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Rewild your inner hunter-gatherer: how an idea about our ancestral condition is recruited into popular debate in Britain and Ireland

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Abstract

We examine how hunter-gatherers are imagined in popular debate in Britain and Ireland, demonstrating that aspects of hunter-gatherer lifestyles are presented as both the antithesis and antidote to perceived crises in contemporary society. We apply an anthropological lens to four areas of popular discourse: physical health, mental health, bush-craft and survivalism. We identify how the imagined hunter-gatherer in these debates is constructed through processes of commodification, which often reveal nostalgic colonial values regarding 'human nature'. This repeats and sustains damaging perceptions of hunter-gatherer lifeways. It also highlights how archaeological, anthropological and other academic research on hunter-gatherers is manifest in popular debates that reinforce assumptions about human nature and the significance of our evolutionary past within a neoliberal, colonialist context.

Key words: hunter-gatherer, stereotype, rewilding, colonialism, commodification, nostalgia, prehistory, Neolithic Revolution

1 Introduction

Hunter-gatherers[4] both ancient and modern are everywhere today. Indeed, Hadza hunter-gatherers of Tanzania recently featured in *Science,* their gut microbiomes having been used as an ancestral baseline compared to 'modernized' populations (Smits et al 2017). In the same year, a related piece was published by Tim Spector, Professor of Genetic Epidemiology at Kings College London, in popular online magazine *The Conversation*. This was entitled 'I spent three days as a hunter-gatherer to see if it would improve my gut health' [i]. After describing the perils of journeying to the Hadza and the dangers of the environment, Spector's article makes the supposed link between modern-day Hadza and the past explicit by describing how he and his team were "never going to be closer to home as a member of the genus Homo" while there with the Hadza with the Serengeti in the background. Little mention is made of anything other than supposedly traditional aspects of the Hadza diet, including details of hunting and tasting porcupine.[5] But Spector reports that based on his three-day Hadza diet his "gut microbal diversity increased a stunning 20%", and thus that "everyone should make the effort to improve their gut health by re-wilding their diet and lifestyle". He argues that we must reconnect with "our ancestors" by being "more adventurous in your normal cuisine plus reconnecting with nature and its associated microbial life".

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[4] The use of the term 'hunter-gatherer' is a contested one, as this term has been argued to be a historically situated and ideological construct (Pluciennik 2002). However, given this term's popular use in media and academic contexts, we retain it for the purposes of analysis in this paper.
[5] That 'Jeff hadn't tasted this creature in his four years of field work' might suggest some caution about how representative this diet is of what the Hadza consume today.

The authors of the *Science* paper and the *Conversation* article sought to use their experience with living Hadza people to understand "our ancestors'" gut health. Indeed, when this was reported on by the *BBC Food Programme's* 'intrepid' Dan Saladino, he described a 'food experiment like no other ….to live and eat with a tribe who are a living echo of our ancient hunter-gatherer past … (who) have survived on the same African landscape we humans evolved in.'[ii] And in turn, this knowledge of 'our' ancestral pasts –which modern-day hunter-gatherers are assumed to represent – is used to understand how 'we' could improve. This aspect of these discourses is readily commercialised. Spector, alongside Jeff Leach, a co-author of that original *Science* paper, are co-founders of the commercial company 'Map My Gut Ltd', who offer personalised analysis of gut biomes and diet advice.

This is a not-untypical move for research outputs from academic papers, which move into public debate through different forms of media involving different authors and with increasingly stark claims. Yet two things are clear. Firstly, a modern-day hunter-gatherer group are used as baseline evidence for past human activity. Secondly this contemporary activity constructed as something ancestral is held up as something good, something we can learn from, something we *need,* as it is an essential part of 'our' human nature. This is then put up for sale.

Indeed, just as these authors marvelled at the supposed uniqueness and ancientness of hunter-gatherer microbiomes, in Britain and Ireland one might often be encouraged to marvel at the survival skills of hunter-gatherers on primetime TV-shows with Ray Mears[6], fashion eating habits to follow a Palaeo-diet, or model preparations for the apocalypse on hunter-gatherer lifestyles. But *why* do people talk so much about hunter-gatherers in the Twenty-First Century? *Why* do they continue to play such a prominent role in popular imaginations? These images of hunter-gatherers, their roles and their relationship to reality are the focus of this paper. They are important to examine because these images of hunter-gatherers share a common assumption: hunter-gatherers represent both our evolutionary *past*, and an ideal *future* state in which 'we' become 'natural' and 'wild' – just like 'they' are supposed to be – and thus achieve our true 'human nature'.

Hunter-gatherers thus occupy a unique position in which they are thought to provide both the antithesis *and* the antidote to broader societal and ecological crises of the modern world, such as mental health and well-being, alienation from the environment, and disaster-preparedness. Ingold has articulated a critical concern with these notions. As he puts it, based on popular imaginations, one might well come to ask: "is there, subconsciously lurking inside everyone one of us, a hunter-gatherer struggling to get out?" (Ingold 2018: 34-5). We argue that this idea of an 'inner hunter-gatherer' providing solutions to 'our' crises is deeply linked to a political-economic context characterized by lingering residues of nostalgic, colonial values, and their concurrent commodification. Approaching this figure of the imagined 'inner hunter-gatherer' anthropologically demonstrates how while academic research in anthropology, archaeology and other disciplines has often been critical regarding such images of hunter-gatherers, it continues to be caught up in public discourses that foster problematic broader assumptions about 'human nature'.

These assumptions have a long history, going back to the images of 'the savage' that came to prominence in the British colonial experiments in 'the New World' of the Americas in the Seventeenth Century (Trouillot 1991, Irving-Stonebraker 2019). Then, British brokers and arbiters of natural knowledge provoked the curiosity of those back at home by playing into the long tradition of early-modern curiosity and collecting – thus fabricating a utopian 'elsewhere' (Trouillot 1991). The Eighteenth Century's increasing focus on commerce meant that missionaries and colonizers became particularly concerned on where the 'New World's' peoples fitted in. Humans were classified and

[6] Ray Mears presents popular TV shows focusing on bushcraft, survival skills and the western exploration of wilderness.

sorted so as to be made governable in the interest of sugar and tobacco profits. 'Savagery' thus became an 'explanatory principle, locating human societies on a universal trajectory of historical development' (Irving-Stonebraker 2019, 71). These intellectual underpinnings are reflected in Scottish Enlightenment views that focused on subsistence practices to pose 'savage' hunter-gatherers as on a lower rung of human development than farmers or pastoralists (Barnard 2004, Pluciennick 2002). These views did not evaporate during Nineteenth Century British and European colonial expansion to the East.[7] And many aspects of them continue to exist today in popular discourses on hunter-gatherers in Britain and Ireland.[8]

Such voices are no longer common in most anthropological and archaeological studies today. Colonial discourses and classifications have long been studied and criticised by many scholars of those disciplines. And yet, it is fascinating to see how rarely the academic post-colonial and de-colonial criticism is reflected in more widespread discourses. As this paper will show, popular images of hunter-gatherers in Britain and Ireland are largely fictional, yet imbued with moral imperatives (Crowe & Schneider-Bateman 2018) which cause imagined hunter-gatherers to continue fulfil the 'savage slot', the collective 'Other' to the contemporary public imagination (Trouillot 1991).

Today, aspects of these discourses appear on the surface to be reversed. Rather than Europeans looking to improve hunter-gatherers into 'humans', many in Britain and Ireland feel they must improve *themselves* by *becoming* hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers thus now represent the ideal form of human nature. Yet, as throughout history, the values that underly the imaginations of 'human nature' found in these discourses continue to reflect a nostalgia for a fictional past onto which contemporary desires are projected. In the process, the imagined figure of the 'hunter-gatherer' is confined to history. Hunter-gatherers are isolated in the past despite their narrative construction in the present (Trouillot 1995), a powerful move that silences the ongoing violence against them. Yet it is these contemporary values, and their intellectual and historical contingencies as they pertain to hunter-gatherers, which are our focus. What is 'sayable' *about* hunter-gatherers in the discursive domain in Britain and Ireland continues to have little relation to hunter-gatherer lives – past or present. We therefore apply an anthropological and archaeological lens to how hunter-gatherers are represented in narrative discourse in Britain and Ireland in order to think through the wider context in which anthropology and archaeology themselves operate.

As in our opening example, interest in developing our 'hunter-gatherer selves' is commonly framed, in both ideological and commercial discourses, as an attempt at 'rewilding'. This is a complex term in its academic usage (Jørgensen 2015; Lorimer et al. 2015) and it has also gained popularity in Britain and Ireland in recent years, not least through the advocacy of prominent ecological critic, journalist and writer George Monbiot; especially his book *Feral* (Monbiot 2013). On the one hand, rewilding is about landscape rehabilitation, in which it is seen as an attempt to set an eco-system back to a time before humans disturbed it: its supposedly 'natural' state. But beyond this, the term is being applied to lifestyle solutions: a quick search of UK booksellers *Waterstones* brings up over 50 titles currently in stock involving 'Rewilding', such as *Rootbound: Rewilding a Life,* and *Rewilding Our Hearts: Steps Towards Compassion and Co-existence.* In such accounts, people very often link their search for 'rewilded' selves to hunter-gatherers - expressing a need to become 'wilder', to reclaim their 'inner hunter-gatherers' - their 'natural' states. They are seeking a time before modern problems, or a time before the Fall. Rewilding is thus heralded as both a practical ecological solution to climate change and biodiversity loss, and a *moral* solution for personal, social, and ecological ills. Amid crises, people are looking back to an imagined, wilder past, which is assumed to be right because it is *natural* (Daston

[7] See, for example Manickam (2015) for discussion of this in colonial Malaya.

[8] They have a particular complexity in Ireland, as indeed Irish peoples themselves were often viewed on the same spectrum as the 'savages' by Scottish Enlightenment scholars (Irving-Stonebreaker 2019, Pluciennick 2002).

2019). These utopian visions of the wild, which reflect desire rather than reality (Cronon 1996, 7), are common in the examples we review below.

Whilst many researchers of hunter-gatherers today are politically engaged, critically astute and sensitive in how they develop and publish their research, the products of academic labour may be particularly susceptible to reproducing normative moralities when they are reused in public discourse in times of crisis. For us, this has been particularly noticeable – as each of us both dwell in Britain and Ireland, and work with hunter-gatherers, past or present. As an archaeologist working with hunter-gatherers in Britain and Ireland and dwelling in Ireland, and anthropologists working with hunter-gatherers in Malaysia and India and dwelling in Britain, we have become acutely aware of what is and isn't sayable about the peoples with whom we research within our British and Irish academic and public contexts. We therefore limit our discussion to Britain and Ireland, although we are well aware that such discourses are by no means limited to these islands. This focus on Britain and Ireland provides necessary focus, but it is also particularly interesting as these islands are not characterised by any significant contemporary hunter-gatherer descendant populations. Farming arrived in these areas c. 6000 years ago associated with a significant degree of population movement and/or replacement (Brace et al. 2019; Cassidy et al. 2020). Since then, there has been no large-scale hunter-gatherer activity, and modern British and Irish populations do not claim meaningful descent from any hunter-gatherer groups who resided in Britain or Ireland in the prehistoric past. In fact, the hunter-gatherer past recruited in Britain and Ireland rarely makes specific linkages to archaeological evidence from Britain and Ireland. Here, the idea that hunter-gatherers provide an example of 'our' ancestors therefore refers to a much broader imagination of 'human nature'.

Demonstrating this, we review key areas of public discourse where the imagined hunter-gatherer is most frequently deployed: physical health; mental health and well-being; survivalism; and bush-craft. Beginning from the persistent ideologies that rewilding reveals in each area, we then consider the context and implications of this embedding of hunter-gatherers as part of our supposed human nature and demonstrate the mismatch between the stereotypes presented and the realities of hunter-gatherer lives past and present.[9]

2.1 Rewild your body: physical health

'From a genetic standpoint, humans living today are Stone Age hunter-gatherers displaced through time to a world that differs from that for which our genetic constitution was selected… There is increasing evidence that the resulting mismatch fosters "diseases of civilization" that together cause 75 percent of all deaths in Western nations, but that are rare among persons whose lifeways reflect those of our preagricultural ancestors'
(Eaton, Konner, and Shostak 1988, 739)

Many popular forms of writing and academic research (such as the above paper in the *American Journal of Medicine*), begin from the assumption that while we humans used to be 'the most fearsome on the planet', 'the Anthropocene human is one whose body has changed - not as a result of evolution but in response to the environment we have created' (Cregan-Reid 2018). Professor of Environmental Humanities and science writer Vybarr Cregan Reid puts it in his popular science book *Primate Change: How the World We Made is Remaking Us,* that if we don't rectify this, we will all succumb to 'mismatch

[9] Further investigation of these issues through fieldwork and interviews with practitioners would be of great interest but was beyond the scope of this review.

disease' (Cregan-Reid 2018). As this argument goes, we 'people in wealthier countries', living 'modern lives' should therefore learn from hunter-gatherers[iii].

Similar tropes exist in discourses surrounding hunter-gatherers and weight loss. Mainstream British newspapers such as *The Telegraph* and *The Independent* have both published articles claiming that 'fasting every other day boosts healthy weight loss as it mimics hunter-gatherer 'caveman' routine' [iv], as does 'skipping meals' [v]. These discourses are also present in medical research. In the journal *Obesity Reviews,* hunter-gatherers (again the focus is on the Hadza), are celebrated for having higher levels of physical activity, and diets that 'involve more wild plant foods, have lower salt and glycaemic indexes', which are micronutrient rich and 'more healthful' than diets in 'industrialized populations' (Pontzer, Wood, and Raichlen 2018, 32). This is commonly commercialized in the form of the so-called 'Palaeo diet', which does not match what we know about past hunter-gatherer diets (Chang & Nowell 2016; for review of contemporary hunter-gatherer diet and relationship to evolution of nutrition see Crittenden & Schnorr 2017). Often these lifestyle solutions are explicitly described as rewilding: the online magazine *Outdoor Journal* features a natural lifestyle coach, whose 'rewilding paradigm for health and fitness' seeks to combat the 'microcosm of our modern culture's generational amnesia'. This might be through not sitting in chairs, making unpredictable movements, eating more or less protein or fiber, or immersing ourselves in nature, allowing us to connect with our 'primal selves'. [vi]

According to *New Scientist* magazine, we can also 'learn from kids and modern hunter-gatherers to make sitting less dangerous'. Though the Hadza spend 'around 9 hours a day sitting', they are squatting and sitting on the ground without chairs, which is better for you as it involves greater muscle activity[vii]. The Hadza also provide inspiration for the amount of hours walking per day 'we' should do [viii], and 'hunter-gatherers' are used demonstrate the importance of squatting in the gym: 'squatting is historically a very primal movement for the human being. It is said that back in the 'hunter gatherer' days, we would squat pretty much all the time'.[ix] Likewise, squatting to defecate becomes part of 'our species history' [x].

It is not clear whether these tropes originated in the public imagination, leading to academic research that draws on them, or whether popular ideas have drawn on academic research. Most likely, both are simply drawing on the same underlying assumptions. As summed up by the aforementioned *Obesity Review* article authors: 'the idea that modern, industrialized environments depart radically from the environments in which humans evolved and that these recent changes lead to disease is now well established and pervasive in public health' (Pontzer, Wood, and Raichlen 2018, 25) – for better or for worse. Though the benefits of taking regular exercise or trying to eat more healthily are not up for question, each of these examples readily conflate extant and prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Both are framed as 'our ancestors'. Thus, hunter-gatherers become both a part of, and yet fundamentally 'Other' to 'ourselves', while extant hunter-gatherers are excluded from 'modernity'.

2.2 Rewild your mind: mental health and wellbeing

> *'The Hadza have managed without central heating, air conditioning, sugary soda, and automobiles. Some of them live to be very old. Many of them seem happier than the Western scientists who visit them'* (Reid 2019)

This article in a medical journal works from the baseline assumption that hunter-gatherers are happier (Reid 2019). Since hunter-gatherers apparently don't experience them, mental health issues thus become further 'diseases of modernity' (Hidaka 2012), with the troubling implication that imagined hunter-gatherers live more simplistic (and thus happier) lives[10]. These claims are based on the idea that there is a 'hunter-gatherer' part of our brains that is being left inactivated by 'our' non-hunter-

[10] For discussion of postpartum unhappiness amongst Hadza women, see Herlosky et al 2020

gatherer lifestyle. Thus, we need to 'rewild ourselves' in order to get in touch with this part of our brain and achieve greater well-being. Methods for doing so include activities like spending more time outdoors, being up for the dawn, cultivating the lost art of listening, being out in the rain, and fostering a 'curiosity' for the natural world - all examples described in popular UK bookseller Waterstone's 'Book of the Month' *Rewild Yourself: 23 Spellbinding Ways to Make Nature More Visible* (Barnes 2018).

Though these may be pleasurable activities, and indeed many hunter-gatherers do them, they are not unique hunter-gatherer traits, and would describe many horticultural or agricultural communities across the world. Yet in that book, hunter-gatherers, as 'our ancestors', are drawn into the discussion.

> *'We humans first walked the savannahs millions of years ago, and we did so for millions of years. It wasn't a fly-by-night experience, something we rapidly outgrew in our rush to invent agriculture and civilization. We were wild for age after age: we have only tamed ourselves in the past few thousand years... the wild parts of our brain are deeply established and it takes the smallest adjustment to wake them up again... it follows, then, that these long-lost parts of our brains are there and ready to leap into action. … That's why the beginnings of understanding are comparatively easy to acquire: our brains are ravenous for a deeper attachment to wild things'* (Barnes 2018, 195–97).

The idea that non-hunter-gatherers are 'starving' for some wildness is reminiscent of George Monbiot's claims in his influential book *Feral* - which led to the founding of charity *Rewilding Britain* - that 'we' in the UK are living through a time of great 'ecological boredom' (Monbiot [2013] 2014). A symptom of this (perhaps another 'disease of civilization'?) is the prevalence of perceived big cat sightings in the UK: 'could it be that illusory big cats also answer an unmet need? As our lives have become tamer and more predictable, as the abundance and diversity of nature have declined, as our physical challenges have diminished to the point at which the greatest trial of strength and ingenuity we face is opening a badly designed packet of nuts, could these imaginary creatures have brought us something we miss?'. These sightings 'reawaken old genetic memories of conflict and survival, memories which must incorporate encounters - possibly the most challenging encounters our ancestors faced - with large predatory cats. They hint at an unexpressed wish for lives wilder and fiercer than those we now lead' (Monbiot [2013] 2014, 60). But what would this wilder and fiercer life look like? Activities such as picking up a dead deer in the woods could help, according to Monbiot: 'the deer wrapped around my neck and back as if it had been tailored for me… As soon as I felt its warmth on my back, I wanted to roar… This, my body told me, was why I was here… Civilization slid off as easily as a bathrobe' (Monbiot [2013] 2014, 33).

In Monbiot's advocation of adventure and peril for getting back in touch with our primordial selves, relieving our ecological boredom, the colonialist echoes are loud. Whilst colonialism is and was a complex and historically varied phenomenon, much colonial 'adventure' writing of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries espoused a similar need to get away from 'domestic realism' to something more adventurous (Boehmer 2005). Monbiot's inclusion of the rough edges of traveling life, alongside dramatic hunting quests, is reminiscent of Twentieth Century English author Bruce Chatwin, particularly his controversial writing on Indigenous Australia (Chatwin 1998). He too, sought the 'rational impulse that has always led men to abandon civilization and seek a simpler life, a life in harmony with 'nature', unhampered with possessions, free from the grinding bonds of technology, sinless, promiscuous, anarchic, and sometimes vegetarian' (Chatwin 1997).

The ideal of a freedom from technology and civilization, as provided by 'a life in harmony with nature', is recycled commercially by companies like 'European safaris' that offer digital detoxes and 'unique experiences' that are 'as wild as Africa' [xi]. Claims are thus linked to 'our roots in Africa': in the aforementioned guide for 'rewilding yourself', Barnes argues that 'a large country house set in a park

full of stout trees with an open sward grazed by deer and a lake running right through the middle', is aesthetically pleasing as it is 'a reasonable imitation of the wooded savannahs of Africa: the places where we first learned to be human' (Barnes 2018, 177). In these commercial and ideological framings of our supposed hunter-gatherer pasts in Africa, our 'human nature' is linked to wildness, ruggedness, freedom, and adventure.

These framings are often also explicitly masculine, echoing the colonial endeavour of the British Empire, which was likewise constructed in popular representations as 'a man's world' (Boehmer 2005, 71). Academic studies on anxiety reflect this. Some attempt to demonstrate that hunter-gatherers can provide a cure based on the supposed mismatch between the amount of people whose news we are adapted to process (as many as in a small hunter-gatherer band), and the access to the 'bad news' of six billion people that we now have (Price 2003). Similar ideas are manifested in 'Caveman therapy' - reported on by the BBC – which has been proposed as a way to help men dealing with anxiety.[xii] Men – arguably - may find it hard to seek help and can allegedly be encouraged with 'caveman'-style activities that allow them to get back to their 'true', 'hunter-gatherer', 'caveman' selves. A recent *Irish Independent* story bemoans how '… Irish men and women have gone too soft. Many grown men in Ireland cannot light a fire in a fireplace using firelighters nowadays, never mind keep themselves alive out in the open'.[xiii] Thus, making a fire or shelter can be a way for men to feel calmer and resolve a crisis of masculinity.

However, the UK mental health charity *Mind* argue that the stereotypes of man *as* the 'strong' 'hunter-gatherer' may in fact prevent men from seeking help in the first place.[xiv] Furthermore, the discourses around caveman therapy working as a result of the 'tribal element', which may create a 'feeling of community' that helps men to open up, demonstrate an ideal of 'cavemen' or hunter-gatherers as living in harmony with one another. Such ideals are based on colonial literatures, which were full of desire for male bonding, and were specifically aimed at men and boys. Baden-Powell's Scout Association – founded on the ethos of training boys to be 'manly men' - was based on his experiences in the army in India and Africa (Boehmer 2005, 38, 71). Alongside upholding the 'Kiplingesque principle of service to mankind', these literatures also held 'convictions of race pride' (Boehmer 2005, 74).

But if 'we' could learn to cooperate like hunter-gatherers do/did, *would* mental health improve? Some medical research starts from this assumption: 'close friendships and family bonds, low levels of social and economic inequality and lots of time spent outdoors are typical in hunter-gatherer populations and other small-scale societies. The absence of these in modern societies is associated with chronic social stress and a range of non-communicable diseases' (Pontzer, Wood, and Raichlen 2018, 34). Other researchers take the opposite view, holding up hunter-gatherer ancestors as examples of a negative kind of 'tribalism', that can illuminate the problems that people face under pressure in 'acute health systems'. This is because 'modern' societies are 'adapted for hunter-gatherer existence', where in times of tension, people go into 'survival mode', leading to poor cooperation (Braithwaite 2005, 542).

The searches for better mental health and wellbeing clearly emerge from genuine needs that remain unmet in many people's lives. Loneliness, anxiety, alienation, and depression are real problems, as is the difficulty men often face in accessing help. It may well be that spending more time outdoors and in the companionship of others, is helpful. But how hunter-gatherers are mobilized as the answer to these problems reveals the tropes of 'simplicity', 'wildness', and 'natural' authenticity that go alongside imaginations of them. These imaginations thus continue to 'epitomize primarily a primitive heathen past, but also a romanticized innocent, spiritual and environmental past and future' (Pluciennik 2002, 113). This erases many of the health and other inequalities that extant hunter-gatherers face today.

2.3 Rewild your skills: Bushcraft

'If like me you find yourself spending far too much of your time imagining being a prehistoric hunter-gatherer and running around the woods living off the land, then this blog is going to be of interest to you', begins a blog titled 'the hunter-gatherer equipment list', exploring 'what [tools] a European hunter-gatherer could have carried with him (or her)'.[xv] This blog is not alone. The ancient hunter-gatherer 'tool-kit' and skills have been the centre of growing interest with more and more courses offered to the public under the title of *bushcraft*: the 'skill at living in the bush' (OED). Bushcraft, or the knowledge of utilizing resources provided by the natural environment with an emphasis on self-reliance, includes many 'traditional' skills like fire-craft, tracking, hunting, foraging, shelter-building and wood-carving. Practitioners often differentiate between bushcraft (using nature to sustain yourself, voluntarily) and wilderness survival (keeping alive in nature) by emphasising ideals of re-connecting to nature and to our ancestral past.[xvi]

Bushcraft does not limit itself to hunter-gatherers. Practitioners often use a more generic concept of 'indigenous knowledge'. Yet, ancient and modern hunter-gatherers are particularly cherished as expert bushcraft practitioners. 'In today's fast paced environment we are dependent on technology more and more and have lost touch with our primal instincts and hunter-gatherer skills', argues an Edinburgh-based bushcraft school on its homepage titled 'let's re-engage with nature, and embrace your Primal Instinct' [xvii]. In an unwitting parallel to Ingold's sceptical question with which we opened this paper, a Bristol-based company offers people the chance to 'get into their inner hunter-gatherer" [xviii]. 'Most of our lives are relatively disconnected from the aboriginal hunter-gatherer lifestyle, some city dwellers dramatically so', writes another Scotland-based Bushcraft blog. Many bushcraft companies offer a 'hunter-gatherer experience' or 'stone-age adventure' that are often regarded as superior *because* participants rely less on modern tools, offering a greater immersive experience [xix].

Past and present, near and far hunter-gatherers are conflated. Many bushcrafters exemplify their expertise by stating they have learned from 'real bushcraft masters' in 'real wilderness', referring to contemporary hunter-gatherers, mostly in Africa and the Amazon [xx]. Some practitioners invite people on special expeditions, to meet and learn from modern hunter-gatherers in faraway continents. For example, *Wild Human* offers bushcraft expeditions to Namibia with 'the masters of this environment – the Bushmen', stating that 'the aim of the trip is for you to 'go bush' with as little western cushioning as possible' [xxi]. Yet, bushcraft is never depicted as foreign. Focusing on *re*-connecting with the *'lost*' skills of *'our* prehistoric ancestors'[xxii], contemporary bushcraft is constructed as a search for *forgotten* local knowledge rather than the mimicry of others. In that, the prehistoric record is of central importance. Bushcraft-related blogs often provide overviews of archaeological data. However, due to the limited preservation of degradable materials and evidence for skills such as fire-making, food preservation or wood-craving, the blogs have to fill in the gaps. This is done, for instance, by skipping between eclectic examples from different time periods and sites located around the world [xxiii], by alternating between "Mesolithic Britons" and a general reference to "primitive people" [xxiv] or by relying on instructors' own experience, for example, in assessing "the skill, time, energy and resources European hunter-gatherers must have had in order to survive in Europe thousands of years ago" [xxv]. Doubtless, bushcraft practitioners do hold a vast environmental knowledge, which was likely shared by the land's ancient inhabitants, whether evidence exists or not. Bushcrafters view the profession as an inspired, adaptive practice, which strives to use 'a blend of primitive skills [and] modern know-how' (Fenton 2016). Yet, this blend opens bushcraft to the danger of crude, reductionist and homogenising interpretations (Fenton 2016: 22-37). By selecting particular skilled-practices and perceptions of 'indigenous knowledge', bushcrafters create a new, fragmented knowledge domain. If originally, such knowledge was rooted in a local social/environmental context, bushcraft extracts it from its context, transforms it into a more generic travelling knowledge, and re-roots in the 'lost ways of our ancestors'.

This creates a representation of 'hunter-gatherer experience' which primarily echoes post-modern aspirations and values.

Bushcraft is not an esoteric skill but a commercial business. In Britain and Ireland Ray Mears' primetime TV-programmes and bestselling books brought bushcraft - and the adoration of the ancient ancestors who mastered it - into millions of living rooms and spawned an industry of bushcraft schools, selling their knowledge for money. Modern bushcraft training is also very individualistic, in contrast to a vast body of contemporary ethnography about the significance of sociality for many extant hunter-gatherers (Bird-David 2017). Although courses are conducted in groups, they address clients as individuals, offer an individualised experience of self-improvement, emphasis personal process and glorify individuals. An extreme example is 'the hunter gatherer challenge' offered by a Wiltshire-based school of 'wilderness survival skills', which is a four-day *solo* experience.[xxvi] Discourse around bushcraft has a clear masculine bias. In Britain and Ireland, most instructors and clients are men and most on-line images are of male participants, despite the evidence that, at least among contemporary indigenous societies, many of the skills practiced are shared across gender boundaries.

The individualised, masculine character of bushcraft in Britain and Ireland, along with the presentation of hunter-gatherers as the antithesis of 'the modern', and a window to ancient lifeways, echo the practice's colonial origins. Modern bushcraft in its commercial manifestation originates in romantic admiration of the white explorer and frontierman who symbolised hardiness, masculinity and resourcefulness (MacDonald 1993:32). Ray Mears' Television programmes, such as '*How the Wild West Was Won'* (2014) which highlights the ways in which settler resourcefulness 'won' their new homelands, carry these associations of bushcraft and colonial frontiers into British and Irish living rooms. The frontiermen's 'wilderness skills', learned from the original inhabitants of their respective colonies, were glorified and adopted for military combat, youth movements (particularly for boys) and later, for 'western' adventurous, recreational, remedial, educational or vocational practices (Fenton 2016:22-37; MacDonald 1993:61). A distinction between 'the frontierman' and 'the native' illustrated the latter's skills as nothing besides his 'natural' instinctual gifts as a 'child of nature', while the former was glorified for his learning, and abilities to utilize the best of both worlds (MacDonald 1993:74). The very concept of 'bush' first appears in the English language in reference to uncleared land in the British colonies (Ramson 1966: 135), positioned (along with the people living in it - the "bushmen") in opposition to 'civilised' towns, bespeaking a culture/nature distinction [11]. Likewise, terms such as *primitive* and *wild*, heavily loaded with colonial connotations, feature both in school names ('wildway', 'wild human', 'back to wilderness') [xxvii] and the practice's description (wilderness/primitive skills/crafts) [xxviii].

Interestingly, yet perhaps unsurprisingly, while male dominancy in commercial bushcraft is overwhelming, there is a particular area in which one can find more women practitioners. Within the field of child education there are in fact many women teaching bushcraft to children in school and after-school curriculums. Why British and Irish women engage with bushcraft activities almost only in those contexts is a fascinating question, but beyond the immediate scope of this paper. However, in these domains, too, the reproduction of (or what is thought to be) ancient lifeways is still primarily advertised as facilitating engagement with nature[xxix] and self-improvement (improving children's sense of self, self-regulation and coping skills)[xxx]. It is, nevertheless, interesting to see how, unlike in bushcraft for adults, which lacks reference to sociality, in the context of education, the social aspects of those perceived 'ancestral lifeway' are in fact foregrounded. Here, too, we find some direct reference to evolutionary reasoning regarding human nature. For instance, as stated in the website of

[11] Mears is responsible for the prevalence of the term bushcraft in the UK, adapted by him to distinguish it from military-survivalism.

a Cotswold-based Forest School[12]: "For 99% of humankind's existence we have been communal hunter-gatherers, inexorably connected to our environment. People are 'programmed' to work in teams through evolution, it is how we have survived; we thrived in social groups based on co-operation, intricate multi-staged planning and a range of innovative social and communication skills… In a bushcraft environment, working together is the natural way to do things, without even thinking about it. It's also a lot of fun, provides endless 'firsts' for participants and can have a positive impact that remains for years to come".[xxxi]

Because bushcraft's popularity is another response to modern dissatisfaction with the alienating forces of urbanisation and capitalist consumption, in contrast to colonial constructions, the *wild/primitive* here is appraised as superior to the *modern*. Nevertheless, here, too, we should remember the impact on the subjects of the discussion themselves. Talking about our ancestors - rather than a foreign society - might make it easier to relate. But collapsing ideas (evidence-based or imagined) about ancient and modern hunter-gatherers together still excludes extant hunter-gatherers from modernity. This static image of 'hunter-gatherer skill and lifeways' as ancient (and primitive) works to delegitimise such skills and lifeways today, particularly when they are conflicted with aid and development initiatives aiming to 'modernise' such societies.

2.4 Rewild your Future: prepping

> *'Is it really possible for 'modern man' to actually survive by foraging for food in the wild?... highly unlikely... If you're in a situation where food is either in short supply or non-existent due to the masses stripping the stores bare... then you're going to have to fend for yourself. This means ensuring you have the survival skills to live off the land… to CATCH, KILL, BUTCHER, COOK & PRESERVE any food you can get - and you need to learn those skills now... if the answer is no, then mate, you're shafted...! Simple as that'* ('The UK Prepper Guide').[xxxii]

The phenomenon of end-of-the-world survivalism, or 'prepping' - preparing oneself for a large-scale disaster, either nature or man-made - is constantly growing. Previously considered an eccentric trend, increasing numbers of people in Britain and Ireland make plans for the day society-as-we-know-it ceases to exist, alarmed by climate change, political tensions, Brexit [xxxiii] or the outbreak of coronavirus [xxxiv]. Prepping focuses on practices meant to enable survival in what is called a SHTF event [13], including stockpiling to shelter in place ('bugging-in'), preparing to survive on the move ('bugging-out'), and learning self-sufficiency skills for the post-collapse environment. This invites the valorisation of bushcraft and the 'ultimate bushcraft masters', hunter-gatherers. Prepping is not all about hunter-gatherers. Guides preach the importance of farming, and teach medical skills, community management, self-defence and bomb-shelter building. However, hunter-gatherers have a special place in this discourse. According to blogger and 'ancestral skills mentor' Arthur Haines, 'Preppers could seriously strengthen their ability to survive (and even thrive) by taking lessons from hunter-gatherers, the original self-reliant people who have inhabited this world for most of the time humans have existed.' [xxxv]. Hunter-gatherers are brought forward to support the practical skill-focused goal of looking at the past to prepare for the threatening future:

> *"Historically hunter-gatherers date as far back as prehistoric times when our ancestors used to forage for wild plants and hunt animals. As part of their preparedness planning,*

[12] An educational approach which gained increased popularity in Britain and Ireland since the 1990s, inspired by the Danish open-air culture. This approach specializes in child-centred/play-based pedagogy in outdoor environments (mostly woodlands), to allow people to experience a long-term, hands-on learning process in nature (see https://www.forestschoolassociation.org/history-of-forest-school/).

[13] An acronym for "When the Stuff (or-SH*T) Hit The Fan", meaning a very big, and messy, disaster, normally connotes the total breakdown of civilization and social order.

> *the hunter-gatherer-prepper learns and practices these hunting and foraging skills to increase their chances of survival should an extreme SHTF event take place… without the skills needed to hunt and trap animals or forage for wild edibles our chances of surviving would be at risk" (the Prepper-Bits blog)* [xxxvi].

Here, hunting and gathering is not considered in contrast to agriculture but supplementing it. While many still recommend agriculture to produce stockable food, prepping-experts, such as the Prepper-Bits blog, often warn readers against over-reliance on agriculture:

> *'If a SHTF event does ever happen that results in the end of the food chain as we know it, the hunter-gatherer-prepper would be able to use their hunting and foraging skills as a short-term method of providing food. Following on from this they would then look to move on to implementing agricultural methods that offer more long-term sustainable food sources. If an extreme SHTF event does happen that prevents us from settling in one place and using the agricultural methods we had planned, it could result in having to continue to hunt and gather on an indefinite basis, leading to a nomadic way of life once more'* [xxxvii].

Others warn against over-relying on stocks that can be easily taken by force: 'when the horde arrive, abandon the agriculturalist mindset and become nomadic. Learn to embrace hunter-gatherer technologies'.[xxxviii]

Bushcraft and survivalism share self-reliance as a dominant theme, but there is a fundamental polarity in their approach to being in the natural world. While a joy of being in nature and a wish to re-establish a relationship with it motivates the former, survivalism depicts nature as a hostile place to be conquered, where one can be overwhelmed (Fenton 2016: 109). Unlike many contemporary presentations of hunter-gatherers, prepping discourse does not represent an attempt to return to a utopian, harmonious society. Hunter-gatherer lifestyle is valorised for its imagined independence from the state and its services, but preppers offer a different take on what a *sustainable* world looks like; grounding it in ideologies of competitiveness, protectionism and self-preservation. The hunter-gatherer-prepper image directly collides with descriptions of sharing and community-cooperation among contemporary hunter-gatherers (Widlok 2016a). Stinginess, in fact, is a central organising principle for prepping: "Rule One: Keep Your Groceries Hidden. No one wants to get themselves into an ant-and-grasshopper situation where they're sharing supplies with the non-prepared deadweights of the neighbourhood", writes journalist Tove Danovich in an article titled 'What Will You Eat When the World Ends?'[xxxix]. This constructs community as dangerous and results in preparations for violence and aggression, an intensified capitalistic discourse.

Disaster-preparedness is another predominantly male performance, highlighting an image of non-state society as one of masculine dominance, in which the prepper is an embodiment of the protector-provider and women and children are dependent on their armed and skilled menfolk. This theatrical performance of apocalyptic manhood, argued Kelly (2016), is a response to the perceived crisis of masculinity and loss of male privileges in modern society .

Does this image of a competitive, aggressive, masculine dominance reflect prehistoric reality? It is hard to say. Philosophers and scholars have been arguing the question of aggressiveness and warfare as the nature of mankind for centuries, each basing their arguments on local evidence (archaeological or anthropological) which are insufficient to prove any universal human trait (e.g., Allen and Jones 2014; Fry 2007). In any case, the apocalyptic usage of hunter-gatherer images does not seem to emulate prehistoric reality. Instead, concerned with the improbability of over-crowded human population returning to a reliance on non-agrarian resources and imagining a cruel natural selection in such scenario, the hunter-gatherer depiction is narrowed to skills, which are stressed only insofar they make efficient tools to increase the chances of survival of the better-prepared few.

3 Inner hunter-gatherers or nostalgic mimicry?

The examples above demonstrate that (re-)imagined hunter-gatherers are now being commonly presented as the antithesis and antidote to the societal and ecological crises of Britain and Ireland. We are not the first to observe this mobilisation of the idea of hunter-gatherers: as Porr & Matthews note, for example, "(i)n the face of global environmental deterioration and unrestricted resource exploitation, … Living hunter-gatherers are now again celebrated as the last remnants of a lost world, a lost Garden of Eden." (Porr & Matthews 2020, 22-23).

But, these stereotypes require further attention for two reasons. Firstly, they often directly link back to the academic literature, and in some cases, derive directly from it. This is a relationship that requires care. Secondly, the stereotypical hunter-gatherer created is based around the notion that we have an 'inner hunter-gatherer' that reflects our core, truer, identity, an identity that is out of place in modernity. Who we are becomes locked to 'our' hunter-gatherer past. Change since then is nothing to do with our true nature.

3.1 Deep-time hunter-gatherers and our evidence

A common theme is that aspects of hunter-gatherer behaviour in the present make some form of connection to activities that are supposed to have characterised our deep time evolutionary past, although there is little detail provided in terms of dates. Understandings of human evolution have been structured by human exceptionalism which is often seen to lie in the development of a form of culture than allows us to stand apart from, and shape, nature. This is a conceptual moment when (natural) evolution stops, and (cultural) history can begin. It is a moment marked by material evidence of the human ability to step back and transform, and it is often considered as the moment when hunting and gathering ends and is replaced by agriculture - the so-called Neolithic Revolution. In other words, hunter-gatherers evolve: but farmers have the capacity to make history.

V. Gordon Childe's famous development of the concept of the Neolithic Revolution was an act of 'imaginative archaeology' (Gamble 2007), creating and defining a problem that allowed for explanations. The great success of it has been the ways in which the Neolithic Revolution accreted social change to subsistence change – being argued to lead to (amongst other things) the origins of inequality, urbanism, accumulation, organised religion and much more (for critique, Finlayson and Warren 2010). In short, the Neolithic led to *us.*

However, in recent years and in influential publications across a range of fields, the Neolithic Revolution is seen as a problem. This may be socio-economic: "... the Neolithic Revolution, the extended moment when our ancestors transitioned from being hunters and gatherers to farmers and in doing so gave birth to the "economic problem" that has preoccupied us ever since" (Suzman 2017, 41). Or it may focus on well-being (Scott 2017, 10), or the start of detrimental human impacts on the global environment (Ruddiman 2005). Morton argues that 'The Severing' of human-nonhuman relations caused by the adoption of agriculture means that we are trapped in a form of 'Agrilogistic' thought that continues to drive the climate crisis (Morton 2016, 2017). Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth* states that "... the case against civilisation ... can be made much more directly as a case against farming..." (Wallace-Wells 2019, 188). Cast as 'The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race' (Diamond 1987) the Neolithic is portrayed as an origin point for all of our woes. The valorisation of deep time as a time before degeneration is an example of the structures of 'sacred history'. Reconciling this with a general belief in progress requires the presence of a catastrophic event (Smail 2008). The 'sacred' hunter-gatherer past is destroyed by the 'catastrophic' invention of farming.

Yet this vision of the catastrophic impact of agriculture and a fundamental split between agricultural and foraging world views doesn't fit the archaeological record. The domestication of plants and

animals happened in numerous locations throughout the globe at different times (Zeder 2015; Price and Bar-Yosef 2011). Domestication happened for a wide range of reasons and the forms of agriculture which developed were variable. Most importantly, recent years have seen increased recognition that many practices undertaken by hunter-gatherers blur easy distinctions between hunter-gatherers and farmers. Hunter-gatherers have been demonstrated to practice extensive forms of landscape management involving plant and animal populations, with many being described as practicing 'low-level food production' (Smith 2001), or 'resource production' (Crawford 2011).

The very nature of agriculture considered in the classic Neolithic revolution narrative is Eurocentric and colonial. The European vision of agriculture and the 'progress concept' (Tsing 2018) of domestication has occluded alternative visions of human-animal and human-plant relationships that do not easily fit into wild/domestic dichotomies, often rendering those forms of interaction highly marginalised: "(i)n anthropology and archaeology, domestication is an analytical term that has merged from the civilisational narratives and landscape-making practices of particular European worlds" (Lien, Swanson, and Ween 2018, 22). In a colonial context, the failure of European farmers who inherited a domesticated worldview to recognise hunter-gatherer cultivation and stewardship directly facilitated colonial land grab and the displacement of hunter-gatherer groups (Deur 2002, amongst many).

Finally, whilst agriculture is presented as the root cause of the crisis - with humans severing their relationship with the 'wild' through processes of domestication, accounts from around the globe also demonstrate that horticulture and agriculture can be processes through which deep and sacred ties are created between human and non-human bodies (Mentore 2012, amongst many). Dividing the hugely complex diversity of human-animal and human-plant relationships into a simplistic and Eurocentric dichotomy of hunter-gatherers and farmers allows for the creation of a fictional point of origin.

Rooting hunter-gatherer behaviours in some unspecified deep time therefore places them into a time before history. Searching for the *origins* of our behaviour in deep time makes our hunter-gatherer ancestry our natural state of being, from which culture and history has led us away, so that we are now 'mis-matched'.

Making links between behaviours observed in the contemporary world and the evolutionary past begs the long-standing question of whether societies commonly classified as contemporary hunter-gatherers are representative of hunter-gatherers in the past. But the location of the stereotypical hunter-gatherer is not just in deep time, but also in *space*. Where examples are cited in the accounts reviewed above they tend to be dominated by varied "Bushmen" groups – not always clearly identified. The ways these groups of hunter-gatherers are used as a symbol for our past is clearly highlighted by a recent Guardian article on the search for human origins ("The Search for Eden") which is illustrated with a picture of a 'bushman from the Khomani San community', although San and Bushmen do not feature in the article at all – the image is simply used to fill the 'savage slot' (Trouillot 1991).[xl] Ironically, the same groups are at the centre of an ongoing academic debate, asking whether contemporary Kalahari San can be directly linked to archaeological finding *in their own* geographic area, and questioning the general claims of Pleistocene antiquity of modern-day cultures (Pargeter et al 2016 and responses). Such debates, however, are nowhere to be found in any of the popular references to hunter-gatherers we reviewed. This conflation of space and time is a familiar colonialist rhetorical strategy (Fabian 1983), and as Athreya and Ackerman (2020:80) note colonial tropes continue to be employed in even in some high-profile archaeological research.

Reconstructing the specific character of deep-time hunter-gatherer forms of organisation and practices from archaeological evidence remains very challenging. In part, this is because of the difficulties of engaging with poorly preserved, fragmentary and time-averaged archaeological data. But even attempting to approach this through trying to identify specific characteristics is difficult.

Instead, Kuhn and Stiner (2001, 2018) suggest that if we can identify in the archaeological record the *principles* that underly contemporary hunter-gatherer diversity, such as different kinds of adaptation to ecological variation, then this provides a basis for suggesting that past hunter-gatherers have similar kinds of adaptations to those observed ethnographically. On this basis, they argue that "the picture of broad-scale variability in the Late Upper Palaeolithic is not unfamiliar to archaeologists who study modern hunter-gatherers" (Kuhn and Stiner 2001, 123) and that this conclusion is not sustained for the archaeological record before this date. Two implications can be drawn.

Firstly, what we can reconstruct after the Late Upper Palaeolithic is at *least* the same kinds of *broad-scale variability* in forms of hunter-gatherer behaviour as seen ethnographically. In fact, recent reviews have highlighted that we should expect to see even more diversity in forms of hunter-gatherer organisation in the past than in the near/contemporary world (Lemke 2018, 8). Yet this variability is hardly recognised in many discussions – popular and academic - which simply talk of a 'hunter-gatherer way of life'.

Secondly, *it is not clear that important aspects of hunter-gatherer behaviour so frequently cited can be robustly evidenced in deep time*. This is especially important given the very fluid understandings we have of recent human ancestry. To take but one point in time, recent reviews suggest that at 100kya as many as *seven* different species of humans lived throughout Eurasia (Galway-Witham, Cole, and Stringer 2019). These different groups met, and in some cases interbred. With the partial exception of Neanderthals, we understand vanishingly little about their forms of life and social organisation. Evidence therefore has little impact on public understandings of hunter-gatherers and who they are or were.

This also raises questions about how extensive the category of 'hunter-gatherers' might be, notwithstanding the oft-repeated claims that 'humanity' has spent 90 or 99% of its existence as hunter-gatherers.[14] Shyrock and Smail argue that a focus on deep time requires that "we attempt to reconceive the human condition as a hominin one" not as exclusively the preserve of *Homo sapiens* (Shryock and Smail 2011, 15). Does our deep time hunter-gatherer past extend to all hominins? Or is it restricted to some species in our genus? Beyond the truism that a *Homo habilis* population relied on wild food for subsistence, are they hunter-gatherers as we normally understand this term?

3.2 Commodifying the colonial origins of the imagined hunter-gatherer

Despite the lack of evidence on deep time hunter-gatherer lifestyles and their relationship to extant hunter-gatherers, imagined hunter-gatherers – and 'our' mis-matches with them – are frequently promoted in the cause of selling something: a diet, a training course, a 'how to' manual. The 'Othering' of the hunter-gatherer becomes a commodification of their lifestyle. For the hunter-gatherer imagined in these discourses, their skills and forms of engagement with the world are considered part of an integrated whole, part of their inheritance, their nature. To the modern inhabitants of Britain and Ireland, however, these are life-style choices which are available for purchase if mediated through the appropriate channels. We can *choose* to be a hunter-gatherer in a way which they cannot: for they simply *are* one.

For some practitioners, researchers and journalists, experience *with* contemporary hunter-gatherers becomes a marketing opportunity, paralleling Pandian's observation about ethnographic authority

[14] If we have been hunter-gatherers for 90% of our existence, and we assume that agriculture appears c 10kya; the origins of hunter-gatherers lie at 100kya. If we have been hunter-gatherers for 99% of this time, the origins of hunter-gatherers lie at 1mya. Neither date for our origins bears much relationship to key changes in the evidence.

that "worthwhile experience can be acquired and held like any other personal property" (Pandian 2019, 49). The hunter-gatherer may be imagined as having these skills as part of their nature. But the outsider who chooses to learn them is rewarded for having done so. The frequent references to the exotic and the rare, to vanishing skills and the 'last' hunter-gatherers make perfect sense in this context: get your hunter-gatherer skills here before they are gone!

Often, the commodification of aspects of a hunter-gatherer identity in Britain and Ireland is tied to extolling self-reliance, individualism, masculinity and freedom. These values are very much in keeping with capitalist ideologies, and it is perhaps no surprise that aspects of hunter-gatherer lifestyles that would provide a great challenge to the capitalist status quo, such as demand sharing, receive less attention. The commodification of the Other is thus self-selecting aspects which fit the capitalist modern world. For example, this commodification of hunter-gatherers allows the immersive experience of living as a hunter-gatherer to be constrained in time and space and sold to a consumer: who needs to actually *be* a hunter-gatherer when you can experience bushcraft for two hours on a Wednesday in a woodland a short drive from home and still gain all of the benefits?

Many of these ideas of hunter-gatherers rely on the idea that there is a primitive, 'wild' part of our psyche that needs to be activated by buying particular products or experiences. This notion has its origins in colonial thinking about primitive Others. In *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need the Wild*, Lucy Jones documents how finding 'the wild' - and thus accessing the hunter-gatherer part of herself - saved her from crisis (Jones 2020, see also Monbiot 2013). For her, as for Barnes cited above, our past, and thus our inner psyche, is being a hunter-gatherer. In stating that the wild activates a 'sense of a primordial state, of something deep, pre-conscious and pre-verbal in the areas of the brain or the mind that still had a primitive, animal element' (Jones 2020, 163), she cites the influence of Carl Jung, who 'believed that we had forgotten that we are primates, and that we need to make allowances for primitive layers in our psyche' (Jones 2020, 163). Jung's view of self and psyche is rooted in colonial psychoanalytic ideas, where notions of 'primitive Africa' were central: 'for Jung, Africa and its inhabitants represented the 'primitive', the unconscious, 'the other', which then enabled him to conjecture about the nature of the European psyche' (Collins 2009, 69). The notion of 'Africa' was thus held up as the opposition of European conscious civilisation (Fanon 1989).

The modern/Prehistoric African, for Jung, represents the European *unconscious*, precisely because he is so close to 'the land': 'primitive man dwell[s] in his land and at the same time in the land of his unconscious. Everywhere his unconscious jumps out at him, alive and real. How different is our relationship to the land we dwell in!' (Jung, quoted in Collins 2009, 73). Jung is not here writing about hunter-gatherers. However, when the baton is taken up by Jones and others in their nature writing, hunter-gatherers *explicitly* become the ultimate representation of this wild self: hunter-gatherers, 'our' primordial unconscious psyche, and the wilderness become inextricably linked. Similarly, demonstrating trajectories of thinking already present in Freud's 1931 publication *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics,* recent writers have sought to connect - via their relationship to the unconscious - the mental lives of hunter-gatherers and 'the insane': "Agrilogistic success led to the dissipation of voices such that we now consider only two types of people as legitimate voice hearers: the insane and the last few hunter-gatherers" (Morton 2016, 87). This is rooted in a colonial understanding of the evolutionary trajectory of the human mind that is deeply enmeshed in colonial racism and repression (Khanna 2003).

The link between hunter-gatherers and ideas of the wild - both in 'nature' and within ourselves - demonstrates how common it is to put cultural values onto nature, and then use nature 'to buttress those very same values' (Daston 2019, 4). When faced with moral panic, using a nostalgic view of past, wild nature (and hunter-gatherers) thus becomes a solution. Indeed, nostalgia is rarely actually about the past - it is often about perceptions of 'the vanishing present' (Boym 2001, 351). In Britain, nostalgia

in times of crisis has a long history. For example, Paul Gilroy identified how common it is to hark back to the Blitz even in the 21st Century, 'made necessary by the 'need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral or cultural bearings' (Gilroy 2004, 96-97). The prevalence of Victory in Europe day celebrations in Britain during the coronavirus pandemic demonstrates that the need to look to an imagined past during times of crisis shows no signs of abating. What is different about this nostalgia for a specific, imagined hunter-gatherer past is that it is now becoming entwined with ideas of the 'natural' and 'wild'. This wilder past is seen as *better* than, and hence the *solution to* what we have now*,* to be achieved through some kind of commercial lifestyle solution through which we can reclaim our human nature.

3.3 The impacts of claiming a hunter-gatherer identity today

How people in Britain and Ireland are actively claiming, or mimicking, a hunter-gatherer identity today should be taken as seriously as hunter-gatherer identities themselves have previously been by anthropologists. This is a 'hunter-gatherer situation' (Widlok 2016b) with deep roots in British history. Similar cultural representations were in the past critical to colonization and displacement (Said 1994; see also Boehmer 2005). Furthermore, with the creation of 'Safari' and National parks being a primary reason that actual hunting and gathering peoples are evicted from their lands today, this is an ongoing process. At what costs do the attitudes behind 'wellness', 'detoxes', 'a deeper understanding of life', a release from 'ecological boredom' and 'rewilding yourself' come, and who pays these costs? What does it mean to mimic aspects of hunter-gatherer lifestyles?

During the British Raj, for example, colonial officials wanted colonial subjects to *mimic* English manners, but always partially, so as to remain under English control: 'to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English' (Bhabha 1994, 125).

> 'Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognisable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.* Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence;* in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualises power' (Bhabha 1994, 122).

Those who mimic aspects of hunter-gatherer life thus partake in a particularly ambivalent form of mimicry: when British and Irish people mimic their imaginations of 'hunter-gatherers', this is not the same as being a hunter-gatherer, whose identities are assumed to be fixed. But that is the whole point - people *do not really become hunter-gatherers* - they take elements and incorporate it into their neoliberal capitalist moral system. This is starkly demonstrated in Jones's book where she asks -

> 'Does the depletion of natural elements have a negative impact on the human mind? Unlike the move from cave floor to mattress - *clearly a good thing* - could the move from outside to inside involve unwanted negative consequences?' (Jones 2020, 48, emphasis added)

It is a partial, ambivalent, mimicry (that involves using a mattress, something apparently hunter-gatherers don't do in her view), but it is one that must be *imagined* to be whole in order to work. It must be imagined that we are getting back to our true essence. Thus, it's not a 'mimicry' at all. In a reversal of Bhabha's concept, it is now the 'colonial subjects' who are being mimicked.

These attitudes towards hunter-gatherers may contribute to marginalising the remaining hunter-gatherers of today. When assumed to be exemplars of our past – or of our ideal future – they are not presented as real people who live in and contribute to today's world (Fabian 1983). They are imagined as fixed and unchanging, set in 'nature'. Their lives are valued as *living echoes* of someone else's past.

They have little present, and certainly no future – they are a-historical (Trouillot 1995). These narratives are precisely the ones that enabled the marginalisation of hunter-gatherers through periods of colonial expansion, when hunter-gatherers were perceived as part of nature, and their systems of landscape management and resource production were overlooked in contrast to the accepted ways of increasing the agricultural productivity of land. This continues today. Hunter-gatherers are still alienated from their homelands, as they engage with state officials and laws and when their opinions and agency are constantly overlooked (Lye 2011). This is often resulted not only in loss of land but also in problems of access to quality healthcare or education, loss of appropriate nutrition and increased poverty. These problems do not appear in the popular accounts we have reviewed – in fact, they are often hidden from the consumer.

Ironically, the valorisation of hunter-gatherers in these popular stereotypes recreates the attitudes that did so much damage to them. Firstly, collapsing ancient and modern hunter-gatherers together deprives modern hunter-gatherers from modernity, presenting them as locked inside their own traditionality. Setting hunter-gatherers as idealised exemplars obscures messier aspects of life that do not fit the narrative. It blurs the fact that in many places the same people themselves are in fact denied all those 'healthy' foods and practices due to deforestation, restrictions on hunting and gathering, sedenterisation and enforced 'development'. Cast as 'traditional' in this binary opposition with modernity made many so-called hunter-gatherers around the world the target of intense governmental and non-governmental aid interventions aiming to save or develop them from such archaic existence by modernising them. In this process, practices and choices which are classified as 'traditional' are often being delegitimised and even actively combated (e.g., Dussart 2010 about health-related choices; Lavi and Bird-David about house building; Lavi in press about child-rearing).

Secondly, most of the accounts we reviewed pay little or no attention to the ways in which these hunter-gatherer lives are entangled with states or markets, and the tropes of being 'wild' people mean that hunter-gatherers' activities are restricted by state and other agencies when they don't fit this narrow view of 'wild' behaviour (Lye 2011). For example, bushcraft practitioners glorification of the wild/primitive skills of extant hunter-gatherers, feeds the imagination of primitive otherness, which dominates eco/anthro-tourism among such societies (Endicott et al 2016). In Namibia, this has been shown to contrast with community-based ventures to see the 'bushman' hosts as modernizing producers of tourism in their own right, rather than just as objects of touristic commodification (Garland and Gordon 1999).

Imagining a 'pure', ideal lifeway, any deviations are often regarded as deterioration. Usage of modern tools or active participance in market economies are often observed with disappointment as acculturation, depriving people of any sense of personal agency and social or cultural flexibility and complexity.[15]

4 Conclusion

Our intention is not to criticise the idea that spending time connecting with the natural world is good for people. It is. Our concern is how an imagined idea of the hunter-gatherer is recruited into these debates and the outcomes of that recruitment. It is worth stating the obvious: connections with nature could also arise through the sorts of activities characteristic of small-scale cultivators, herders or many other subsistence activities. Indeed, the success of the 'new nature' writing shows that the need to establish deep connections with *place* through a variety of engagements is very significant in aspects

[15] Though it was beyond the scope of this research to consider what contemporary hunter-gatherer populations think of the ways in which they are represented in the discourses we have highlighted here, this would be valuable and interesting research for the future.

of British and Irish society (Smith 2017). But the focus on hunter-gatherers in many of these discussions that we have reviewed is very specific.

The recruitment of hunter-gatherers past and present into discourses about how to understand and resolve the diseases, problems and challenges of western metropolitan lifestyles is of course not new. It has existed since the origins of the concept of hunting and gathering society and the 'savage'. The valorisation of past lifeways as a Palaeo fantasy (Zuk 2014), or Paleomythology (Schneider-Bateman & Homchick Crowe 2018), has also been discussed before, especially the creation of a *moral* imperative to act in the ways that evolution has supposed determined for us. But our analysis has highlighted the specific ways that moral imperative is shaped by neo-liberalism, and colonial nostalgia. This often serves in the context of optimism, as in the perceived well-being benefits of hunter-gatherer activities, and in the context of profound scepticism, such as the need for hunter-gatherer skills to thrive after a SHTF event. In short, as Ingold put it, "Hunter-gatherers occupy a special place in the structure of modern thought so special, that had they not existed they would certainly have had to have been invented" (Ingold 1999, 399).

In conclusion, critical analysis of the ambivalent forms of the invented, imagined hunter-gatherers that roam through popular debate are important for at least four reasons.

Firstly, the increasing degree of critical post-colonial awareness in the academic discipline of anthropology is not having a substantive impact on how the public encounter the stereotypical hunter-gatherer. This should be a concern for those of us who research hunter-gatherers – past or present. Anthropologists and archaeologists must exhibit greater awareness of the historical contingencies of our disciplines' intellectual histories, and actively work to challenge problematic manifestations of them when they arise in both academic research and public discourse.

Secondly, understanding the ways in which these stereotypes are deployed can focus discussion about the origins of contemporary problems, which, despite many claims, were not caused by the Neolithic Revolution. Indeed, one might suggest that searching for the origins of the crisis over 10,000 years ago is something of a deflection for searching for them in, for example, the developments of colonialism, capitalism or neoliberalism. Better understanding how these long-standing fictions limit our debates could help find potential solutions, which may well lie in closer relationships to nature but are not restricted to hunting and gathering as a mode of subsistence.

Thirdly, recognising what we do and do not know about past and present hunter-gatherers, and how we can know it, might encourage some humility in a context of substantial cultural appropriation, especially in popular discourses, and continued colonial and settler domination.

Finally, many of the claims made about the roles of our so-called inner hunter-gatherers in 'rewilding' ourselves valorise and romanticise hunter-gatherers. Yet they do so through the perpetuation of stereotypes and conceptual models that actively perpetuate the ongoing marginalisation of the very peoples that they seek to elevate.

The emphasis on the rediscovery of 'lost' skills and the ancient, rooted nature of hunter-gatherers also reinforces the ways in which difference is constructed. 'They' are unchanged, whilst we have been changing. 'We' have been moving away from our true selves ever since the Neolithic Revolution and in this have lost something important. 'We' have demonstrated the capacity to change, whilst they have not. And now, 'we' can change *again*, this time by choosing to be like them. This static image has far-reaching implications to the ways many see extant hunter-gatherers' current situation.

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