3

Mud to Menu: Labor at Caledonian Oysters Co.

Tara Phillips

Phillips's paper examines how Caledonian Oysters Co. challenges capitalist conceptions of labor by cultivating reciprocal relationships with people, place, and the natural environment. Through three days of participant observation and engagement with workers, Phillips demonstrates how oyster farming is structured by tidal rhythms that foster ritual, interdependence, and a shared historical memory. These practices create meaningful forms of work that contrast with the linear, profit-driven demands of tourism and broader capitalist economies. By emphasizing reciprocity, communal responsibility, and environmental attunement, Caledonian Oysters Co. reveals how labor can become a relational practice rooted in connection rather than exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore how Caledonian Oysters Co. challenges traditional capitalist definitions of labor by fostering meaningful connections with people and place through ritualistic practice. Caledonian Oysters Co. is one of the biggest producers of shellfish in Scotland. Located in Oban, a coastal town that has become a tourist destination in recent years, Caledonian Oysters Co. is an organization that lies at the intersection of relational networks with the environment and as a self-sustaining community. Established nearly 40 years ago by Judith Vajk and her husband, Hugo Vajk, the farm is operated by Angus, Michiel, and Judith. Over the course of three days, I studied and volunteered at the farm. Using participant observation and first-hand accounts, this essay sets out to explore how oyster farming cultivates reciprocal relationships with the environment and within the organization.

WHAT IS WORK?

There are two main aspects of work on the Caledonian Oysters Co. farm. The first is on land—keeping up with orders, sorting the oysters by size, and bagging them to be sold or brought back to the tide. The second aspect of work is by the tide—organizing and checking up on the oyster beds as they grow. As Angus explained, “One week will be a neap tide. The tide doesn't go out enough to access the beds, and on those weeks, a normal day will look like

maintenance of bags, repairing those, tidying up, running to orders, making sure everything… we are selling is going out on time. It's a lot quieter during that time." Oyster farming at Caledonian Oysters is intimately tied to the changes and cycles of the natural world. This cyclical routine creates a feeling of connection to natural rhythms. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) in their writing Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants says

"The other half belongs to us; we participate in its transformation. It is our work, and our gratitude, that distills the sweetness" (2013: 92).

Oftentimes, working conditions on the farm are out of anyone's control. As Judith shared, "you're dealing with good weather and bad weather… we've got all the equipment, all the rain gear to beat that." Oyster farming is a unique type of work as it is tied to the natural world and not controlled by human scheduling. David Graeber (2018) in his famous text "Are you in a BS job In Academe, You're Hardly Alone" defines work as labor that should be meaningful but often isn't: "Surveys in Britain and Holland reveal that 37 to 40 percent of all workers there are convinced that their jobs make no meaningful contribution to the world" (2018: 1). Graeber claims that work has become distorted as it over-emphasizes profit and performative busyness, when in the past work has been about cooperation to meet communal and environmental needs (2018: 8). The farm is the opposite of a "bullshit job"—the work not only has a tangible end product, but the everyday experience of the labor is rooted in natural rhythms and a sense of collective responsibility and purpose. Angus, Michiel, and Judith derive fulfillment from their connection with process, place, and people, as opposed to simply doing work for profit. As Angus shared,

"Work has to be fulfilling. I think the concept of work has been perverted, and I think that work is actually something that all humans do and need to do. But it's been twisted into this thing that we do specifically for monetary gain...there is something really wrong with that."

Work on the oyster farm is reciprocal rather than merely extractive–it responds to and contributes to the environment that surrounds it.

The farm is run by a small team of three: Judith, her son Angus, and Michiel Henderick, who came from Belgium in 2019. From the outset, Michiel's idea of work aligned with Graeber's (2018) definition of "meaningful labor" because Michiel values connection and working with nature. For him, the fact that he is outside is crucial: "It's just a nice place, people are nice…there is more of a connection with people." By working at an oyster farm, Michiel, Angus, and Judith have collectively decided to surrender to the tide schedule. Angus says, "It is a ritual aspect for sure. You're so tied to the tide in a way that few industries are tied into a natural process like that." Judith agrees, sharing, "The tides dictated my wedding day, the birth of our children." As Victor Turner (2017) in The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure explains,

"community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elder" (2017: 97).

Bonds are created through all submitting to the tides and natural world; they are "giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond" (Turner 2018: 97). Working with the tides thus shapes and equalizes relationships on the farm, and bonds are formed both within the company and with the external environment.

These bonds, in turn, undermine hierarchical structures as all members of the company submit to the "general authority" of the natural world. Michiel's work, for example, is restricted by the climate as the bulk of his work takes place during tide time. As Judith explains, "...one way or another, Michiel works mostly when it's tide time," which gives him the freedom during the neap tide to pursue other interests and relationships outside of his work. As he shared, what he likes about "working with the tides" is that "during the neap tides, there is not a lot of work here, but that gives me the chance to do other stuff with other people and for other people… I like that you're outside and working with the tides and the seasons."

Kimmerer defines work as "finding balance" (2013: 180). For Caledonian Oysters Co., this balance is rooted in nature, community, and openness to natural processes. Kimmerer goes on to explain, "Our lives became entwined in ways both material and spiritual. It's been a balanced exchange: I worked on the pond and the pond worked on me, and together we made a good home" (2018:121). For Kimmerer, a relationship is built through the act of restoring and caring for the environment. More broadly, this represents how sustained work with the environment creates a sense of interconnectedness. This same interconnectedness is manifested every day on the farm. Over the course of three days, I observed how shared responsibilities, and informal teaching shaped the close dynamic among workers. Michiel explained how "I always considered people I worked with as colleagues. I would never consider them friends. I would never meet out with them outside work. Because the community [on the farm] is really tight. I consider them here as friends." Kimmerer (2013) touches on an idea of the mutual benefit between the land and those working on it. The sense of mutual trust and connection, both interpersonally and with the natural environment, that exists within Caledonian Oysters Co. can therefore be seen as springing from cooperation to work with the tides and meet communal and environmental needs.

SYMBOLISM AND RITUAL

The farm occupies a unique position in that "It is a liminal space, neither a land farm or a sea farm… it's more of a shore farm," as Angus described. It is also unique because of the ever-changing connections created with other people and with the natural environment. As Turner says, "The powers that shape the neophytes in liminality for the incumbency of new status are felt, in rites all over the world, to be more than human powers, though they are invoked and channeled by the representatives of the community" (2017:106). Turner suggests that liminal spaces and relationships connect people to "more than human powers" as works end up creating rituals which leads people to surrender to natural authority. Throughout my participation and observation, it became clear that the process of oyster farming approached ritualistic action through the repetition of tasks and shared language centered around the informal naming of tools and spaces that create a living memory of the past.

Every day, each repetitive and mundane task became infused with meaning in the act of repetition. Judith described everyday work as "very repetitive" and Angus shared how, because of how small the team is, "we kind of make up a lot of our own traditions. Because a lot of our items that we use don't actually have names necessarily. So we kind of just make up

names for things. A lot of the areas on the beds all have names based on who built them or who was here at the time when that was made, it sort of dates it in our heads and that's kind of our tradition I suppose." As Kimmerer says

> *"That, I think, is the power of ceremony: it marries the mundane to the sacred. The water turns to wine, the coffee to a prayer" (2013: 56).*

On the Oyster farm, even simple tasks that have been repeated thousands of times before are done with intentionality and a sense of tradition. In the act of repetition across time, a sense of historical continuity is established, both in the act of repetition and in the naming of tools and spaces, which creates a living and shared memory of the past. More than a mere routine, the daily act of oyster farming not only honors the past but also reinforces group identity through ritualistic action and naming.

The fact that Caledonian Oysters is a family-run business also means that, to external eyes, it has an informal hierarchy. When first speaking to Angus, he introduced himself as the "farm manager" although his mother, Judith, said, "I think I am the boss, but Angus thinks he is the boss." This lack of awareness of formal titles speaks to the farm's structure which is rooted in mutual respect and interdependence. Turner (2017) defines these sorts of relationships as existing within a "generalized social bond" that transcends formal roles and "has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (2017: 96). The oyster farm physically operates in a liminal space, and the relationships and bonds formed between people are also liminal. As Turner (2017) described much like with ritual, the liminality of the place breaks down social hierarchies as work becomes a way of life and roles become fluid. Having gone abroad for university, Angus returned to Oban in 2019 to fulfill "a family obligation." Michiel is the only employee not connected to the farm through direct familial ties, but still he feels himself to be intimately tied to the generalized social bond that exists on the farm. As he shared, "In a rural place, I think a lot of community comes out of working and getting to know people. It is less so in a big city." For him, work has been a source of connection: "I know a lot of people because of this place…the nice thing about this place as well, once you get to know one person, they know all the other people too… and then you get to know more people and it just kind of expands." Overall, the farm is shaped by shared traditions and ritual. This, when coupled with the physical liminality of the space and its porosity to environmental factors, allows for hierarchies to be broken down and new fluid roles to be established, both within the company and with the external environment.

TOURISM AND THE EFFECTS OF CAPITALISM

Oban is known as the seafood capital of Scotland. A coastal town in the west of Scotland, it has a population of just over 8,000 people and a large population of visiting guests. In the high season, Oban attracts "upwards of 3,000 guests staying each week" (Omifolaji 2014: 202). Caledonian Oysters Co. has helped maintain the town's status through their work, which has helped capture the interest of tourists. Despite my visit in early March, a relatively low season, on my journey from the train station to where I was staying, I passed nine hotels. Tourism is a force that reshapes the economy and often privileges visitors over local needs. These ideas were confirmed by Angus when he said, "all the industries around here are focused

on tourism." Interestingly, Judith points out how "Oban people are [the] hardest public to attract. It seems like on the west coast, they don't eat so much shellfish as you would imagine." Caledonian Oysters Co. sells all over Scotland, to "Glasgow, Edinburgh and all around this area." Within Oban, their customers are typically restaurants and the fishmongers in town. When the business was first established, Judith explained how "...there was just no market really in Scotland, so we were selling to Scandinavia and England. And bit by bit the market started to increase here, which is great." The Caledonian Oysters team currently produces about a quarter of a million oysters annually, all of which are sold within Scotland. Even still, Angus points out how "the Scottish oyster industry is [not] meeting demand as a whole. There is probably a demand for three times the amount of oysters that are actually produced in Scotland."

Tourism is, by its very nature, an extractive relationship that exists between individuals, the environment, and local communities. This stands in stark contrast to the reciprocal relationships established on the farm. Angus explains how "Tourism is a very tricky industry to do right for any community…you really have to strike a balance between being exploited versus getting something good from your tourism. It's a very hard line to work." Oban is no stranger to this struggle. As Angus shared, "Like everywhere, our community is being taken over by large supermarket corporations and those food practices have really shaped every aspect of our lives.… A lot of our fish is exported or is for the tourism industry, which is pretty common in Scotland…. This in turn feeds into a longer history of exploitation in Scotland, where we export our tourism, and we export our special products. I feel like a lot of that is taken from Scotland and not reciprocated necessarily." Although, it seems that as the farm and tourism are mutually dependent on each other for their economic survival, tourism is also a force that limits the farm and its workers: workers are only able to find jobs in the tourism or seafood production industries, and they often find themselves struggling under rising housing costs.

Indeed, because of tourism and the extraction it brings, Caledonian Oysters have had to consolidate in recent years. While they used to have two sites where they would operate, now, they are moving to just one: "We had this space that we rented from a local landlord… and without getting too Marxist about it, landlordism is a very exploitative practice, at least certainly can be. We found ourselves in a position where we were renting a space, which was originally just a field, that we had made fit for purpose, landscaped, built a structure upon it, and built drainage systems. And yearly, the rent would go up. It was compounding. It seemed a bit unfair, so we ended up leaving." As Kimmerer explains,

> *"In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a "bundle of rights," whereas in a gift economy property has a "bundle of responsibilities attached" (2013: 45).*

The oyster farm having to consolidate their property can therefore be understood as an example of capitalist relations that exist between the farm and the world, whereas life on the farm is closer to a reciprocal "bundle of responsibilities" owed to each other and the environment

Yet life on the farm isn't always sunshine and rainbows; oyster farming is difficult, hard work. In Judith's words, "It is dirty. It is hard work. It's not indoors. You're open to the elements." Angus adds: "It is a very physically demanding job, but

I see that as quite a good thing… mentally I would say the main strain is just the strain of running any business." Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges, every team member "tries to work in such a way that we are not taxing ourselves too hard. Because we are such a small team, you can notice that." Despite oyster farming operating within a commodity economy and the difficult physical and mental strains it places on each member, the value of the work is not merely monetary—there is value in working together and working with the natural environment. Judith shared, "I think we do, we knock off each other pretty well actually.". From my time volunteering on the farm and through my participant observation I found that work was about the sharing of knowledge both with me and with each other. Relations were rooted in reciprocity, shared responsibility and ritual. Mary Douglas (2003), in her famous work Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo explains "Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So, disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite" (2003: 1). In the context of Oban, oyster farming is harnessing the "unlimited" potential of the natural environment – embossing "restriction" and "selection" to create a product/system of being, "patterning" the environment.

CONCLUSION

Caledonian Oysters Co. pushes back on the capitalist idea of labor through ritualistic practices and connection. Angus, Michiel, and Judith foster meaningful relationships with one another and with the positionality of their farm in its natural context. My work as a volunteer allowed me to understand the ethos of reciprocity through participant observation. Ritualistic practice and connection—evident in both repetitive work and the establishing of a shared historical memory that bleeds into the present— clash with and resist linear extractive forms of work and capital. Indeed, the very act of work at Caledonian Oysters Co. is structured by a non-human schedule of the tide, which places it in a liminal space that breaks down internal hierarchies and creates a feeling of meaningful reciprocity from the environment. Despite the inherent challenges of existing within and depending on the extractive system of tourism, the workers on the farm maintain a sense of meaning through reciprocal relationships with the environment and each other.

Bibliography

DOUGLAS, M. 2003. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.

GRAEBER, D. 2018. *"Are you in a BS job." Academe, You're Hardly Alone*. The Chronicle of Higher Education 5.

KIMMERER, R.W. 2013. *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed editions.

OMIFOLAJI, K.J, et al. 2024. *"Population Abundance and Density Estimates of Poorly Documented Near-Threatened Calabar Angwantibo (Arctocebus calabarensis) in Oban Hills Region."* Animals.

TURNER, V. Abrahams, R. and Harris, A. 2017 *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. London: Routledge.