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**From Middle Ground to Common Ground: Self-Management and Spaces of Encounter in
Organic Farming Networks**

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Abstract

This article deploys the anarchist notion of self-management to critically investigate the global organic farming network World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) as an initiative that offers insights into the possibilities and challenges of encounter. WWOOF facilitates the giving of food, accommodation, and hands-on learning experiences for volunteers, in exchange for their labor on organic farms. It operates as a moneyless sharing economy, designed as a site of mutual learning and cultural exchange. Literatures on encounter divide between brief tourist encounters of difference and everyday encounters in diverse, usually urban, communities. In linking these two bodies of work, I argue that the principle of self-management, as conceived by anarchist thinkers, can help develop a unified, critical framework for making sense of encounter event-spaces. This adds important nuance to theorizations of encounter by recognizing the entwinement of the intimate and the structural, while foregrounding the capacity of people to autonomously create shared spaces of interdependence. The case study indicates that structural contradictions and inequalities in voluntary relationships within statist-capitalist modes systems can seriously undermine otherwise promising interpersonal encounters. By articulating self-management as a tool for both analyzing and producing spaces of encounter, this essay offers new possibilities for a more holistic and unified analytical framework.

Keywords: *encounter, organic agriculture, self-management, tourism, volunteering.*

How to live with difference in uncertain, volatile times has become a central marker of debate in popular and academic circles. This article interrogates the politics and geographies of encounter among organic farmers and volunteers involved in World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), a global voluntary exchange initiative in which travellers work on organic farms in exchange for bed, board, and hands-on learning experiences. I contend that the anarchist principle of *self-management* represents a mode of analysis and a device for action in forging liberatory encounters of difference, and critically explore WWOOF as a case study in how self-management can bridge analytical and political gaps within current debates. Rather than delimiting the production of spaces of encounter to an abstracted framework of policy- and planning-based legislative structures, self-management offers us a more radically egalitarian toolkit that emphasizes the immanence of encounter, reframing it not as a simple experience of difference but as a means for co-constituting differential experiences of space as “uncommon ground” (Chatterton 2006). Crucially, self-management is not an invitation to ignore encounters’ embeddedness within material and power inequalities; on the contrary, this anarchist perspective offers a unitary framework for integrating analysis of the intimate, interpersonal elements of encounter with broader concerns regarding social justice. The empirical sections thus indicate how WWOOF operates in an ambiguous political and economic space in which participants forge promising relationships through self-managed practices, yet struggle to negotiate the exploitative mediations and machinations of the hierarchical and capitalist modes of organization in which they are implicated.

The article is divided into six sections. First, I explore existing work concerning spaces of encounter, bringing literatures on tourism encounters and everyday multiculturalism into conversation with one another. The former offers important insights on power relations, yet falls short in thinking through how travel encounters can inform broader social justice agendas. Conversely, studies of encounter in multicultural communities have theorized how difference is reproduced, challenged, and transformed through everyday embodied practices, but this field could learn from tourism scholars' concern with power and material inequalities. The article is thus positioned in the interstices of geography and tourism studies, arguing for a more unified theoretical and conceptual framework for making sense of encounter *in general*. The following section moves towards such a framework by applying anarchist thought to the question of encounter, developing a framework for understanding encounters as “direct” and “warm” (Heckert 2010, 187) event-spaces that can proliferate convivialities through self-managed negotiations of “uncommon ground” (Chatterton 2006).

I then introduce WWOOF in more detail and outline the research methods, drawing from a four-month mobile ethnography and interviews with 23 participants. Empirically, I first introduce the role of encounter in the motivations of hosts and volunteers, outlining how certain kinds of encounter are central to their decision to participate. Next, I explore the everyday embodied, organizational, and emotional practices of self-management on farms and how self-management shapes the encounters that take place. In the final section I consider how political-economic factors impact problematically on WWOOF encounters. In sum, although WWOOF offers important lessons for forging self-managed spaces of encounter, spatial and material factors – such as domestic spatialities, statist-capitalist

economies, and legislative contexts – have a profound impact on any potentially liberatory encounter. In concluding, I reflect on how anarchist self-management can signal a shift in the core sensibilities and principles underpinning the geographical study of encounter and its role in broader social justice agendas.

Encounters in travel and community space

Valentine (2008, 333) noted that “[e]ncounters never take place in a space free from history, material conditions, and power.” Although she was referring to encounters in multicultural communities, Valentine could well have been talking about tourism encounters instead. In this section, I undertake a joint discussion of two bodies of work on encounter that independently make important contributions, but, I argue, together can productively contribute to more unified ways of understanding this phenomenon.

Unlike other spheres of encounter, a governing premise within tourism studies is that the site of tourism is a space of consumption; that tourists consume the images, spectacles, and embodied sensations of their destination (Gotham 2002; Falconer 2013). Demand for cheap, convenient, and responsive consumption environments means that the tourism industry tends to foster low-wage, precarious, and poor quality employment (Zampoukos and Ioannides 2011). Host communities thus face a plethora of related inequalities in tourism encounters, including economic inequity, immobility, disempowerment, and an inability to represent local culture on their own terms (Week 2012). As a result, the tourist site is

generally conceived by critical tourism scholars as one of intense capital accumulation (Kingsbury 2011), infused by various modes of social control by the state (Lynch et al. 2011).

Tourism is thus a “spatial fix” (Harvey 2001) that both local and transnational elites engineer, partly through carefully choreographed encounters between host and tourist, emphasizing the exotic, luxurious, or extraordinary nature of the experience. Participants themselves undertake some of these choreographies (e.g., Daugstad and Kirchengast 2013), whereas broader parameters and codes of conduct tend to be instituted by external institutions such as the state, NGOs, and industry bodies (e.g., Gillen 2014; Lugosi 2014; Mosedale and Albrecht forthcoming). As Lugosi (2014, 87) noted, “[h]ospitality may... be mobilized purposefully to establish power relations, invoking obligations both to conform to organizational norms and to reciprocate.” Institutional mediation, however, not only produces modes of control through direct rules and regulations but also mediates encounters through influence over unspoken/unarticulated “affective structures” (Clough 2012) of desire, fear, excitement, and so on. While tourists are becoming more interested in active, existential, or relational experiences of authenticity (Rickly-Boyd 2013), the mediation of encounters continues to obscure the inequalities and injustices that tourism generates, often by engineering intimate, affective landscapes of tourist-host interaction (Conran 2011; Kingsbury 2011). As I discuss below, this stands in stark contrast to scholarship on multicultural communities, which regularly references the affective dimension as a *contributor* to conflict, rather than to its prevention.

Ethical tourism actors increasingly seek to create more egalitarian spaces for the co-production of experiences through “authentic” encounters between host and visitor (Gibson 2010). Nevertheless, despite a greater focus on social justice issues, research suggests that the branding of tour operators as “ethical” may be as much a marketing ploy as a genuine effort to address inequalities (e.g., Lansing and DeVries 2007). Cravatte and Chabloz (2008) illustrated how attempts to decommodify the tourist encounter by ethical tourism companies are repackaged as ethical commodities through “double fetishization”, whereby businesses simultaneously demystify material hardships of host communities (de-fetishization), and repackage them as commodities (re-fetishization). By marketing experiences as more authentic or ethical, operators profit from the same inequalities and power asymmetries that they sought to challenge. Even well-intentioned initiatives can deepen inequalities *within* host communities and perpetuate neo-colonial constructions of host communities as exoticized and pre-modern (Gibson 2010). Thus, while “pathways to global citizenship may exist” within ethical and volunteer tourism initiatives, they are also subject to “cooptation” by neoliberal capitalist structures (Lyons et al. 2012, 374), thus undermining potential intercultural benefits.

Given the array of power dynamics inherent in tourism practices, “power relations are central” (Mowforth and Munt 2009, 48) to any critical treatment of tourism encounters. The subtleties of power relations, however, are not fully understood through large-scale, political and economic processes alone, and scholars are increasingly sensitive to the embodied interactions when tourists and hosts meet (Crouch and Desforges 2003). Often, the affective intimacies of tourism encounters “not only pervade, but also help reproduce the everyday

and often exploitative lives of people employed in tourism” (Kingsbury 2011, 666; cf. Conran 2011).

While tourism literatures raise important points about power relations in tourism encounters, they often stop short of deploying these findings to address broader political questions regarding difference and encounter *in general*. They recognize encounter as offering “the possibility of not only inscribing but also disorienting us from... habits, stereotypes, and prejudices” (Leitner 2011, 830), yet tourism scholars have hitherto rarely addressed common concerns with encounter as a general phenomenon.

In contrast with tourism literatures, geographers of multiculturalism have developed a body of work that considers not only the discrete instance of encountering but the everyday, long-term experiences of living with difference (e.g., Gill et al. 2012; Ince 2009; Lawson and Ellwood 2014; Leitner 2011). Work in this area has increasingly recognized the importance of developing spaces for encounters that foster forms of “interdependence” (Valentine 2008), interweaving people’s wellbeing together through the everyday co-production of locally-rooted “micro-publics” (Amin 2002). Superficial encounters, no matter how often they take place, do not necessarily lead to greater understanding and respect between cultures. Certain forms of tolerance, similarly, can leave real and perceived injustices and inequalities unaddressed (Gill et al. 2012; Valentine 2008). Thus, research shows how long-term travel exposure to a range of different national cultures may not necessarily produce noticeable changes in respect or understanding if they do not create mutual relationships of

interdependence, or if they remain delicately stage-managed by specialist institutions (e.g., Nyaupane et al. 2008; Lyons et al. 2012; Sirakaya-Turk et al. 2014; Wright 2014).

The growing interest among tourism scholars in embodied and affective components of encounter is paralleled in studies of multicultural community encounters. The temporality of the latter is distinct from tourism, constituted by myriad tiny, often-unarticulated encounters over extended periods, through the “throwntogetherness” (Massey 2005) of place. It is often in the transient spaces and conduits of everyday life, such as buses (Lobo 2014), cycle lanes (Brown 2012), playgrounds (Wilson 2013) and workplaces (Datta and Brickell 2009), where encounters take place. In these spaces, differing but unspoken normative codes intersect with the sensuality (sight, smell, dimensions, etc.) of different bodies and objects. Thus, using bus travel as an example,

[i]n a space of such extraordinary intimacy with others and intense materiality, where bodies are pressed up against each other, seats are shared, and personal boundaries are constantly negotiated..., differences are negotiated on the smallest of scales. (Wilson 2011, 635)

In response to this diverse, everyday intimacy, the question remains how to nurture positive affects such as “desire or joy” (Popke 2009, 83) in place of frustration or resentment. Scholars often observe forms of “gritted teeth tolerance” (Gill et al. 2012, 510), in which actors attempt to moderate their disapproval of others, or else avoid confrontation by various forms of disengagement (e.g., listening to music) where possible (Wilson 2011). In

contrast to Massey's throwntogetherness of place, a key implication of these literatures is the rejection of the underlying passivity of Massey's term, and the assertion that people have *agency* – to tolerate or react; avoid or confront – to shape their negotiations of difference. This is not merely the decision-making agency of the isolated individual but rather a much more “distributed” (Lobo 2014, 714) agency, co-produced in the encounter by a multitude of actors and objects combined. Van Eijk (2012) suggested that the complexity of agency in encounters may even stand in contrast to actors' own narratives of difference, which can be manipulated by authorities and institutions seeking coercive control over spaces of encounter. By foregrounding narratives over practices, “there is a danger that research perpetuates the view that there is something wrong with how people in ‘problem places’ interact” (Van Eijk 2012, 3023). Thus, legalistic scriptings and policy frameworks can be deeply problematic in their (often punitive, see Painter 2006) efforts to discipline and regulate diverse and unscripted micro-negotiations of encounter.

In multiculturalism literatures, geographers have tended to study the urban sphere. Uneven and undemocratic processes of planetary urbanization can produce antagonisms between migrant and settled populations as they negotiate their cultural differences in the unequal, hyper-diverse spaces of the metropolis (e.g., Young et al. 2006; Herbert et al. 2008). This focus on the “hybrid cultures” (Valentine 2008, 324) of large urban centers, however, risks overshadowing the enduring relevance of rural spheres. Some scholars have rightly critiqued the unspoken dominance of the urban as the only space where social innovation or radical transformation is likely to occur (e.g., Firth 2012). WWOOF, then – placing an emphasis on the rural – offers an interesting lens on the politics and spaces of encounter.

In bringing insights from these two literatures together, I seek to drive theoretical and conceptual development forward in three ways. First, following critical tourism scholars, it is essential to stress the situated power relations that play out through the encounter, particularly focusing on the structural unevenness and power asymmetry embedded in difference. Second, drawing from literature on multiculturalism, sensitivity to the everyday, embodied practices of encounter must be maintained. Finally, an unerring commitment to social justice – linking tourism scholars’ emphasis on development ethics and multiculturalism scholars’ emphasis on collaborative micro-publics – is essential for a unified political geography of encounter. Thus, following Lobo (2014, 716), I understand encounter as “an event-space that brings together bodies as well as ‘vibrant’ objects or actants in ways that can contribute new insights to anti-racist agendas” – and also, I hasten to add, broader intersecting agendas of social, democratic, and economic justice. Encounter as an event-space has spatial and temporal qualities, and can jolt us out of established patterns of being, understanding, and relating. I next turn to anarchist notions of self-management and autonomy to help forge a critical agenda and conceptual framework for approaching encounter as a situated, materially grounded, yet intimate, political event-space.

Anarchism and self-management in encounter

Voluntarism, a central tenet of WWOOF and similar initiatives, has a politically ambiguous history and present. In this section, I propose that the principle of *self-management* is a central function of a liberatory form of voluntary relationship and encounter. Self-

management, I suggest, can be a powerful principle of both analysis and practice in the specific task of nurturing convivial spaces for encounters of difference. In geography it is perhaps best known through Lefebvre's notion of *autogestion*; a practice of reappropriating not only the means but also the agency of social and economic production (Brenner 2001). The anarchist tradition, however, offers perhaps the longest history of such notions of self-management, stretching back to pre-Marxian times through Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (e.g., 2005 [1848]) (although he rarely used this precise term).

Anarchism is a unified critique of hierarchy, authority, and material inequality, and the social exclusions that stem from them. It advocates for the democratic self-government of relationships, societal structures, and productive activities without coercive leadership from elites or mediation through abstract forms of valuing such as money. Anarchists link their commitment to self-management with the principle of autonomy:

Autonomy refers to the forces constitutive of beings, to the capacity to develop in themselves the totality of resources which they need in order 1) to affirm their existence, and 2) to associate with others, and to thus constitute an ever more powerful force of life. (Colson 2001, 47-48)

Anarchist autonomy thus highlights the collective agency of people to shape and change their lives and the world. Rather than being constrained by others, anarchists view agency as *augmented* through cooperation, such that the "liberty of each man [sic.]... does not find another man's freedom a boundary but a confirmation and vast extension of his own"

(Bakunin 1971 [1871], 262). The mode of organization that facilitates this collective power most effectively must be a self-managed system, since it is through unmediated or minimally mediated relations that mutually affirmative processes can take place. Self-management is a means of developing workable alternatives to established modes of doing politics, shaping social life in ways that prefigure a future society premised on collective, egalitarian cooperation (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006). It therefore augments nucleic collectivities that are otherwise suppressed through hierarchical and mediating forms of organization. Brinton (2004 [1961], 41, 44), noted thus:

Exploiting society consciously encourages the development of a mass psychology to the effect that... all important decisions must be taken by people specially trained and specially equipped to do so. [...] All [hierarchical institutions], bourgeois and “radical” alike... draw a discreet veil over the immense creative initiative of the masses.

These specialist decision-making institutions often include governmental bodies, but in the context of this article, institutional actors such as tour agencies, NGOs, and industry bodies are also implicated in this institutional landscape. Cousin (2008), for example, outlined how French tourism policy bypassed the concerns of locals and tourists; instead, deploying abstract, calculative business models, constructing a vertical power relation in tourism spaces. Profit also mediates encounter, since money is an *abstracted* form of value, and the introduction of money into an encounter can have profoundly negative impacts on acts of sharing (e.g., Denaro 2013).

This is paralleled by literature in areas such as urban planning, where community consultation often functions as a carefully choreographed exercise by businesses and policy-makers to force through redevelopment plans with a veneer of superficial public approval (e.g., Bickerstaff and Walker 2005; Holgersen and Haarstad 2009). In response, urban planners and tour operators alike must foster delicate forms of mediation “in which nobody will have the feeling there is something wrong” (Cravatte and Chabloz 2008, 233).

Institutional actors are therefore key participants in ethical and volunteer tourism businesses’ double fetishization (Cravatte and Chabloz 2008), which requires careful planning to ensure that encounters take place in a way that circumvents engagement with the structural causes of injustices. The ethical tourism field creates encounters partly as means for encouraging understanding and reducing prejudice, but studies show that such mediation regularly inhibits attitude change (e.g., Sirakaya-Turk et al. 2014). Moreover, marketing strategies deployed by volunteer tourism organizations are likewise sources of conflict, misunderstanding, and frustration between hosts and guests, undermining the potential for mutual respect (Wright 2014).

In work on the spaces of everyday encounter, this parallels what Brown (2012) calls the “choreography” of encounters in public space. In the complex meshwork of embodied and affective factors in encounter, legal codes of conduct in public space seek behavioral obedience despite the messy realities of public encounter:

Legal scriptings are never the whole story in securing claims to space. Rights are never complete and self-evident; to be meaningful, they have to be enacted in and through practice, and infused by moral force... Thus, the struggle for public space does not just take place through the pages of legislation or Codes but in the spaces of bodily encounter. (Brown 2012, 803)

In anarchist self-managed models, the possibilities for an immanent, corporeal encounter are not subsumed into legalistic frameworks from distant specialists but proliferate through the collaborative co-production of such frameworks. In outlining an anarchist theory of “direct relationships”, Jamie Heckert emphasizes self-management in an ethics rooted in immanent intersubjectivity,

which [is] continually produced in the present, in being present. Ethics here are not simply *about* relationships: distant, objective and cool. They are *born of* relationships, of relating: directly, intersubjectively and warmly. (2010, 187, emphasis added)

Within geography, likewise, anarchist and anarchist-inspired scholars have made steps towards an explicitly immanent ethics of relationships (e.g., Chatterton 2006; Springer 2014). Such an approach may be able to turn “uncommon ground” into “common ground” by destabilizing the rigid, vertical structures that divide different social, cultural, and political groups and spaces.

An ethics based on contingent and relational ontologies is part of transcending fixed or essentialist characteristics. Presupposing the rigidity of social roles, of us and them... blinds us to the possibilities of common ground which surround us. (Chatterton 2006, 269-270)

An anarchistic ethics of encounter, oriented towards producing self-managed spaces of common ground, offers possibilities for changing the way we think about encounters. Furthermore, such self-management may also prefigure future alternative worlds, in which organizational relationships are unfettered by coercive actors that dictate societal structures from above and afar (cf. Swann and Stoborod 2014).

Thus, we can use self-management as a principle of encounter in two distinct but interlocking ways: as a factor in critical analysis (to what extent is this encounter enacted by the participants on common and equal terms?); and as a mode of practical implementation (how can we foster self-managed event-spaces for encounter?). Self-management is by no means the only factor for consideration in encounters, but it has the benefit of traversing a diverse array of power relations, from the intimate micro-scale, to large-scale social processes.

One issue raised by self-management is that existing work on encounter has often fallen short of discussing how encounters function in relation to exploitative or oppressive relationships. Class, for example, has been absent from many discussions of encounter. Chatterton's (2006) uncommon ground and Heckert's (2010) direct ethics of encounter

become rather more complex when one identifies such a division of opposing interests, since dominant notions of “respect for difference” involve little consideration of the fact that oppression, exploitation, and domination thrive through difference just as much as cosmopolitanisms do. Class is one example, but other oppressions such as gender or colonialism can be similarly problematic.

Can we find common ground with an exploitative employer or an institutionally racist police force? The answer is ambiguous. On one level, how can one find commonalities with an oppressor whose interests are to perpetuate the oppressive relation *ad infinitum*? That said, individuals who become police, property investors, soldiers, and politicians do so consciously, thus there always remains some level of hope, since even the most hardened are generally aware of the ethical dilemmas surrounding their actions (Heckert 2009). This may potentially lead to class treason, desertion, resignation, and abdication, and encounters of difference have most likely led many to commit these acts, even if they are extremely rare. Therefore, self-managed encounters can potentially lead to a process of “learning to walk with others” (Chatterton 2006, 259), producing spaces where unmediated exchanges can find common ground.

WWOOF is an anomaly in the tourism world because the form of exchange is non-financial, offering insights into specifically *moneyless* encounters. Recent work on “diverse economies” has emphasized the “politics of economic possibility” (Gibson-Graham 2006, xix) that emerges when we create spaces and structures to reimagine value. Likewise, the anarchist commitment to prefigurative politics mobilizes non-commodified forms of

exchange to support the development of alternative social relations (e.g., Ince 2010). Beyond the capitalist value-form – an imperfect abstraction from immanent valuing (Proudhon 2004 [1840]) – for anarchists, “there is no way by which value can be [objectively] measured” (Berkman 1942, 29). Therefore, value becomes a product of specific economic encounters and relationships. As discussed below, from the perspective of diverse economics scholars (e.g., Gibson-Graham 2008), the economic practices across WWOOF are extremely varied. What distinguishes the diverse economies perspective from most anarchist perspectives, however, is that the former is focused principally on the economic realm, whereas the latter integrates alternative economic imaginaries into the transformation of the full range of societal structures, relationships, and practices. Anarchist self-management, rather than foregrounding particular societal spheres, is necessarily intersectional in this sense, helping anarchists to triangulate their politics across a range of questions. Scholarly endeavor must thus be oriented towards “help[ing] us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility” (Gibson-Graham 2008, 619), rather than to solidify existing hegemonic forms, economic or otherwise.

A central pivot of self-managed encounter is therefore the ability to co-produce meanings, structures, and value collaboratively in the interstitial spaces of dominant social relations. The remainder of the article interrogates the realities of self-managed encounters in WWOOF. WWOOF represents one of many alternative travel practices – such as hitchhiking (O’Regan 2012) and CouchSurfing (Molz 2012) – that share similarly collaborative, anti-hierarchical, and non-financial characteristics. Using WWOOF as a case study, the central

question the article asks is: what are the possibilities and challenges of crafting spaces for self-managed encounters of difference?

Introducing WWOOF

WWOOF was established in the UK in 1971 to enable London's residents to escape the hectic rhythms of urban life and learn new skills in organic food production. Particularly since the rise of the internet, it has grown rapidly to become a global phenomenon, and has struggled to organizationally adapt to its new, global reach (author's fieldwork). This is partly reflected in the diversity of definitions utilized by WWOOF organizations. However, it is generally understood as "a worldwide effort to link visitors with organic farmers, promote an educational exchange, and build a global community conscious of ecological farming practices" (WWOOF-USA 2013, n.p.).

At a basic level, volunteers – often long-term travellers – help an organic farmer in their daily work in exchange for food and accommodation, facilitating an exchange of labor for hospitality. Since organic farming is particularly labor intensive, volunteers are a much-needed source of labor power. In return, volunteers receive food and accommodation for anywhere between one week and several months, alongside a hands-on learning experience in ecologically sustainable food production and ways of living. Therefore, "WWOOF uniquely creates connection between travelling, education, non-monetary exchange and promoting sustainable lifestyles" (Kotůlek 2011, 131).

The WWOOF relationship has also become a space for encountering and living with others from different backgrounds and places of origin. WWOOF farms operate in 117 states around the world, offering potential volunteers a range of climatic and cultural experiences, while hosts may receive volunteers from anywhere in the world. Because participants drift in and out of membership over time, it is difficult to quantify participation. Nevertheless, there is a minimum of 10,500 farms globallyⁱ, of which approximately 9,000 are located in the Global North.

WWOOF farms exhibit considerable diversity in their economic activities. Many incorporate multiple forms of income-generation alongside farming, such as accommodation, trainings, events, or environmental services. Indeed, not all volunteer labor performed is agricultural, also involving cooking, childcare, construction, and other non-agricultural tasks. In some cases, farms may function only for personal self-sufficiency, gratification, or experimentation. As such, WWOOF farms constitute diverse economies (Gibson-Graham 2008), incorporating multiple forms of production, value, and labor.

While the majority of WWOOF farms are located in the Global North, they vary considerably according to local conditions, agricultural markets, and legislation (McIntosh and Campbell 2001; Kotůlek 2011; Lipman and Murphy 2012). WWOOF farmers, too, represent a range of different backgrounds. Thus, it is essential that WWOOF be not seen as a singular, homogeneous entity, even among farms in the same locality or region. Nonetheless, common traits include the small scale of many farms, and parallel practices of other ecological, social justice, and wellbeing agendas, including eco-building, cooperatives,

specialist diets (e.g., raw, vegan), yoga, rare seeds and breeds, low-impact living, permaculture, and biodynamic agriculture (author's fieldwork).

“WWOOFers” – the nickname for WWOOF volunteers – tend to be travellers at the low-budget end of the backpacking spectrum, often participating in other non-financial travel economies such as wild camping, cycle-touring, couch-surfing, and hitchhiking (author's fieldwork). Aside from transport and visa expenses, the only financial outlay for WWOOFers is a nominal membership feeⁱⁱ to access online farm databases and cover administrative costs for the predominantly volunteer-run organization. Alongside long-term travellers, some WWOOFers target specific farms to learn particular skills.

Another distinctive characteristic is WWOOF's federated structure, connecting semi-autonomous national-scale bodies through the Federation of WWOOF Organizations. WWOOF's federated structure, alongside very low participation costs, facilitates – at least in theory – the movement of individuals with structurally low economic capital to places otherwise beyond their economic reach. These factors, however, do not prevent WWOOF from being populated largely (although not exclusively) by the same chiefly white, culturally middle-class demographic from the Global North that characterizes mainstream overseas and international development volunteering. This membership dynamic is notably shaped by the economic dominance of the Global North, related inequalities in immigration and visa regimes, and inequalities of opportunity within volunteers' places of origin, presenting openings for some and barriers to others (e.g., McBride and Lough 2010). Therefore, while

WWOOF resists capitalist volunteer-tourism relationships, it is influenced by similar processes.

There has been surprisingly little academic interest in WWOOF. Much existing research positions it as an unorthodox sub-sector of the commercial tourism industry. McIntosh and Campbell's study is a clear example, associating WWOOF with the commercial farmstay market, as "a contributor to farmstay operations" that is "essentially a tourism venture" (2001, 111-112). This approach is problematic, since it downplays its non-touristic origins and the cooperative nature of the guest-host relationship that is absent from for-profit farmstays. In contrast, I position WWOOF as a *voluntary exchange* initiative that has become increasingly subsumed into the tourism milieu. Indeed, McIntosh and Campbell (2010, 119-122) themselves found that farmers generally do not associate their WWOOF participation with tourism.

The research draws from a mobile (Büscher and Urry 2009) 22-month ethnography of non-financial travel economies, of which WWOOF was one case study. Table 1 outlines key characteristics of the eight farms where ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for approximately two to three weeks each. Alongside field notes, photographs, and other dataⁱⁱⁱ, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 59 individuals in the larger study, of whom 23 were WWOOF volunteers (n=21) and hosts (n=6)^{iv}. The low numbers of host interviewees stemmed from a range of factors, including language barriers, and lack of opportunity due to family and work commitments. Since the total period at WWOOF farms

was approximately four and a half months, this low number of host interviewees was to some extent counterbalanced through everyday ethnographic interactions.

[Table 1]

Mobilizing encounters

While most volunteers referenced cost saving as a primary reason for participation, the desire for some kind of meaningful encounter was also a major factor. Volunteers often desired an experience that somehow went beyond a superficial touristic engagement with a place:

[I]t's more of my ideal way of seeing France as opposed to going to Paris to see all the sights that all tourists want to see, which I still want to do, but for me, it felt like this was a better way to see it[;] a cultural experience as opposed to, like, a tourist experience. (Adam, volunteer, September 2011)

Living and working in a household for several weeks represented a counterbalance to the incessant, “plastic-wrapped” (Henry, volunteer, March 2012) mobility of backpacking, and an opportunity to engage with everyday life in a particular place. While longer-term does not necessarily mean “better” encounters, the contrast with the usual rhythms and spaces of travel was certainly appealing for many volunteers. WWOOF's mode of encounter thus entices travellers with the promise of a radically different experience of place.

For hosts, motivations were often rooted in the need for additional labor but this was often accompanied by a desire to travel vicariously via encounters with volunteers. Welcoming worldly people from overseas acted as an antidote to the immobility and attachment to the land in often remote rural locations:

[I]t was an extremely positive thing for us as a family, living in quite an isolated environment..., which can be quite limiting for all people involved, and we feel it's positive for us all to meet people from different places. [...]

The WWOOFers that have been – and we've had over 30 now – have all been really energetic, positive young people. (Amanda, host, November 2011)

The personal gratification derived from these encounters is, for Amanda, amplified by the isolation of agricultural life. With many hosts operating small enterprises for a niche market, the isolation that they experience is usually greater than that of a large-scale non-organic farmer with large workforces and distribution networks. Thus, networks of encounter in WWOOF are generally extensive, stretching across global space, rather than intensive, rooted in a single place. The nurturing of these extensive networks also reiterates the agency of people to actively shape global spaces for encounter, even in what are considered difficult (rural) conditions for encounters. Alongside the creation of local networks among some WWOOF farms, the opportunity to travel vicariously through volunteers creates a sense of outward connection:

[I]t's... like a community. The kids can see that there are other people doing things different. And... we love travelling, we love to meet people [but] we are bound, bound to this place a bit [laughs], so then we thought OK, maybe we can get interesting people in, new ideas and all of that. (Greta, host, October 2012)

While hosts and volunteers desired an encounter with *difference*, they also valued pre-existing common ground. Existing commonalities, especially a shared interest in organic food or sustainable living, establishes among WWOOF participants shared (if extremely broad and nebulous) core values that make the encounter already partially formed in the eyes of some:

[Y]ou get a deeper understanding of culture and habits by mingling with the locals, rather than strolling down the promenade eating ice cream. [... But the farm is also] an inspiring meeting point for like-minded people. (Anders, volunteer, June 2013)

The motivations for participation in WWOOF are anchored by a desire for encounters with different cultures, environments, and societies, yet this is filtered to some extent by membership of an association with a set of (somewhat vague) core values. While these values were always at least tacitly present, many volunteers “didn’t intentionally go to somewhere to work on something specific” (Gillian, volunteer, August 2011). Nevertheless, whether or not a commonality was explicit, possibilities for linking between common and uncommon ground certainly exist (Chatterton 2006). Taking seriously Bakunin’s (1971

[1871]) assertion that individual agency is not hindered by collectivity but actually *magnified* by it, we can begin to understand the appeal of WWOOF as a space for encounter. In negotiating shared but implicit political-ecological imaginaries, WWOOF may encourage spaces with the potential to augment these commonalities “warmly” (Heckert 2010, 187) through material practice. As the next section explains, self-management as an analytical framework and practical tool sheds interesting light on the embodied, emotional, and material dimensions of encounter.

Self-management as encounter

The intimate event-spaces of encounter on farms are influenced by WWOOF’s broader, self-managed structure. While it is geographically uneven, with a bigger membership in the Global North, WWOOF has no organizational center or periphery, with no official status in many of the states where it has national-scale bodies. Moreover, the coordinators of these bodies are farmers themselves. This structure allows participants to operate more or less autonomously where, aside from local bureaucratic-legal and unspoken socio-cultural parameters, they can adapt the WWOOF ethos to local contexts relatively independently of the hierarchical structures of capital and state. Alongside these lie mediating factors internal to WWOOF, such as discursive and linguistic practices (e.g. WWOOF-specific slang), technical knowledge, physical demands of labor, and influence from official WWOOF literature and independent sources such as blogs. While relatively minor compared with the institutional regulatory factors that shape formal volunteer tourism (Mosedale and Albrecht forthcoming), these do have bearing on the spaces of encounter produced by WWOOF.

Rather than institutional parameters, factors affecting participation in WWOOF are articulated in WWOOF participants' narratives of encounter through intersections of embodied and emotional experiences:

[W]hen you're not in places that are specifically designed for your type of people [...] you're really forced into a new environment that you're not comfortable with... It just forces you to engage completely. (Adriana, volunteer, February 2012)

Even when differences are relatively small in global terms (e.g., between residents of different European states), and when encounters are generally convivial, the experience of encountering difference can be intense. Living directly with strangers, as Adriana notes, means you must "engage completely" in working and living together. Placing a highly visible traveller body outside established tourism spheres "designed for your type of people" produces spaces where these forms of minimally mediated engagement can flourish (cf. Lobo 2014). For those who regularly travel through off established tourism trails, however, "it's nice being here [at a WWOOF farm] for that reason" (Laura, volunteer, February 2012); it represents relief from even greater emotional intensity elsewhere.

The specific conditions of the WWOOFing relationship are negotiated directly between the farmers and volunteers themselves, without external involvement. In this process, host and guest communicate by email and/or telephone beforehand, and in person, to jointly

establish agreement on anything from dietary needs to working hours and tasks. Volunteers come to farms with wide variations in levels of skills and experience that must also be taken into consideration when preparing a WWOOF visit. “Most volunteers are very eager”, says Monica (host, November 2013), but due to this diversity, coordinating several volunteers at once can sometimes be “more trouble than they’re worth”.

While broad guidelines exist among some WWOOF organizations, they are advisory and derived from past collaborations between volunteers and farmers (author’s fieldwork). The negotiations that take place before and during a period of WWOOFing thus remain central to the formation of social bonds between host and volunteer. This negotiation represents a direct, immanent process of relationship formation that continues to develop throughout the stay; in a sense, we might see this not as *unmediated* but as a kind of collective *self-mediation*. Participants almost uniformly valued this process as a means of learning not only about different cultures but also specifically by living through them. In an effort to “directly engage” in daily life and eschew “a middle-man” (Tommy, volunteer, July 2013), hosts and volunteers appreciated “getting to know the people..., working with them, talking to them, participating in the creation of a shared local culture” (Monica, host, November 2013). This “shared local culture” is continuous but in flux, with a regular turnover of volunteers, making the practice distinct from both tourism and community encounters. Actors take care in developing interpersonal relationships but they know that the situation is temporary. The duration of the encounter, then, reflects a particular approach to value, in which individuals invest time and emotional energy to create intense, temporary, but sometimes long-term, event-spaces of encounter.

As discussed, value is for anarchists ultimately located in the intersubjective relations with which capitalism and authority structures usually interfere. The absence of monetary exchange, and volunteers' physical participation in farm work, combine to forge immanent, corporeal relationships, through collective activity. These shared "highs and lows" (Mélanie, host, August 2011) form common bonds that support the appreciation of direct (Heckert 2010), place-based relationships as inherently valuable, irrespective of the longevity of the encounter. Robyn (host/volunteer, December 2012) notes that she was

working with people who had farmed for years [and] others who were just beginning to farm and so we would all be able to learn together. I like the idea of sharing responsibilities, work, and meals.

For Robyn, working, living, and eating together become merged into a single thread of "interdependence" (Valentine 2008) bound by common bodily experiences and collective responsibilities with others. Allon and Anderson (2010, 11) warn that when travellers "not only *travel through* but also *dwell in place*," the likelihood of anti-social, narcotic, sexual, or violent bodily encounters between host communities and travellers increases. Although admittedly very geographically dispersed, the WWOOF experience suggests that greater integration of host and guest has the opposite effect – building interdependence precisely through their social and spatial proximity. At a very base level, this is partly a recognition that aside from parting company altogether, getting along is the only option (cf. Wilson

2011). Getting along is not, however, a weak substitute for a more active sense of care or altruism, as Kropotkin indicated:

It is not love to my neighbor... which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire. [...] It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man [sic.] from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own.

(2009 [1902], 23)

The impulse to cooperate, for anarchists, is not an atomized personal morality but a recognition that mutual aid is essential for both survival and the flourishing of convivial sociality. Through the embodied experiences of “shared work that is physical, noble, and satisfying to see completed” (Jane, host/volunteer, November 2013), this impulse is more likely to be solidified and less likely to be disrupted by institutional efforts at choreographing (Brown 2012) encounter.

Self-managed, intimate relationships can nevertheless be difficult as well as rewarding. For example, Greta (host, October 2012) underscored how volunteers in domestic space can have unpredictable outcomes:

WWOOFers can bring very, yeah, hectic atmospheres that we try to balance out because the kids are really a copy of what is happening around them. So if the atmosphere is very bad, the children can start screaming a lot, jumping, running, going crazy [...]. It is more stress for us.

Equally, the “atmospheres” imposed upon volunteers by hosts can also lead to frustrations:

Cassie: [Our first host] was very minimalist in a lot of ways. We didn’t eat a lot of food there [...]

Ildi: She didn’t really care to learn very much about us, she didn’t spend much time with us or teach us about the way she lived her life. She was a very interesting woman... but she just didn’t really care to share that with WWOOFers. (Cassie and Ildi, volunteers, September 2011)

In contrast, Cassie notes that their experience on another farm was “exactly what we thought WWOOFing should be.” With ambiguous and complex power differentials between host and guest within hosts’ domain, “corporeal mechanisms” (Brown 2012, 816) relating in this case to food habits and unconscious behavioral traits can incite a range of emotions in self-managed encounters. The spatiality of the WWOOF arrangement intensifies the encounter, since factors such as family dynamics, physical space, economic survival, and emotional sustainability intersect powerfully in domestic space. In this vein, Amanda (host, November 2011) notes that “you have to factor in gaps because the family dynamic does

change when there are people around all the time, [since] behavior is conditioned by the presence of other people”.

Such coping strategies are reflected in studies of broader tourism-oriented farmstay initiatives, whereby hosts undertake forms of “border work” to maintain a level of distance between domestic and commercial lives (Brandth and Haugen 2012). While WWOOF hosts often undertake similar bordering, the absence of a commercial relationship, between a service provider and a paying customer, creates grey areas since rules and conditions of the WWOOF relationship are partially negotiated on an *ad hoc* basis through collective discussion. In turn, the emotional labor involved in maintaining such boundaries – especially when sustained over long periods – can be taxing for hosts. While Amanda elsewhere references positive elements of WWOOF, her coping mechanism involves maintaining certain periods of time without volunteers to “re-energize a little” (Amanda, host, November 2011).

Differences of personality and lifestyle are inevitable whenever strangers meet, but the intensity of working and living in a small space with only a collectively agreed set of (sometimes differently understood) social parameters intensifies the propensity for both convivialities and conflicts to emerge. Encounters choreographed by bodies external to the encounter may succeed in engineering a safe middle ground between strangers. Yet, as well as ameliorating possible conflicts, middle grounds also undermine the extent to which uncommon ground can engender agonistic spaces of engagement to nurture what Amin calls the “vibrant clash of an empowered and democratic public” (2002, 960).

Structural inequalities of/and encounter

The previous section explored the benefits and challenges of self-managed WWOOF encounters on an interpersonal level. Despite the significant positive potential of WWOOF's direct encounters, elsewhere, Conran (2011, 1467) has noted that "the overwhelming focus on intimacy in volunteer tourism overshadows the structural inequality that volunteer tourism seeks to address and reframes it as a question of individual morality." Since self-management relates to developing a "totality of resources" (Colson 2001, 47) across a corresponding totality of social life, it is important to take seriously Conran's criticism. Therefore, this section engages with the ways structural power relations and political-economic inequalities in society play out in WWOOF, disrupting otherwise highly promising interpersonal encounters.

Perhaps the most fundamental problematic for an anarchist critique of political economy in WWOOF is that the line between voluntarism (collaborative work practices, mutual learning, sharing) and free labour (voluntary self-exploitation) is decidedly blurred. Abraham's narrative (volunteer, September 2011) illustrates this ambiguity:

I've heard experiences of people going somewhere and... they don't do any farming, but they're working on the person's house, and that person is getting free labor. To me, I wouldn't have a lot of respect for that, and I would probably leave that situation right away, you know, unless I felt that that was

really aiding that person's gardening, let's say, so um, maybe I'm getting into muddy water there [laughs].

Abraham begins with clear boundaries of what are and are not legitimate WWOOF activities, but the more he speaks, the less certain he becomes, until he finally gives up trying to maintain the distinction. For most hosts in the study, an initial motivation for participation was access to volunteers to support their labor-intensive organic farming, and therefore to earn money. This relation of production is in many regards like a capitalist worker-employer relation, and in a number of ways it unsettled efforts to nurture collaboratively self-managed encounters. Most hosts had at some point confronted a volunteer about their productivity. For example:

[V]olunteers who just want to hang out, or just talk, or have no real interest or skills are the ones that tend to cause problems for us... We sometimes have the problem of folks showing up to do a little work and expect to walk away with a boat load of food in return. (Jane, host, November 2013)

Conversely, volunteers experienced situations where the WWOOF relationship exposed the economic reality of their participation. A large minority (8 out of 21) reported that they had at least once departed early from projects where they had felt exploited or undervalued, and most had confronted bad hosts to remedy a situation:

[One host] was quite unfair with us [...]. I spent two weeks making bunk beds in a marquee with no electricity in Hokkaido [northern Japan] when it was -15 [Centigrade] outside... At the time it was awful, just really terrible, and we ended up having a few nice revolutions and stuff. About every week or so there'd suddenly just be a confrontation. (Ed, volunteer, February 2013)

Although other organizations (e.g. Workaway, HelpEx) without WWOOF's collaborative ethos often have higher instances of conflict (author's fieldwork), this illustrates the dangerous contradictions of undertaking voluntary work for what are often profit-making businesses. Moreover, this led hosts who genuinely wished to forge collaborative encounters to act increasingly like bosses, creating internal moral turmoil for some, such as Greta (host, October 2012), who asked rhetorically: "how we can go on without having to sit down and say 'you are like this and we want you to change'? I mean, we cannot change anyone."

Thus, if it is not possible to separate the internal non-financial economies in WWOOF farms from external capitalist economies, then the nature of the encounter is affected – indeed, studies have shown that capitalist relations of production in tourism can operate precisely through what appear to be intimate emotional relationships (Kingsbury 2011). Likewise, the introduction of profit motives into immanent social relationships has negative impacts on the quality of encounter (Denaro 2013). Although Greta's farm was not her main source of income, it nonetheless impacted on her relationships with volunteers. However, by opening up space for reflection within herself, Greta tested the limits of her own understanding;

thus, following Wilson (2011, 637), “it is perhaps only during those moments when the boundaries of acceptable conduct are tested and the close juxtaposition of strangers becomes an issue” that event-spaces of encounter are politicized. In turn, and in contrast to more choreographed spaces of encounter, power relations and broader questions of social justice are brought into sharper focus precisely through the “mundane intimacy” (ibid.) of self-mediated encounters.

Some hosts came into conflict with the law due to their participation in WWOOF. Two farms^v in the study were threatened with legal action under pressure from larger non-organic competitors due to their use of “migrant labor”. As a result, one disaffiliated from WWOOF for several years. Likewise, a national-scale European WWOOF body^{vi} was subjected to intense state scrutiny during the fieldwork for similar reasons, leading to farms reluctantly asking for payments from volunteers to cover additional taxes for using what the government perceived to be free labor (author’s fieldwork). WWOOF volunteers, usually travelling with tourist visas, fell down the cracks between the legal categories of “tourist” and “worker”. Although studies have indicated that WWOOF farmers generally do not consider volunteer labor to increase net incomes (McIntosh and Campbell 2001), WWOOFers do help to perform tasks quicker, and for lower financial outlay than paid staff. The question of the local economic impacts of WWOOF volunteers was often debated informally among volunteers and hosts (author’s fieldwork), and perceived impacts varied according to individual experiences, local and national-scale economic contexts, economic practices of specific farms, and their particular uses of volunteers.

Not only were most volunteers beneficiaries of an uneven global economy that facilitated their travel, but also they were often representative of culturally middle-class strata within their places of origin. Likewise, a high proportion of hosts in the ethnographic study (six out of eight farms) were educated ex-urbanites, with the necessary financial and cultural capital to take the risk of establishing a new life in agriculture. This does not mean that they were wealthy, although one host certainly was, but that hosts and volunteers alike were “more willing to take that risk” (Adriana, volunteer, February 2012).

Despite labor being a tool for collective sharing and cooperation on an interpersonal level, the structural position of many WWOOF farms and participants makes the encounter more problematic. WWOOF may not operate or market itself as a development organization, but Conran’s (2011) warning regarding the intimacy of volunteer encounters masking structural inequalities is an issue that WWOOF is yet to address – an issue made especially problematic given its increasingly global reach. This now presents a constellation of political questions regarding WWOOF’s unorthodox position between capitalist tourism and agricultural industries. In positioning “uncommon ground as a starting point for a dialogical and normative (i.e., proposive) politics” (2006, 260), promising forms of *individual* reflexivity (e.g. Heckert 2009) remain entangled in a society dominated by vertical power relations. In this regard, the loose structures that link WWOOF farms, and the mobile, transient nature of volunteers, are a blessing and a curse – allowing for participants to productively engage in self-mediated forms of embodied, interpersonal encounter, but failing to provide the necessary co-ordination and connectedness to allow a platform for alternative relations to emerge at a wider scale (cf. Gibson-Graham 2008). In turn, this is why Bakunin’s (1971

[1871]) anarchist conception of agency as something augmented by connectedness to others is so central to a *holistic* treatment of encounter, since its implication is that self-management, as more people and relationships enrich its structural basis in society, creates “an ever more powerful force of life” (Colson 2001, 48). Weak points within this web of relationships can undermine otherwise promising initiatives.

Conclusions: for self-management in encounter

In this article, I have deployed an anarchist framework for interrogating the spaces of encounter, foregrounding self-management as a tool for understanding encounter as an event-space that can expose present and future possibilities for alternative social relations. The research demonstrates that the practices and relations within World-Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms bring to light the politically ambiguous nature of encounters even in progressive, participant-led, multicultural initiatives. Scholarship of encounter must be attentive to the ways in which intimate social relationships and wider-scale power relations relate (often contradictorily) to one another due to the multiple differential forms and levels of embeddedness in capitalist economies and matrices of hierarchical authority. In WWOOF, participants negotiate the grey area between mutual aid and voluntary (self-)exploitation.

The self-managed encounters in WWOOF sometimes incite conflict, yet they also hint at forms of autonomous encounter that value immanence and co-production of meanings. Drawing from Brown (2012), choreographed efforts to engineer legalistic behavioral

consensus from afar may obscure more vital forms of engagement, where legitimate disagreement is a component of transforming encounters into incubators of liberatory relations. Nevertheless, WWOOF is embroiled within the very relations and processes that its (admittedly indistinct) ethos confronts; in a sense, a kind of “double fetishization” (Cravatte and Chabloz 2008). Nevertheless, without the coercive choreography of the middle ground, WWOOF farms can and do operate as a basis for seeking common ground (Chatterton 2006).

The anarchist principle of self-management can inform a broad set of debates about encounter. First, self-management provides an analytical and conceptual toolkit for interrogating the contested spatialities of encounter that demands attention to both interpersonal and structural spheres of analysis. Studying WWOOF on these terms has illustrated how attention to multiple factors – including interpersonal relationships, cultural context, political-economic relations, and legal frameworks – constitutes a depth of analysis that could signal a qualitative shift in existing approaches to encounter. Second, when self-management is established as an *analytical* principle, we may begin to identify new techniques for fostering positive, diverse collectivities *in practice*. This is true for tourism encounters and everyday community encounters alike. If we recognize the impact of power asymmetries and inequalities of hierarchical institutions and economic relations, then we can create spaces for modes of encounter that prioritize collaborative self-mediation over coercive choreography.

Colson's articulation of autonomy foregrounded the interdependence of the individual and collective to develop a "totality of resources" to forge "an ever more powerful force of life" (2001, 47-48). Self-management is thus fundamentally a prefigurative resource, rather than an end-point. Herein perhaps lies its usefulness; not as a blueprint for designing encounters in universal ways, but as an adaptable tool for different uses in different contexts. It is clear from the study of WWOOF that self-management is not an easy solution to the politics of encounter, but it offers glimpses of what could be achieved when globally dispersed groups collaborate to seek a situated "ethics of direct relationships" (Heckert 2010).

Endnotes

ⁱ This number, compiled by the author from public listings on official websites, is likely to be higher, since several large WWOOF organizations (e.g. France, New Zealand) do not publicize farm membership numbers. WWOOF Philippines (n.d.) estimates that there are over 12,000 farms.

ⁱⁱ This ranges from around \$5 to \$50 per year depending on regionally-defined costs.

ⁱⁱⁱ Much of the ethnographic and some interview data were collected with Helen Bryant.

^{iv} Several interviewees had been both hosts and volunteers. Two interviewees were also long-term interns who occupied both volunteer and host roles.

^v To protect the identity of these farms, the states in which they are located have been omitted.

^{vi} See endnote v.

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