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LANDSCAPE AND MASCULINITY IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S A FAREWELL TO ARMS

BY [VICTORIA ADDIS](#) NOVEMBER 13, 2018 [BAAS POSTGRADUATE ESSAY PRIZE, LITERATURE, PG BAAS, RESEARCH](#)

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Since his first works came to critical attention, Ernest Hemingway has occupied a space in the critical and cultural imagination as a definitively “masculine” writer. His novels and stories focus on male narrators in difficult or extreme situations involving war, violence, and the natural world, and his critical heritage has focused on these elements and on Hemingway's personal life in order to maintain this characterisation. Recent feminist re-evaluations of Hemingway's works, however, have led to new readings which complicate the issue of gender identity in his works and provide a basis for renewed discussions of masculinity and the Hemingway hero (Traber 28). Hemingway's landscapes provide another avenue through which to navigate these discussions, as they, like the masculinities his works explore, cannot be reduced to one layer of significance or to one gender.

In his 1947 essay, ‘Hemingway,’ literary critic Robert Penn Warren popularised the idea of the ‘code hero’ in Hemingway's fiction (Beck 68). These heroes, Warren argued, ‘represent some notion of a code, some notion of honor, which makes a man a man, and which distinguishes him from people who merely follow their random impulses’ (Warren 2). Following Warren, a number of critics have sought to relate Hemingway's heroes to a variety of masculine literary traditions.[1] These multiple incarnations of masculinity and the sometimes-opposing ideals they embody exist within *A Farewell to Arms* as competitors, fighting to become the final expression of the hero's masculinity. Indeed, the novel's protagonist, Frederic Henry, performs various masculine roles within the narrative; the war hero, the romantic hero, the man-in-nature, the modern cynic, all without success.[2] These various masks of masculinity can be explored through Hemingway's narrative landscapes, which betray the psychology of the male narrator, present the male body as the host of an embattled masculinity, and ultimately push back against a tradition of American pastoral that codes nature as exclusively feminine (Kolodny; Carpenter).



Ernest Hemingway in his military uniform in Milan, Italy, 1918, where, like his character Frederic Henry, he served as an ambulance driver.

The coding of nature as feminine has been termed ‘the uniquely American “pastoral impulse”’ (Kolodny 8). In the hugely influential work, *The Lay of the Land*, literary critic Annette Kolodny analyses the history of the American pastoral mode as a literature predicated on a relationship between the isolated male, and a feminised nature, which, paradoxically, occupies the position of both mother and lover.[3] Hemingway’s acceptance and perpetuation of this correspondence is widely assumed (Romesburg 146), yet I hope to reveal the ways in which Hemingway manipulates and subverts the expectations of the pastoral mode by rejecting this idea of an exclusively feminised nature, and by instead fostering links within the narrative between the landscapes therein and various masks of masculinity. My aim here is not to entirely refute these readings of a feminised nature in Hemingway’s novels, but to interrogate that feminisation where it occurs, and to draw out the exact nature of the relationship between landscape and gender in *A Farewell to Arms*. In so doing, I show that Hemingway’s uses of gendered landscapes, like his representations of gender in the novel more generally, are not as clear-cut as they may at first appear. It is important to note, however, that whether represented as masculine or as feminine, these landscapes remain subject to the male agency of both Hemingway’s narration and Frederic’s experience, while producing different performative effects.[4]



Hemingway’s Aestheticised Landscapes

Before examining the ways in which Hemingway’s landscapes complicate the gendering of nature as exclusively feminine, it is important to recognise that, at least in some respects, Hemingway’s landscapes do conform to the expected model of the pastoral mode. This is most apparent in Hemingway’s use of aestheticised landscapes—landscapes that form an artistic image separate from the flow of the narrative—wherein ‘the action stands still for the description itself’ (Stipes Watts 30). These stylised, artistic landscapes cannot be disentangled from the idea of a nature dominated by a patriarchal ‘male gaze’, which ‘projects its phantasy on the female figure which is styled accordingly’ (Mulvey 808). This sense of female ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness*’ (Mulvey 809) perfectly describes Hemingway’s aestheticised landscapes, which, like the on-screen bodies feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey analyses in her seminal work on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ are pushed into the frame under the examining eye of the male narrator. As the literary scholar Emily Stipes Watts states, ‘the manner in which Hemingway sets apart his landscape descriptions from the narrative flow is a means of “framing” his picture’ (47). From this perspective, Hemingway’s novel is very much in line with Kolodny’s diagnosis of the pastoral mode in American fiction.

In constructing these aestheticised landscapes, it has been widely noted that Hemingway draws on the modernist artistic landscapes of Paul Cézanne (Wilhelm 64; Gruber Godfrey 60; Berman 21-36; Stipes Watts). The implications of this for feminist readings of the novel, however, have yet to be fully explored. In *Ernest Hemingway and the Arts*, Stipes Watts identifies Hemingway’s specific debt to Cézanne, stating that he:

[...] borrowed at least four methods from Cézanne for landscape descriptions: the use of a series of planes often cut across by a diagonal line, the careful delineation of even the most distant mountains and ridges, the emphasis upon volumes of space with the use of simple geometrical forms as the basis of definition, and the occasional use of colour modulation (40).



Aestheticised Landscapes: Mont Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine (c. 1887), by Paul Cézanne

According to Stipes Watts, these techniques combine in their focus on order and simplicity to suggest that for Cézanne and for Hemingway, 'Nature has order; it has form; it is not chaos' (41). In examining one of the opening depictions of landscape in *A Farewell to Arms*, we find that this idea of the "order" of nature, and indeed of a feminised nature in the pastoral tradition, seems to be upheld:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels (3).

The idyllic description of the river, highlighted by the white stones and pebbles standing out against the backdrop of distant mountains across the expanse of the plains, draws its composition directly from the visual arts, and from Cézanne in particular. In this opening description, Hemingway breaks the landscape into three sections, or "planes"; the river, the plains, and the mountains in the distance. As with Cézanne's landscapes, everything in the image is carefully ordered, and delineated, falling into distinct volumes of space. The further dimension beyond the frame gives perspectival authority to the village, and by extension, to the viewer, Frederic Henry. In describing his environment in this way, the narrator becomes the artist, creating landscapes out of the natural world. The construction of these aestheticised landscapes is a process by which it can be argued that nature is 'feminized'; organised into pleasing formations by a patriarchal controlling impulse (Soper 141).

With this in mind, it is interesting to look at the first description we are given of Frederic's love interest—the English nurse Catherine Barkley, and her friend Helen Ferguson: 'We saw their white uniforms through the trees' (17). The two nurses fall under the same aestheticising impulse as the river at the opening of the novel in that they are primarily of importance through their visual relationship to their setting. Their white uniforms, promising a virginal purity, signal their presence in the garden, as the half-screen provided by the trees allows Frederic Henry and his companion Rinaldi a voyeur's glimpse of their figures. These aestheticised landscapes and the subjection of the female characters to the same aestheticisation supports conclusions of Ernest Hemingway as a masculinist writer, subjecting both his female characters and the landscapes he narrates, to the same male gaze.

Territory and the Male Body

The first way in which Hemingway's use of landscape problematises this reading of *A Farewell to Arms* is through his portrayal of wartime territories. At first inspection, Hemingway's territorialised landscapes—landscapes that are presented as parcels of land to be won or lost—are simply further examples of the patriarchal impulse to dominate: 'There was fighting for that mountain too' (4). Yet what is interesting about these landscapes is that they invite, but are not so easily reduced to, a single-gendered reading. The complication at the heart of the gendering of these landscapes is linked to the tension between viewing *A Farewell to Arms* as a 'love story' or as a narrative of 'masculine self-fashioning' (Stychacz 3). As a love story, the underlying expectations of narrative tradition, both in terms of the pastoral mode and the romance genre, would combine to support the gendering of these territorialised landscapes as feminine; love, after all, is a battlefield. As a narrative of conflicted masculine selfhood, however, the "body" of the landscape is necessarily male. From this perspective, the territory that is being fought over in the novel is Frederic himself, in an internal battle for self-realisation.

The idea of Hemingway's landscapes as a metaphor for masculinity is made explicit through the connections drawn between these landscapes and the male body: 'The forest had been green in the summer when we had come into the town but now there were the stumps and the broken trunks and the ground torn up' (6). The 'stumps' and 'broken trunks' correspond directly with the male body, and, more specifically, with the injuries and amputations that resulted from fighting in the war. The reference to 'ground torn up' pushes this connection between man and nature beyond the physical into the psychological, suggesting a sense of groundlessness, dislocation, and anguish. Taken as a symbolic representation of an embattled masculinity, the war-torn landscape can be interpreted in parallel with representations of the actual male body in Hemingway's text:

and suddenly we were in it and it was snow [...] the bare ground was covered, the stumps of trees projected, there was snow on the guns and there were paths in the snow going back to the latrines behind the trenches' (6).

The peaceful snow-covered landscape that has stilled the war is as precariously calm as the description of Frederic's anaesthetised leg later in the novel:

He used a local anaesthetic called something or other 'snow', which froze the tissue and avoided the pain until the probe, the scalpel or the forceps got below the frozen portion. The anaesthetized area was clearly defined

by the patient and after a time the doctor's fragile delicacy was exhausted (86).

The snow of the landscape mirrors the deliberately named 'snow' of the anaesthetic. This correlation unsettles the suggestion at the beginning of the novel that the war is winding down. As with Frederic's leg, the snow has only temporarily numbed the area, and so the strife of war still exists beneath. In connecting the male body to the landscape, Hemingway is able to reinforce key narrative moments through this dual underpinning.

Landscape and Male Emotion

Perhaps the most fundamental way Hemingway allies his landscapes to a sense of masculine identity is through the projection of Frederic's thoughts and emotions onto the landscapes he narrates. As literary scholar Cecilia Farr states, Hemingway's characters 'affirm that by "telling" the landscape in which we live, we, indeed, construct ourselves' (163). Returning to the front after a break, he describes in it all the glories of the spring: 'The fields were green and there were small green shoots on the vines, the trees along the road had small leaves and a breeze came in from the sea' (10). The renewing effects of Frederic's time away are projected onto the scene he describes at a moment when the realities of the war remain distant to him. This sense of Hemingway projecting Frederic's emotions on to the landscape is most apparent where the description of the same landscape is altered within just a few pages. Reunited with Catherine, Frederic narrates the landscape he sees from the window by foregrounding the civilised gardens with which Catherine has been associated from her first appearance in the novel:

Catherine was asleep and the sunlight was coming in through the window. The rain had stopped and I stepped out of bed and across the floor to the window. Down below were the gardens, bare now but beautifully regular, the gravel paths, the trees, the stone wall by the lake and the lake in the sunlight with the mountain beyond (222-23).

In highlighting that which he associates with the nearby Catherine, we can infer that his private thoughts are at that moment of her. Away from Catherine, and viewing the scene from a different perspective, it becomes haunted and ugly: 'Stresa looked deserted from the lake. There were the long rows of bare trees, the big hotels and the closed villas' (226). This description offers a more realistic picture of Stresa during the war, and reveals much about Frederic's mental state following his desertion. The unpopulated landscape can be read as a proxy for his sense of disconnection from the camaraderie of the war effort, and for the empty shells of the various masculinities he has found lacking and has by this point abandoned. These psychological landscapes allow Hemingway to reveal some of Frederic's more private thoughts and emotions in a narrative that, at least on the surface, often elides the deeply personal.

Masculinity and the Nature/Culture Divide

One of the biggest conflicts for any masculine identity is that between the natural and the mechanical or technological. As English scholar Mark Allister describes, 'men have traditionally been associated with machines, from gun to plow, from bulldozer to fighter jet; and yet men have also been taught to venerate wilderness, which is usually hurt by those machines' (2). The contradictions between masculinities centred on the 'natural' and those centred on the 'modern' are explored in Hemingway's novel through the tensions he introduces between the earth as a maternal, and thus feminine force, containing what Kolodny describes as 'the hope of rebirth and regeneration' (189), and the war-torn landscape as an externalisation of both the male body, and the psychology of the soldier. Frederic Henry is allied to technology and modernity through his role as an ambulance driver, and to pastoral nature through the brief moments of respite he enjoys intermittently across the narrative.



Territorialised landscapes: Gary Cooper and Helen Hayes in *A Farewell to Arms* (1932), a film adaptation of Hemingway's novel that focused on the romance narrative.



Trenches at Monte San Gabriele (Skabrijel) along the Italian front, 1917.



The moments of *A Farewell to Arms* that seem the most peaceful are those moments in the midst of war where through some momentary respite Frederic connects with nature: 'The earth of the dugout was warm and dry and I leant my shoulders back against the wall, sitting on the small of my back, and relaxed' (45). These moments are facilitated by landscapes which occupy the middle ground of the 'pastoral ideal' (Marx 255), set between the over-civilised nature of manicured gardens and the true wilderness of the mountains:

There were villas with iron fences and big overgrown gardens and ditches with water flowing and green vegetable gardens with dust on the leaves. We could look across the plain and see farmhouses and rich green farms with their irrigation ditches and the mountains to the north (115-16).

This passage describes a temporal as well as a spatial regression; we move into the past as we gaze into the distance. The layering of the landscape places the wild mountains and the once-kempt gardens in contrast to the centralised idyll of the farm. The overgrown, neglected garden with its overflowing ditches offers a comment on the true value of the 'civilised' nature of the wealthy villas. The relative speed with which it has begun to revert to its wild, overgrown state, illustrates the frailty of modern civilisation. Set against this picture of ruined grandeur, the rich farmland with its careful irrigation ditches remains fertile. The relationship between man and nature, which come together, for Hemingway, in the age of pre-industrial agriculture as exemplified by the farmland, has, it would seem, cultivated a rich oasis in which masculinity and nature can thrive together.

This relationship, however, is not one that can exist in the present. The location of this way of life as firmly in the past is underscored later in the novel during the retreat. Frederic comes across a barn, which 'seemed like a good place'. Once there, he experiences another moment of temporary respite:

The hay smelled good and lying in a barn in the hay took away all the years in between [...] The barn was gone now and one year they had cut the hemlock woods and there were only stumps, dried tree tops, branches and firewood where the woods had been. You could not go back (192).

There is a double sense of distance here, created by the pastoral longings of Frederic Henry's past self, which are then severed by the reflections of his 'present day' self on returning to the scene some time later. As literary scholar Joyce Wexler states, 'The juxtaposition of the narrator's memories and his present thoughts permits us to measure the impact of Catherine and the war in him' (121). The desertion of the landscape in the "present" lends a finality to the suggestion that this type of masculinity is no longer feasible in the modern age.

Where representations of "natural" masculinity in *A Farewell to Arms* are found in the pastoral nature of retreat, those of "modern" masculinity are to be observed in both the mechanised war and the militarised landscapes it traverses, and in the urban spaces which provide a counterpoint to the novel's use of the pastoral. The representations of the military in Hemingway's novel question the war-hero as a viable masculine ideal in the modern world:

Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees were too dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and the leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching, and afterward the road all bare and white except for the leaves (3).

The layering of clauses in this description is suggestive of the layering of dust on the trees it describes. The repetitive 'and the' reflecting the monotony of the marching and the incessant accumulation of filth from the war until we find 'the road bare and white except for the leaves.' The dirt and dust has shifted from the road to the surrounding environment, leaving the road as white as the pebbles from the idyllic stream in the opening paragraph of the novel. This description emphasises the tension between the "natural" environment and the destructive war that tarnishes it. The afterthought given to the fallen leaves: 'except for the leaves,' suggests the insignificance of natural life, and by extension, human life, to this modern war. The faceless 'troops' are just another aspect of the collective war-machine.



As an ambulance driver for the Italian army, Frederic Henry's role allies him to the technology and mechanisation of modern warfare. The uncomfortable relationship between this new way of waging war and the masculine ideal of the soldier come together in Frederic's sense of emasculation in his role: 'It's not really the army. It's only the ambulance' (17). These modernised elements are what strip the war-hero of his romantic status; as Catherine laments of her lost beau, 'He didn't have a sabre cut. They blew him all to bits' (19). Frederic not only feels unheroic—as evidenced by his farcical undercutting of the circumstances under which he obtained his medal, 'I was blown up while we were eating cheese' (59)—but that his part in the war is equal to, or even less than that of the vehicles he conflates himself with: 'I went out where we washed the cars to take a shower' (34-5). Just as modernised warfare has trampled Frederic's idyllic landscapes, so too has it destroyed another traditional masculine ideal, that of the soldier-hero.

Alongside the defunct pastoral ideal and the modern war that undermines traditional narratives of the soldier-hero, Hemingway also explores the possibility of a new form of intellectual cynicism as a masculinity for the age. Set against traditional masculinities, this cynicism refuses to strive towards an ideal, but functions as a response to the ruptured and uncertain times. Charles Hatten argues that Frederic's two friends; the priest and Rinaldi are 'linked respectively with traditional ideals and modern cynicism' (88). From the basis of this demarcation, it is possible to observe how both forms of masculinity are rejected by Frederic. The priest wants him to go to Abruzzi, a wild, mountainous region of central Italy where '[t]here is good hunting,' but the other officers disagree: 'He doesn't want to see peasants. Let him go to centres of culture and civilization' (8). The difference between these locations, the rural and the urban, sets up the divide between nature and culture that is at the heart of these competing versions of masculinity. Abruzzi is shown to be another pastoral idyll, 'where it was clear cold and dry and the snow was dry and powdery and hare-tracks in the snow and the peasants took off their hats and called you Lord and there was good hunting' (12-13). It is demonstrably limited to the past in the feudal echoes of the address 'Lord,' and is belittled by the other soldiers as such.

Frederic's choice not to visit Abruzzi allies him temporarily with the cynical conception of manhood favoured by the drunken officers, and with its urban centre in Italy—Milan:

I had gone to no such place but to the smoke cafes and nights when the room whirled and you needed to look at the wall to make it stop, [...] and the world all unreal in the dark and so exciting that you must resume again unknowing and not caring in the night, sure that this was all and all and all and not caring. Suddenly to care very much and to sleep to wake with it sometimes morning and all that had been there gone and everything sharp and hard and clear and sometimes a dispute about the cost (13).




35cm Austro-Hungarian naval cannons on the Italian front, 1916.

Frederic's disorienting experience in Milan demonstrates the inadequacy of this cynical response to modernity, and to the position of the individual male within that society. In this passage, he mixes emotions and sensations

with objects and reality in a jarring juxtaposition: 'everything sharp and hard and clear and sometimes a dispute about the cost.' His objective reality is obfuscated, ostensibly by the 'smoke cafes' and the drinking, but also by the mental confusion of giving in to a masculinity in crisis. Frederic's inability to find a centre to his narrative thread in this section reflects the confused and frightening sensation of being in an urban environment without a suitable form of expression for his masculine selfhood.

The Indifference of Nature and the Failure of Traditional Gender Roles

Alongside the strong connections between Frederic's psychology, his physicality, and the landscapes he narrates, Hemingway also presents a separate view of nature as a wild and indifferent force; a force that eventually serves to bring out the underlying danger in idealised gender roles for both men and women that has been latent in the narrative. In opposition to the anthropocentric nature of Frederic's narrative, Hemingway's novel conflates a wild, elemental nature with the ravages of war, presenting both as forces acting beyond the realm of human agency 

with rain coming in sheets there was a bombardment[...] There was much shelling and many rockets in the rain and machine-gun and rifle fire all along the line [...] between the gusts of wind and rain we could hear the sound of a great bombardment far to the north (166).

The sounds coming in great swellings and bursts from the distant north show the remoteness of this wild nature to Hemingway's characters as the war and the weather continue to be unmoved by personal narratives. This remote, impersonal nature is never more apparent than during Catherine's difficult labour: 'It's just nature giving her hell' (283), the tragic result of which marks with finality the hopelessness of Frederic's endeavours to construct a meaningful identity based on idealised notions of masculinity.

The final sections of the novel are entirely devoid of the narrativised landscapes which had been at its heart for so long. As Catherine lies dead from the ultimate performance of femininity—childbirth—Frederic's masculinist gaze has visibly shifted: 'It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain' (293). Here, the aestheticising nature of the male gaze previously enjoyed by Frederic is finally found wanting. The 'statue' as an art object is simply a thing to be viewed, not an agent of subjectivity, and this is what Frederic mourns. As scholar William Glasser concludes, Frederic is too late in coming to learn 'that what he has finally come to love, and now feels the loss of, has left her body' (467). In the final moments of the novel, Frederic is confronted with the emptiness both of his own male gaze, and of the pursuit of an identity formed solely through the performance of traditional gender roles.

In a novel dedicated to expressions of masculinity in various guises, these final pages seem to undercut that entire premise, particularly in the stark image of Frederic's dead child, 'a freshly skinned rabbit' (286). The male child, a product of all of the masks of masculinity Frederic employed throughout the course of the narrative, cannot survive. This image represents the symbolic death of Frederic's quest for an identity formed through traditionally idealised notions of masculinity. The natural/pastoral image of the skinned rabbit in this context is particularly damaging for the concept of pastoral nature as a retreat, and a recuperative force. In this single image, we see the failure of all of Frederic's performances of masculinity, and we are left with the final, almost clichéd ending of a man who has lost everything, walking back to his hotel in the rain. The irony of the final image comes from the fact that it also is a performance: that of the tragic hero. Frederic's 'tragic flaw' is his doomed search for an ideal of masculinity, which can no longer exist. That the book ends with yet another mask underlines the futility of Frederic's project, but also its continuation. For all of the protagonist's failed experimentations with gender-as-performance, the final impulse of the narrative is one of dissatisfaction, and a dogged determination to locate the masculine ideal, however futile.

Hemingway's use of landscape in *A Farewell to Arms* reflects the various masculinities lived and performed within the text, offering a critique of the traditional and emerging myths of masculinity portrayed. The landscapes operate symbolically and psychologically to reveal aspects of Frederic's characterisation, thoughts, and emotions that are otherwise absent or subdued within the narrative itself. Frederic's connection to the landscapes he aestheticises and projects onto is eventually severed by the war and the wild, elemental nature that the narrative allies with it. Faced with the overwhelming realities of war and an impersonal nature, Frederic's patriarchal outlook and the landscapes it engenders cannot hold. In losing this perspective, the immateriality of the various performances of gender roles in the narrative is revealed, culminating in the tragic irony of the ending. Viewed in this way, the overall pattern of the novel is one that seeks out and then turns away from various models of gendered self-representation, seemingly unendingly, and without hope for a positive resolution.

[1] Jopi Nyman presents the case for the hardboiled hero in *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism and Hard-Boiled Fiction*; James Plath argues the importance of the archetypal Western hero to understanding Hemingway's fictions in 'Shadow Rider: The Hemingway Hero as Western Archetype'; and Charles Hatten and Marc Hewson explore the possibilities for the 'romantic hero' after the narrative failings of the 'war hero': Hatten in 'The Crisis of Masculinity, Reified Desire, and Catherine Berkley in "A Farewell to Arms,"' and Hewson in "The Real Story of Ernest Hemingway": Cixous, Gender, and A Farewell to Arms.'

[2] This reading relies on the idea of gender-as-performance outlined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Building on existing notions of gender as a social construct, Butler posits that our conceptions of the masculine and of the feminine gain legitimacy through their repeated performance. In her own words, '[a]s in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation' (191).



[3] See also Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.

[4] The performativity of gender, as explored by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, refers to the effect of producing the impression of being a man, or of being a woman, as distinct from though inevitably connected to, the act of performing pre-existing gender roles (191).

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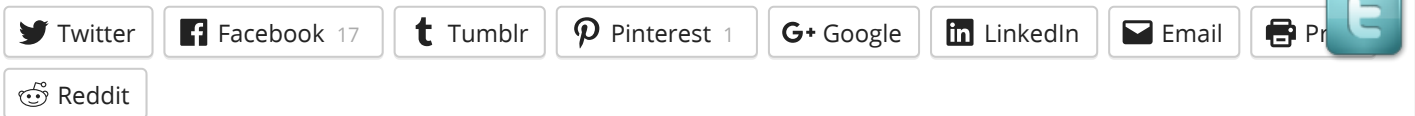
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November 15

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November 15

Music and Social Movements Symposium (Northumbria University)
November 30

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