

Book review. From the Bog to Cloud: Data centres are far more than data centres

Through a granular attention to the different processes and relations of power that converge in the Irish boglands, *From the Bog to the Cloud: Dependency and Eco-Modernity* (2025) draws the reader into the fine-textured materiality of the landscape, and into the country's cool and windy climate — perfect for data centres and wind farms, so the story goes.

In the book, Patrick Bresnihan and Patrick Brodie take us to Ireland's bogs to present 'an unfolding tale of over- and under-development, colonial and postcolonial dependency, land ecologies of the capitalist world system, and unfolding infrastructural landscapes of eco-modernity structured by the resource demands of "monopoly tech"' (5). Situated in the (seemingly) interrelated transitions to 'greener' and digital economies, the book makes a valuable contribution for understanding how these different dynamics are interwoven, and is crucial reading for anyone working in critical geography, infrastructure studies, sociology of space, media studies, design and architecture. In this review, we first consider how the authors 'ground' the cloud and unpack the power geometries (Massey, 2018) which imbue this particular formation of the Irish landscape. We then think through the agential role of the stories presented in the book to forward other possible futures, before reflecting on what this understanding can do for us — a designer (NAME) and an urban sociologist (NAME), and both teachers — in our practices of research, making and teaching.

The reader is drawn into the materiality of the land through vivid ethnographic descriptions of the places visited by the authors; accounts of bus rides, car journeys and walks, attending conferences and activist meetings. Equally we are drawn in through photographer Sean Breithaupt's images which illustrate the book: big landscapes, oversized metal (infra)structures that exceed or intrude into the frame, and photos taken through chain-linked fences reminding us that these places are enclosed and highly securitised. Most of all, we are drawn in through the authors' careful attention to the layering of (neo-)colonialism, international finance, comprador capitalism and geopolitics, and to patterns of dispossession and harm, extractive ecologies, and techno-solutionist narratives whereby digital growth and AI are presented as enabling green growth. A 'constellation of trajectories' which, as the authors show, take specific material, spatial forms (Massey, 2005, p. 155), and in ways that appear uncontestable. The book is not an easy read. It is heavy, perhaps even boggy. At times it feels like the reader is wading and struggling to hold all of the actors together in their head. The authors do an extraordinary job of following and untangling this incredibly complex network and history, and grounding them, literally.

Yet, as the authors underline, 'the mere acknowledgement of the materiality of the "cloud" and its energies are insufficient' (9). Rather the book works to situate the cloud and other far-from-immaterial dynamics in the 'wider global (imperial), political and economic context' (195). In forensic detail, knotted threads of energy, data, investment, green growth discourse, financialisation, state policy, the building of infrastructure and eventually mineral supply chains are followed and unpicked, not just to show how these are grounded, but to lay bare the material and spatial workings of power.

For example, the authors point to new forms of enclosure that mirror or replicate how enclosures have played out historically in Ireland; the bogs and peatlands deemed as 'wasteland' or 'desert' to be made productive by English colonisers are now enclosed for private energy infrastructures to power vast data centres hosting 'the cloud' (see also: Liboiron, 2021).¹ We are told of how colonial maps (drawn up by the British Bog Commission) were re-used in the development of Ireland's post-war independent energy infrastructures. And in more recent years, Ireland's economic model as a tax haven ensures the country maintains a continuity of dependency to the US and EU. This status leads to further extractions. We are reminded that digital capitalism should be thought of as a mine rather than a cloud; data collected on us and stored in these data centres has become a resource to be analysed through AI systems powered by the energy infrastructures that global tech companies are busy installing. Here, 'climate action is seamlessly folded into the energy priorities of multinational tech companies' (3). For instance, Amazon Web Services' (AWS) 'Eco-Energy Park' is promoted as part of a 'just transition', but in reality is a form of privatised decarbonisation built specifically for data centres that fails to meet the needs of local communities, and instead funnels common resources and public infrastructures (and their profits) into the pockets of one of the most powerful companies in the world.

We also learn about the agency of the non-humans enrolled in both historic and contemporary colonial exploits. The pervasiveness and extent of the Irish bogs continually frustrated colonial administrators, who saw these inaccessible and infertile landscapes as fodder for 'improvement'. In a contemporary example, the construction of a 91.2 MW wind farm in Donegal, under contract with the world's largest cloud provider AWS, precipitated a catastrophic peatslide (121). Perhaps the bogs are beginning to bite back.

There is also a tension here. Bogs have attracted attention in recent years for their capacity to absorb carbon (and so become enrolled in another eco-capitalist industry). Whereas historically bogs have been valued on their potential energy (from burning) to fuel Ireland's progress and modernisation, they are increasingly being seen (valued) as carbon sinks. In a neo-colonist cycle of repetition, where in the 1970s the Dutch Government bought the bogs 'for safekeeping' before 'graciously hand[ing] them back to the ignorant Irish people' (155), the data centres are now being used to do the work of bog carbon-capture calculation. Another example of the pervasive, normative narrative that AI will somehow resolve the climate crisis.

Through the book, stories exercise a kind of agency playing a prominent and important role, alerting the reader to some of the ways in which power is materialised and spatialised. We see the importance of which stories are told and not told. The story of Guglielmo Marconi's 'Imperial Wireless' — an early wireless station broadcasting across the Atlantic — set in Derrigimlagh bog that was powered by peat, is celebrated in plaques, information panels and a guided walk around the site. However the authors reveal to us that other stories, such as that of a famine site near to the wireless station, are not told.

¹ It is estimated that by 2026 data centres will use 32% of electricity on Ireland's national grid (Key Findings Data Centres Metered Electricity Consumption 2023 - Central Statistics Office, 2024).

Reading the book we ask how to resist the dominant narratives? And, interrelatedly, how to resist the ways global capitalism absorbs commonly-held resources, natures, common-land ... how could relations be re-made? How might we, as Isabelle Stengers (2015, pp. 87–88) urges, learn the ‘art of paying attention’ to the commons, to common causes, in order to undo ‘the sinister diagnosis of the “tragedy of the commons”’? With the authors’ help we find that stories also have a capacity for forwarding other possible futures.

Countering the state’s narrative of ‘AI’s economic and societal benefits’ (Rialtas na hÉireann Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 5), the book tells different stories. It centres the activism that pushes back at these processes (or tries to push back). The authors make the crucial if somewhat pessimistic point that this populist environmentalist movement — organising on a grassroots, local scale (as opposed to official environmentalism) — can result in exhaustion and division, with communities ‘unable to withstand the conjoined forces of the post-developmental Irish state and global capital’ (203). But the book also documents a rich seam of protest and activism, connecting resistance to ‘a longer history of anti-colonial, land-based and often internationalist politics’ (1). In telling these stories, it shows that these protests are not just oriented around questions of land and land rights but that they take up space. They prove resistance (McQueen, 2025). They give an impetus to keep showing up - a future in which we mobilise, even in the face of, the foundations that have been forged by the Irish state, its compradorised organs, and multinational corporations to ‘work *against* meaningful environmental justice’ (215).

Finally, we’re prompted to consider what it is we (designers, social scientists, researchers) could (or should) be doing here. We are told the story of social scientists being brought into energy projects ‘to study how to get communities “on board” with already-decided regimes of climate action, and nothing more’ (151). In terms of our own capacities, we ask ourselves — as a designer and an urban sociologist, and as teachers, working together on questions of access, trespass, walking and commoning (Rondel & Healy, 2025) — what is the next move? In response, we have formulated a set of provocations or ‘design briefs’ that we intend to take forward in our teaching practices, and would like to give to students and other researchers and practitioners:

- What stories need to be told now? And how might this practice centre neglected beings and other forms of agency?
- How might the ecologies and infrastructures that are required by data centres be re-designed as a *commons*?
- How do we care about bogs in a warming climate? The reality of these landscapes is that the climate will be unable to support bogs any longer. What do practitioners do with this?

References

Bresnihan, P., & Brodie, P. (2025). *From the Bog to the Cloud: Dependency and Eco-Modernity in Ireland*. Bristol University Press.

Key Findings Data Centres Metered Electricity Consumption 2023—Central Statistics Office.

- (2024). An Phriomh-Oifig Staidrimh.
<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-dcmec/datacentresmeteredelectricityconsumption2023/keyfindings/>
- Liboiron, M. (2021). *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Duke University Press.
- Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Massey, D. (2018). Power-Geometry and A Progressive Sense of Place. In B. Christophers, J. Peck, M. Werner, & R. Lave (Eds.), *The Doreen Massey Reader* (pp. 149–158). Agenda Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781911116844.011>
- McQueen, S. (2025). *Resistance* [Graphic]. <https://turnercontemporary.org/whats-on/exhibitions/resistance>
- Rialtas na hÉireann Government of Ireland. (2024). *National AI Strategy Refresh 2024* [Strategy]. <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/national-ai-strategy-refresh-2024.html>
- Rondel, L., & Healy, L. (2025). Learning by trespass: Walking and reading and making commons in the Peak District. *Field*., 10(1), Article 1.
<https://doi.org/10.62471/field.134>
- Stengers, I. (2015). *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism* (A. Goffey, Trans.). Open Humanities Press.