

Rurality, Class and Whiteness in U.S. Dominant Discourse and Counter-Narrative,  
Postwar to Present

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Rurality, Class and Whiteness in U.S. Dominant Discourse and Counter-Narrative, Postwar to Present**

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**Concordia University, 2012**

In present U.S. society, there persists the conception that rurality — particularly that of the white working-class and working poor — is a spatially, temporally and culturally regressed space. In this “dominant discourse on rurality,” white working- and poverty-class (WWCPC) rural subjects are considered retrograde because they appear to deviate from the norms of progress and development that most reflect the “mainstream,” or the “middle-classless” and sub/urban. Although this phenomenon is not unique to the U.S., the forms in which this society continues to understand rural “locations” are uniquely American and have roots in the recent past, the postwar period. However, as we see in representations of the “sense of place” of those subjects who are intimate with rural locations in both the postwar and the present, there exists a counter-narrative to such unwarranted notions. Following Marc Angenot’s Social Discourse Analysis, this thesis analyzes a “discursive topology” that includes a wide array of written and visual materials from the postwar (defined as 1945-1970) and the post-1980s, including an analysis of the “topoi” employed to represent rurality in both dominant discourse (here, primarily found in the social sciences and journalistic reportage) and WWCPC rural

counter-narratives as found in autobiography, literature, and filmic adaptations. The study of representations of rurality across diverse discourses gives a fuller understanding of the role of rurality in American society in these time periods. Further, by studying WWPC rural counter-narratives as portrayed in autobiographical, literary and filmic representations of memory, we can access a voice that is critical of the middle-classless sub/urban norms of progress and development that continue to dominate American society.

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The deepest gratitude of all is reserved for my husband, Doug Van Nort. His love has seen me through the frustrations, disappointments and victories in all things life, this project being just one part. Thank you.

As a final note, some of the work in Chapter Three has already been presented or published, albeit appearing differently from its presentation here: presented at the *Working-Class Studies Association Conference: Class Matters* (“Thruways, Byways and Off-Road Consciousness,” University of Pittsburgh, June 2009); published in *Journal of American Studies* (“Nostalgia, Class and Rurality in Empire Falls,” 45(03). August 2011)

and *Peer English* (“The Meaning of Local Hierarchies in Contemporary US Rural Fiction,” 6. Summer 2011). This list does not include any articles that draw on other chapters of this thesis and that are still under consideration at the time of this thesis submission.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction: Non-Existent Places**

Months before the 2006 New York gubernatorial election, democrat Eliot Spitzer made a comparison between Upstate New York and Appalachia. Spitzer stated, “You drive from Schenectady over to Niagara Falls, you see an upstate economy that is devastated. It looks like Appalachia. This is not the New York we dream of” (quoted in LeBrun). The statement became controversial in the following weeks, largely due to the cultural connotations of this comparison between Upstate New York and an economically disenfranchised, rural “Appalachia.” For some commentators, as we see in Robert LeBrun’s *Times Union* editorial, the “economic devastation” associated with Upstate is linked to a rural/urban division (as represented by “Upstate” and “Appalachia” versus “NYC”): according to this logic, the seemingly undeveloped rural spaces Upstate are predictably also marked by a lower socioeconomic status. LeBrun then links this division between “Upstate” rurality/low-socioeconomics and “Downstate” urbanity/prosperity to a cultural division by alluding to an iconic American film. “Maybe it is time to buy a banjo,” LeBrun writes, alluding to the dueling banjos sequence involving an upper-class urbanite and a local Appalachian boy in the early 1970s film *Deliverance* (dir. John Boorman, 1972). This reference draws on a commonly held perception that there exists an inherent cultural division between low-socioeconomic rurality and the rest of mainstream, urban America, so that economic difference is in part explained through the inherently regressive cultural character of rurality itself.

While LeBrun reinforces this view of rurality as culturally regressive, editorials in other publications directly contest such representations. For example, another 2006 editorial found in the right-leaning publication *Observer Dispatch* (based in Utica) takes a critical line towards Spitzer's statement: "Spitzer's disparaging remarks not only reinforce the argument that downstaters have no clue about upstate, but they also suggest that he's out of touch with reality" ("Let's Hope"). According to this article, the "reality" with which New York City native Spitzer is out of touch does not concern Upstate's flailing economy, which this editorial also notes. Rather, the writer takes issue with the cultural devaluation of the rural Upstate experience. For this writer these rural communities, despite their economic problems, are "certainly not synonymous with total despair," and he points to the natural beauty, the sense of tradition and the local pride of their inhabitants. Like LeBrun, this editor also draws on larger cultural conceptions to make sense of the continuing existence of lower socioeconomic rural places, but in this case what is invoked is an idealized vision of rurality characterized by a great strength of spirit. In so doing, the editor seeks to give voice to the people living in these rural communities, to their awareness of their cultural place within the larger U.S. society and culture, and the fact that these communities have persevered despite great hardship.

The two editorials discussed above illustrate the fraught positioning of rural spaces—particularly those inhabited by the white working-class and working poor—in the U.S. national imaginary. Both editorials draw on larger cultural representations in approaching the socioeconomic issues faced by these rural communities. These representations

oscillate between culturally devaluing economically disenfranchised rurality to idealizing these same spaces, a common duality that has been part of rurality's cultural place throughout U.S. history. As social scientists, historians and cultural theorists have suggested, such representations of rurality — particularly of working-class and working poor whites — ultimately reinforce the same dominant national narrative which links mainstream America<sup>1</sup> to a middle-class and urban experience (including its “sub/urban” off-shoots) and its attendant notions of “progress” and “development.”

In this dissertation, I continue the critical examination of the dominant representations that cast white working-class poverty-class (hereafter: WWPC) rurality as regressed and also foreground discourses that problematize and contest such representations. The term “dominant representations” is used in this dissertation to refer to particular representations but also to a larger process: such representations are usually highly recognizable and appear natural (i.e. they are seen as reflecting the way things “really” are) to the subjects of a given society but in effect serve to centralize a particular subject position. Understood in this way, dominant representations are also open to critique and defamiliarization. Thus, while in this dissertation the dominant perspective and its resulting representations are seen as generally structured around the middle-classed and

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<sup>1</sup>Following scholarly and popular usage, I will use “America” and the “U.S.” interchangeably to refer to the geographic entity known as the United States of America. This is not to conflate other countries in North America with the U.S. but to underscore the interrelationship between national boundaries (“U.S”) and ideology (“America”).

sub/urban, these representations are also open to critique by the viable counter-narrative that exists despite them. The dominant *conception* of rurality as a regressed cultural space may predominate, but it is contested, as we shall see, by the *experience* of WWPCPC rurality across the U.S. as articulated in the self-representations (broadly understood) of rural subjects in a variety of genres. In addition to problematizing the dominant discourses on WWPCPC rurality, these self-representations also interrogate the norms of progress that underpin the national narrative of which such discourses are part. These self-representations illustrate the agency with which WWPCPC rural subjects question these dominant norms, while also inviting the reader or spectator to participate in such a critique.

Thus, at the core of this dissertation is the intersection — in relation to WWPCPC rurality — of conceptions (as accessed through dominant representations found primarily in journalistic writing and scholarship in the social sciences) and the potential of experience to inform a counter-narrative to these dominant views (accessed through a variety of genres and media, including autobiography, fiction and film)<sup>2</sup>. This intersection poses some important questions that will be explored throughout the dissertation: in what

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<sup>2</sup> The discourses within which one might find “dominant representations” and “counter-narratives” are not mutually exclusive. For example, dominant representations of WWPCPC rurality may arise within self-representations of these subjects, and counter-narratives may arise within journalism and scholarship in the social sciences. Particularly in regards to this latter discursive form, we will see scholarship devoted to reclaiming WWPCPC rurality within a discipline that has historically misrepresented it.

ways are dominant representations of regressed WWPC rurality disseminated in “America”? How can WWPC rural subjects assert agency on a local and national level despite such dominant representations, and in the process, possibly critique the mainstream view and its underlying assumptions?

One way to ground such an exploration, following John Agnew’s theoretical lead in *American Place/American Space*, is to consider the possibility that in maintaining its own voice, a localized “place” can also question a larger national “space.” In examining the self-representations of WWPC rural subjects, then, we can both more fully understand rural agency and bring that perspective to bear on the larger American “space”<sup>3</sup>. For Agnew, place is comprised of three interlocking elements: locale (“the settings in which social relations are constituted”); location (“the effects upon locales of social and economic processes operating at wider scales”); and sense of place (the interrelation, at the level of the individual, of “concrete, everyday practices” and the negotiation of larger social, cultural, economic and national processes) (Agnew, *Representing* 263). The “sense of place” Agnew refers to is an experience rooted in the physicality of a place and the larger social, cultural, economic and national processes that comprise the “location” within which a given “locale” is embedded. One’s “sense of place” can be seen as

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<sup>3</sup>This point is echoed in the rural social sciences. See Sachs’ forward in *Country Boys* which addresses the continuing need for rural studies despite the “postmodernism and hyperurbanism” that surrounds our present society (ix).

speaking to the dynamic interplay that is the focal point of this dissertation as I set out to examine both dominant representations and self-representations of WWPC rurality.

I will draw out this interrelationship, focusing on the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the present. One of my main concerns is to examine how shifting notions of progress during this time period have been persistently anchored in a middle-classed and sub/urban perspective that has been consistently reinforced by particular conceptions of WWPC rurality. Conversely, I am interested in the counter-narratives that emerge from the WWPC rural experience, and their potential to interrogate the underlying norms of the U.S. national narrative. Drawing on a multidisciplinary critical framework, this dissertation selectively examines a wide range of primary materials published at particular points of time between, roughly, 1945 and 2011.

Theoretically and methodologically, my analysis is informed by the model of *Social Discourse Analysis*, elaborated by Marc Angenot. I will examine a wide range of discursive forms in order to analyze the ways in which WWPC rurality has been predominately portrayed and representations that challenge such dominant discourses. The materials I have chosen will demonstrate that the view of WWPC rurality as a regressed space inhabited by regressed people persists in discourses ranging from scholarship in the social sciences to popular journalism, both right and left leaning. However, one can also find in these sources articulations of WWPC rural agency, and fuller expressions of a counter-narrative can be found in historical revisionary texts, autobiographical works, novels written by authors from these backgrounds and the filmic

adaptations of some of these works. The retrospective perspective offered by WWPC rural subjects in these novels and film adaptations — as post-1980s subjects looking back, remembering and narrativizing the postwar period — is particularly valuable in constructing alternative representations of rurality in America in the time periods examined here.

I will use the remainder of the present chapter to introduce the key concepts and the methodological and theoretical elements that inform my analysis in this dissertation of representations of WWPC rurality in the latter half of the twentieth century — with a more specific focus on the postwar period (roughly, 1945-1969) and the present (post-1980) — across the following discourses: journalistic reportage; scholarship in the social sciences; autobiographical writing; literature; film adaptations. It is my contention that a *dominant discourse on rurality*, within which white working-class and working-poor rural subjects figure prominently, exists in the U.S. This discourse represents WWPC rural subjects as regressed others in comparison to our “modern,” mainstream (middle-class sub/urban) sensibilities. Such representations are found in the influential discourses of journalism and the social sciences which, however, also offer resisting counter-narratives. In Chapter Two: “Postwar Progress and Development: Conceptions of Space, Time and Culture,” I use an interdiscursive approach — a reading of similar representations across different discursive forms — in order to analyze the dominant representations of WWPC rurality in the postwar period, examining articles in magazines and newspapers as well as scholarship in the social sciences. These texts



illustrate the systematic assertion of the norms of progress that underlie the portrayal of WWPC rurality as spatially, temporally and culturally regressed. While these texts can be mined for what remains unsaid about WWPC rurality (my specific use of the term “unsaid” will be clarified in a subsequent section of this chapter), an analysis of more recent texts is needed in order to amplify this WWPC rural voice. Throughout Chapter Two, I seek to do that by turning to autobiographical writing and revisionary scholarship in the social sciences and humanities.

I more fully bring this WWPC rural voice to bear upon both postwar and present conceptions of WWPC rurality through an analysis of literary works in Chapter Three, “Literary Representations of WWPC Rurality,” and film adaptations of these literary works in Chapter Four, “The Role of WWPC Rurality in Popular Film”. The novels and films help give voice to a demographic otherwise lacking agency in dominant discourses of the postwar and present, and in the process, expose the unsaid assumptions of these discourses. My analysis of the literary works and filmic adaptations also explores how those from postwar WWPC rural backgrounds attempt to redress such dominant conceptions through the medium of memory. The writers studied in Chapter Three use memory as a way to interrogate these postwar norms as well as critique the continuing use of WWPC rurality to shore up mainstream norms of progress. Moreover, the fact that these novels were all made into fairly well-known Hollywood or popular Independent films speaks to a larger cultural need to remember the postwar and hear some of its forgotten voices. In Chapter Four, I analyze both the limitations and the

potential of these filmic adaptations to pursue a critique of dominant representations of WWPC rurality, to present a counter-narrative, and to employ memory to affirm the agency of WWPC rural subjects.

The literary and filmic corpus examined here attests to the interrelationship of the postwar and present. By way of conclusion in Chapter Five, “WWPC Rurality in the Present,” I touch upon this interconnection by examining a range of contemporary discourses on issues such as the perpetual farm crisis, mobility, political commentary and Internet accessibility. In keeping with the dual focus of the dissertation, the final chapter seeks to highlight the WWPC rural voices excluded from dominant representations, foregrounding the ways in which such dominant representations continue to serve to normalize and naturalize the position of the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream.

In what follows I outline the framework for my analysis of the dominant discourse on rurality as well as the counter-narratives that emerge from WWPC rural subjects in both postwar and present U.S. To begin, I define two of the most important keywords that structure my discussion: rurality (in the section below, “Considering Rurality”) and class (in the section “Class and Rurality”). I will consider both of these terms in light of the relevant existing scholarship in the social sciences, history and cultural studies in order to isolate the particular intersection between rurality and the WWPC as dominantly conceived in American society. This discussion will also introduce ways for addressing the issue of agency in the context of WWPC rurality. After defining these terms, I turn to my methodology in the sections entitled “Social Discourse Analysis” and “Image and

Discourse.” Drawing on Marc Angenot’s Social Discourse Analysis, I explore the potential for finding articulations of the WWCP rural experience within the *unsaid* of the discursive forms of a given time and place. To further extend Angenot’s approach to the study of film, I will draw on the work of Gilberto Perez and Frederic Jameson. Three more sections follow: in “Discursive Topology,” I detail the specific discourses selected as my primary objects of study in this dissertation, which include print journalism from the right and the left, scholarship in the social sciences, autobiographical writing, literary works and film adaptation; in “Memory and Agency in Fictional and Autobiographical Narrative” I review the potential for representations of memory in literature and film to assert WWCP rural counter-narrative; and in the concluding section “Looking back on Postwar U.S.,” I clarify the temporal parameters of the dissertation and the continuing relevance of the postwar for the present.

### **I. Considering Rurality**

One of the challenges of this dissertation lies in critically approaching a subject that is both ubiquitous and little understood by the majority of Americans. In many of these representations of rural space, in both textual and visual media, rurality appears as a regressive space, filled with retrograde culture and people. However, even in an urbanized society like the U.S., rural space exists not only figuratively but in the everyday lives of millions of people. If we consider the statistical breakdown of metropolitan versus non-metropolitan residents, roughly 20% of the population lives in

rural areas as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000 (“United States”)<sup>4</sup>. The pervasive imagery of regressed rurality, whether idealized or devalued, does not adequately account for this rural experience.

Drawing on Agnew’s terminology, which also reflects the approaches of rural social scientists<sup>5</sup>, I will consider rurality in regards to the actual places (“locales”) that are given meaning through the economic, social and cultural forces (including dominant representations) that act upon them (“locations”), and the “sense of place” negotiated by their inhabitants as they navigate these various factors. In order to fully grasp this interrelationship between locale, location and sense of place in rural places in the U.S., I draw on a wide range of disciplines including history, cultural studies and the social sciences (anthropology, sociology, geography, etc.) from the postwar period to the present. The present section “Considering Rurality” outlines the ways in which this dissertation draws on this interdisciplinary range to pursue an analysis of WWPC rurality in the U.S. in both dominant discourses and self-representations. Because “rurality” is a term fraught with contradictions, a brief analysis of its use within the very discourses framing my methodology is first in order, through a discussion of some secondary scholarship in the aforementioned fields.

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<sup>4</sup>However, this percentage has appeared to drop through 2009 (“Table 28 and Table 29”).

<sup>5</sup>Martin Phillips gives a helpful overview of debates through the 1990s where the study of rurality in the social sciences took on a more interdisciplinary consideration in order to navigate the connotations of these spaces in both dominant discourses and individual experience. (130-131; 138-139).

The term “rurality” is more than a geographical descriptor as it also includes the experiences of the people who inhabit these locales and the dominant representations surrounding their location in American society. While theorists across disciplines may choose to focus on one of these components at a time (such as statistical analysis of rurality, the study of the ways in which rural subjects express themselves, or representations of rurality in American culture), each of these dimensions influences the others. Their intersection is especially important to keep in mind in regards to my use of terms like “experience” and “conception,” which I employ in order to engage with rurality at the levels of locale, location, and sense of place. I am not claiming to uncover the unadulterated experiences of rural locales — my methodology does not include fieldwork, and the primary materials I analyze are all previously recorded discourses. Moreover, one could argue (and many have) that even direct contact with these rural places would be unavoidably mediated by the larger conceptions surrounding them<sup>6</sup>. While I at times discuss “experience” and “conception” as discrete terms, it is for heuristic purposes — the main focus throughout this dissertation is the interrelationship of the two in regards to WWPC rural subjects in the U.S.

Any discussion on rurality is fraught with the difficulty of identifying the larger conceptions that shape our understanding of actual rural places and people. As rural demographers point out, even seemingly objective, quantitative measurements like statistical analyses are themselves influenced by larger sociocultural conceptions of

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<sup>6</sup>This is a common refrain in interdisciplinary rural studies: see Stewart; Fitchen and, more recently, Wray.

rurality. David L. Brown and William A. Kandel suggest that larger conceptions that define rurality as anything *not* urban have informed statistical models such as the U.S. Census (11), something that we can see continuing into the 2010 census classification system of rural areas: “‘Rural’ encompasses all population, housing, and territory *not* included within an urban area” (“2010 Census”; emphasis added). This latest census illustrates Brown and Kandel’s observation that the rural classifications used by the U.S. census use “terms [that] are defined as residual counties or territory *left behind* after metropolitan counties or urban areas have been defined according to minimum population and geographic thresholds” (11-12; italics in original). These classification systems, among others, are unable to “adequately account for the enormous variety of rural areas” in terms of socioeconomics, culture and politics, an oversight which also impacts decisions at the policy level (14) and which some people believe may potentially persist in the wake of the Census 2010 results (see O’Hare).

This bias in the statistical classificatory system is symptomatic of dominant discourses on rurality in American culture. When we consider the work done by social scientists who study rurality, we can further examine this bias — and its potential impact on representations of rurality in many disciplines, including the social sciences — in light of the realities and ideologies of class and race in America. Social scientists like Paul Milbourne, Janet Fitchen, Kathleen Stewart, Cynthia Duncan and most recently, Matt Wray, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, have found that rural areas across the U.S. are predominately white, composed of a higher percentage of working-class and -poor whites

than in metropolitan areas. As we will see throughout this dissertation, these statistical facts are usually explained away in both scholarly and informal analyses of rural locations through the widely held conceptions of rurality and rural subjects that explain “low-class” rural whites as natural extensions of their culturally regressive character<sup>7</sup>. These rural places become the losing half of a binary, what a present, “civilized” society is *not*.

As Raymond Williams details in his seminal study *The Country and the City*, this rural other can be seen as part of the imaginary of Western cultures generally. Williams argues that from the Ancient Greeks to Victorian England and into his present, rural locales have been defined in a binary relation to urbanity, embodying what “civilization” is perceived *not* to be. Similar to what Raymond Williams argued in regards to English nation building, many scholars recognize that geography, and particularly in relation to the rural, has been used throughout American history to establish the norms of progress associated with the modernizing forces of a given time<sup>8</sup>. For example, cultural theorists Gerald W. Creed and Barbara Ching believe that rural places hold a “backwards” connotation within larger social conceptions that work to reinforce the “cultural and economic superiority” of the urban (17-18).

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<sup>7</sup>As we see in Charles Murray’s latest tract on Social Darwinism, to be discussed in more depth in the concluding chapter of this dissertation, such explanations persist even into 2012.

<sup>8</sup> A few noteworthy, if at times problematic, examples emerge from the social sciences (see Bunce; Short; and Wilson).

We can also see that these rural locations take on specific meaning in the U.S. when they are tied to WCPC whites. Some scholars, like anthropologist Allen Batteau and historian Anthony Harkins, illustrate how WWPC rural subjects are portrayed as *negative counterexamples* (Harkins 4) and have served a specifically middle-classed and urban subject position and its socioeconomic and cultural dominance, a discussion I use to guide my own analyses of WWPC rurality in the chapters that follow. Both scholars analyze representations of the hillbilly in the South as a case in point, but both discussions can be brought to bear more generally on WWPC rurality across the U.S. Their studies conclude that the use of the urban/rural binary historically—and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century—has helped solidify an American national imaginary based around a middle-class subject position centered on urban forms. Batteau demonstrates that the rhetoric surrounding Appalachia as a savage place is tied in part to its rural surrounds, thus aligning urbanity with civility (28-29), and reinforcing urban, middle-class “nationally oriented” norms of progress as early as the late-1800s (38-39). He suggests that in order to shore up this specific definition of progress, Appalachia (and the *not* urban by inference) was conceived of as a space *outside* of national progress, a physical limit case that mainstream society had evolved beyond.

Batteau’s discussion foregrounds three interlocking components that portray “Appalachia” as a cultural and national other: whiteness, low-classness (working-class and/or poor) and rurality. By the twentieth century, as Batteau demonstrates, these elements come to be exemplified by the “hillbilly” figure (“Appalachia By Design”).



However, this figure exceeds its Appalachian referent and becomes representative of rural locations across the U.S. According to Anthony Harkins, the hillbilly has been used to ease a changing U.S. national identity, a way of promoting the “benefits of advanced civilization through negative counterexample” and endorsing the “unquestioned acceptance and legitimacy of ‘modernity’ and ‘progress’” (4). This role has persisted in comic strips, radio shows, film, television and the Internet<sup>9</sup>. Although Harkins places the hillbilly image within a devalued South (and, thus, closely aligning with Batteau’s specifically Appalachian hillbilly), he also claims that the hillbilly is a “mythical” other, not exclusively tied to a “concrete geographical locale”; the “label has historically been applied to literary and cultural figures from upstate New York to western Washington State,” applicable to “anywhere on the rough edges of the landscape and economy” (5). The people associated with these places are highly recognizable figures to Americans: “rednecks,” “white trash,” and in historian Anthony Harkins’ discussion, “hillbillies.” These figures, while predominantly situated in the Southeastern U.S., more generally represent the regressed figure of a white, working-class and working-poor subject synonymous with rurality. Regarding the term “redneck,” social scientists find it has come to represent “a largely unproblematized slur against working-class rural people, a generalized assumption about their politics, and a generalizing stereotype about the degeneracy and lack of morality that has historically defined poor people in Euro-American discourse” (Jarosz and Lawson 12; see also Goad’s *The Redneck Manifesto* and

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<sup>9</sup>And as also seen in the postwar; see the chapter, “The Hillbilly in the Living Room.”

Fox). The rurality of the “redneck” cannot be dismissed, much as the rurality behind the term “white trash” helps solidify its place outside of a proper, middle-class “whiteness” (Hartigan 2; see also Wray). While these terms pointedly refer to the race and class of this particular subject position, they are also inflected by a geographical binary that pits the rural against a mainstream imagined as urban.

In such formulations, rurality — whether referring to farmlands or small towns — exists as a shadowy other. Even when more specifically associated with the Southeast through accents and setting, rurality is always embedded within the larger geographic binary of rural versus urban. This predominating conception of rurality within the U.S. national imaginary has led anthropologists like Janet Fitchen to observe that there is no “quintessentially rural place” in America and thus the conceptualization of rurality becomes the “residual space of the nation” by default (*Endangered* 246-248). As Fitchen points out, this prevailing view of rurality as residual space has concrete effects on policy and also becomes part of how we relate to “place” in our everyday lives. Sociological studies like the more recent *Country Boys* come to a similar conclusion: “In its most practical sense, ‘rural’ refers to those particular spaces that are not metropolitan. In other words, ‘rural’ has immediate meaning as the opposite of ‘urban’ and ‘metropolitan’” (Campbell et al 13). The “opposite” of sub/urbanity refers to both geographical and cultural binaries: to be *not* urban has cultural connotations that, in turn, attach themselves to all rural places.

As social scientists have demonstrated, however, these cultural connotations ignore the complex realities of rural spaces and occlude the lived experiences of the subjects who inhabit them. Moreover, as I will show, this lived experience has also been impacted by the dominant representations contributing to its devalued status in the U.S. Scholars have addressed a range of concerns, including the composition of rural poverty (see sociologist Paul Milbourne's work; anthropologist Janet Fitchen; Rollinson and Pardeck; and Lichter and Johnson), and the complex socioeconomic realities that have historically affected rural places. They have pointed out that like urban areas, rural spaces have historically relied upon industry to remain viable within the larger national economy, due in part to an abundance of natural resources (see Luloff in Luloff and Swanson 17; Doukas). This contrasts with the predominant view that conflates rural space with agriculture, for example, in disciplines like history (see Effland for a critique), and in reviews of public policy (as discussed by Swanson in Luloff and Swanson). As with urban areas in the U.S., the exodus of industry from rural places has left many problems in its wake (for a couple of examples, see Stewart for the impact on coal communities; Humphrey in Luloff and Swanson on timber dependent areas).

Thus, we can see that far from being removed from "modern" concerns, rural areas have also been impacted by such issues as poverty and the disappearance of traditional working-class occupations. Nor is this a new phenomenon, as attested by collections like *American Rural Communities* (1990) (Luloff and Swanson). Although published almost twenty years ago, the discussions in this collection continue to hold relevance, not least

because the socioeconomic landscape discussed in the book continues today. One notes that many of the concerns raised in *American Rural Communities* are still with us, including that approximately 1/4 of the population<sup>10</sup> is routinely overlooked; the economic livelihood supporting rural communities is in danger of collapsing, or already has, with little to no viable replacement; and, last but not least, that misconstrued notions of rurality and its location in the U.S. elide or ignore actual rural experience.

One misconception that *American Rural Communities* and more recent sociological works like *Country Boys* and studies by Paul Milbourne try to dispel is the idea that rural America is an homogenous other and unworthy of serious inquiry. This misconception relies on the idea that rurality itself is something stuck in time, a regressed space that exists outside of a truly viable society. In one sense, the statistic that 1/4 of the population lives in rural spaces both twenty years ago and in the present may attest to an unchanging space. But as Luloff points out, migratory patterns have created a shift within rural locations from the postwar to the present, whether these migrations have occurred from rural to urban, urban to rural or from one rural space to another (in *American*). Further, as Luloff discusses regarding the 1980s, it is not that the rural population has not increased — it has, just not as quickly as the urban (12). Paul Milbourne cites the continuation of this trend into 2007, including the influx of immigrants for low-wage labor (“Re-

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<sup>10</sup> This figure continues. See *Country Boys* from 2006 and Paul Milbourne from 2004; see also the more recent USDA definitions of what constitutes the “rural” (Reynnells) for a statistical account of the rural population.

populating” 384), a phenomenon also noted in a 2011 *New York Times* article entitled “Hispanics Reviving Faded Towns on the Plains” (Sulzberger) and discussed more in-depth in Donato et al’s study of Mexican immigrants to nonmetropolitan areas in the 1990s. In this latter study, the reality of Mexican immigrants obtaining low-wage employment in rural areas while unique to our particular time period, is also part of an historical movement of immigrants seeking economic opportunity in rural industry (Donato et al 553). Regardless of the composition of these rural locations, it is clear that as the population of the U.S. grows, so must the rural population, since the ratio to metropolitan areas remains relatively unchanged (approximately 1/4 of the population) even as some rural areas may suffer disproportionately from out-migration to urban areas (see Milbourne, “Re-populating” 385)<sup>11</sup>. These studies point out that like its sub/urban counterparts, rurality is susceptible to change, whether this change comes from migratory shifts between regions and particular locales, or as economic restructuring forces rural inhabitants to re-align community and livelihood<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>Of course, depending on the statistical measure, rural population in the 2000s has decreased since the 1990s printing of *American Rural Communities*. Without the sociological background to truly evaluate different statistical measures, I cannot fully align myself with one measure over another. However, it is noteworthy that rural sociologists to the USDA (see Reynnells) are unable to reach agreed upon definitions (and thus statistics) of the “rural.” Suffice to say that any figure cited may actually underestimate the U.S. rural population.

<sup>12</sup> See the collection *Persistence and Change in Rural Communities* (Luloff and Krannich), where changes over a fifty year period were outlined in rural communities across the country.

Studies from the social sciences thus demonstrate that far from being one-dimensional, rural places are shaped by the same complex processes as the rest of the country, and their inhabitants bring their own kind of agency to bear on the changing world around them. One study documents how rural locations from Massachusetts, Iowa and California became agents in their own future even if this agency appears different from that of the mainstream: “They are thus forces of resistance... quiet, sometimes fairly conservative, but, nonetheless, loci of active engagement in designing futures” (Hamin and Marcucci 475). Such studies clearly demonstrate that there is no reason to believe that the cultural character of rural spaces is any more homogenous, stagnant (and/or backwards), disconnected from society, or culturally inferior (i.e. not innovative, unentrepreneurial, etc.) than their sub/urban counterparts.

However, dominant representations of rurality in the social sciences fail to acknowledge these qualities, for example, often referring to a “brain drain” from rural to urban areas, thus associating rural to urban mobility with the pursuit of *cultural* progress by a rural elite wishing to escape the shackles of a retrograde rurality. In such formulations, rural to urban migration which might have been explained by the lack of economic opportunity in rural areas is instead associated with a desire for cultural improvement. However, some sociologists contest such assumptions and claims. In Thurston Domina’s study on educational attainment and rural out-migration, we can see that by 2003-2004 a “brain drain” was certainly occurring in nonmetropolitan America (391). However, Domina finds that contrary to “creative cities” hypotheses in urban

sociology that posit a natural attraction of well-educated rural people to the urban (377-378), it is also possible to explain the 2003-2004 brain drain by “economic incentive” (393; 396-397). While Domina feels that cultural preference cannot be discounted as a factor in rural out-migration for the well-educated, he also maintains that the fluctuation in rural population trends in the period 1989-2004 could also be explained by economic fluctuations during this time, thus contradicting the idea that cultural preference is the sole or principal reason behind rural to urban migration (395).

In contrast to dominant discourse, then, perhaps the “brain drain” towards the middle-classless<sup>13</sup> sub/urban is not a natural progression to a supposedly enlightened urban consciousness, but merely an opportunity for a more comfortable life. As Domina points out, there has not been a steady stream of rural to urban migration from the postwar on; while the 2000s have seen this pattern occurring, the 1990s saw a reversal, where rural in-migration increased, which was itself a reversal of the 1980s trend of rural out-migration. As Fitchen discusses in her analysis of rural poverty and homelessness, this fluctuation could be explained in part by the out-migration of low-income urban inhabitants who can no longer afford the urban and suburban areas they come from (“Homelessness” 183). Urban-to-rural mobility for low-income residents, then, also

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<sup>13</sup> As I will explain in more depth in the following section, the term “middle-classless” is taken from Robert Seguin who maintains that the myth of classlessness within the U.S. is in fact a misdirection that asserts a generalized middle-class outlook and lifestyle as the norm to which all Americans should aspire (hence, a classless society is in reality that of the middle-class).

illustrates that mobility is not necessarily tied to a historical trajectory towards progress and cultural enlightenment in the city but may be motivated more by economic necessity.

The intra-rural mobility that occurs among the rural poor may also shed light on the occurrence of rural-to-urban mobility. According to social scientists Foulkes and Newbold, “brain drain” is used to explain the out-migration from rural areas towards better urban opportunities, yet this analysis elides the fact that mobility continues amongst these economically depressed rural areas (440). And while this intra-rural mobility has implications for understanding the face of rural poverty (see Fitchen, “Homelessness” 191; Milbourne), it also challenges the notion that rural inhabitants are incapable of proactively dealing with the difficulties in their lives (even if, as studies cited here suggest, intra-rural mobility may be exchanging one state of impoverishment for another).

Intra-rural mobility among the poor demonstrates that instead of listlessly remaining “behind” those who may have left for the city, rural subjects actively seek opportunity even where none appears obvious. This quality of fortitude and agency is more positively identified in studies that isolate the innovative attitudes that working-class and working poor inhabitants bring to their changing rural locations. As Terry Buss’ study on entrepreneurship of “displaced workers” in rural areas suggests, entrepreneurial innovation in rural areas can be found in those WCPC rural inhabitants who maintain livelihood in places that have little to no economic opportunity. Within the four rural areas studied (states in the Northeast, South and Midwest) (16-17), Buss finds that



displaced workers, or those who had been laid off or fired with little other opportunity to replace their livelihood (15), created a sizeable impact on their local rural economies merely by starting their own businesses (21-22). Other studies point to the creativity of rural residents in attaining economic — and communal — livelihood in areas like “informal work” (Slack); “nonstandard employment” (McLoughlin and Coleman-Jensen); even the use of local churches to help out communities overlooked by the government (Fitchen). Despite the appearance of stagnating places and people, these studies show creativity and innovation within the very places that appear regressed, thus exhibiting traits generally attributed to the “urban.”

These studies illustrate that the experience of actual rural locations across the U.S. may differ quite markedly from the dominant discourses on rurality. This elision is one reason that the experience of rurality, and more specifically for the purposes of this dissertation, of WWPC rurality, needs to be actively brought out in relation to these dominant conceptions. In this dissertation, rural “experience” or sense of place, to use Agnew’s term, is understood to be impacted by these dominant conceptions but also to carry the potential to problematize them, and can be accessed through an examination of representations in a variety of media and genres. The dissertation will examine articulations of *rural identity* as they assert individual and communal experience in concert with and/or contrast to the dominant representations that dismiss it. Approaching the question of rural identity from the perspective of rural sociology, Michael Bell’s study of an English village in the late-1980s/early 1990s suggests that a “country

identity” operates as a “secure foundation for both the social-psychological and positional interests” of those who consider themselves and are viewed as truly “country” (77), partly through a contrast with what it is *not*, i.e. the urban (72-73). The observation can then be seen as extended to the U.S.: “Throughout the Anglo-American world, the rural-urban continuum remains an important source of legitimation, motivation, understanding, and identity” (79). For Bell, the use of dominant tropes that represent the rural as outside society (77), especially when cast as an idealized space, can lend certain rural residents more power at the local level (75-76), allowing rural subjects to see themselves as the moral backbone for the nation as a whole (77-78).

From Bell’s study, we can see that rural subjects themselves may also invest in dominant conceptions of rurality as an idealized place. Other studies in the rural social sciences demonstrate the ways in which a rural identity may be formed in relation to the mainstream devaluation of rurality as well, reappropriating its tropes into a source of local identity and pride. Aaron Fox’s study of country music and rural communities in Texas and Illinois portrays a different type of rural identity than what would be seen by mainstream travelers traversing backcountry roads amidst the signs of deindustrialization and hard times (113). Although the mainstream may see this landscape as evidence of rurality’s regression and stagnation, those who inhabit rurality live in a different relation to their changing locale: the “junk...takes on a life of its own,” the “landscape speaks with a local accent” (115). This “local accent” is actively negotiated by Fox’s rural subjects through their sense of place, their relationship to the past and present, and to

landscape and change. Their rural identity, rooted in the everyday experience of working-class rural life, is proudly forged in distinction from the urban, as exemplified by the phrase “out the country”:

But to live *in* this country is to live, as those locals sometimes say if you ask them where they are, “*out* the country,” the inversion of the preposition “in” calling attention to the “outness” of the decaying built environment “out” past the city limit, “out” of fashion, “out” of step with these postmodern times. (115-116; emphasis in original)

On the one hand, the mainstream may perceive the low-classness of these rural locations as a natural extension of their place outside the present, urban, “postmodern” time. However, this very geographic out-of-stepness is not necessarily experienced by rural subjects as a sign of failure, but rather an emblem of local, rural pride.

Fox’s study points to rural identity as forged in the hardship that is often associated with working-class life. This becomes particularly clear when Fox describes the interrelationship between the changing rural landscape and the local community. Here we begin to see the negotiations of a rural identity on a more personal level, as when a landscape of “closed-down coal mines and landfills and factories” next to corn and bean fields becomes a reminder of what once was and of the nothing that will replace it (224-226). Thus, we see a rural identity that is not simply a reflection of dominant discourses on rurality but is also an active negotiation of the effects of forces on rural locations. This negotiation has also been examined by social scientists concerned with rurality in the

Midwest (Davidson), upstate New York (Fitchen) and Appalachia (Stewart). These social scientists make apparent that far from being passive dupes who are too unenlightened to understand “modern” social problems within a rapidly changing society, these rural subjects are *conscious* of their location in the larger cultural landscape and are also aware of the *changes* occurring in their communities. As we will see in the following chapters of the dissertation, this type of awareness reflects a WWPC rural agency that draws in part on both personal and collective memory as vehicles for constructing a spatially and temporally dynamic sense of identity and place.

In turn, the sense of identity and place of WWPC rural subjects can counteract dominant representations of WWPC rurality and the norms of progress that underpin them and that have been so destructive to rural communities over the years. In this way, expressions of rural identity may be used as a site of resistance to dominant norms that attempt to overwrite such experience, thus becoming a *counter-narrative* to dominant discourse. This point is forcefully brought out in Lisa Heldke’s 2006 article, “Farming Made Her Stupid” as she critiques the devaluation of rural experience in both academia and mainstream U.S. culture. “Stupidity” attaches itself to what is other than mainstream, urban ways of knowing:

*Stupidity*, as I use the term, means something more than a lack of knowledge, for which the term *ignorance* is more appropriate. Stupidity denotes actual *antiknowledge*. If knowledge is a positive quantity on the spectrum and

ignorance is a zero, stupidity must actually be a negative number. (Heldke 154; emphasis in original)

It is not the navigation of the “county road system,” knowledge of natural surrounds or living life outside the city limits that counts as positive knowledge but the navigation of subways and urbane sophistication (151-152). As Heldke points out, the possession of rural knowledge through everyday experience is not seen as an asset by mainstream society, becoming instead an indicator of what one lacks as a person; “knowing” how to live in a rural environment places one below “ignorance.” As Heldke further argues, “Stupidity is also a moral category; people are understood to be morally culpable for being stupid” (154). Thus rurality in mainstream discourse comes to exemplify both the evacuation of knowledge and the absence of a moral character.

Heldke recognizes the destructive effects of a dominant discourse that equates rural knowledge with “stupidity”: rurality becomes irrelevant within mainstream society and to rural subjects themselves. To claim rural identity in this society is to be ontologically reduced to a “rube, hick, hayseed” and all the negative connotations that are affiliated with these terms:

Knowledge of rural life has eroded considerably in the United States among rural people, and particularly among rural young people. While multiple reasons explain this, one contributing reason is that to possess such knowledge in our metrocentric society makes one a rube, a hick, a hayseed—in short, unsophisticated. (161)

Yet, as Heldke also demonstrates, to have access to a subject position that is placed outside of mainstream discourses can also be a powerful thing. Heldke draws on her own rural experience in a “farming-related business in a small farming community” (152) to critique the urbane, academic culture of which she is part but which ultimately silences her relatively unique background. Heldke’s use of experience to posit this critique is a prime example of her contention that rural knowledge/identity has access to a “resistance” against the larger norms that appear to dismiss it (159).

Part of the challenge of this dissertation lies in bringing out this rural identity within the very discourses that appear to belittle it. While I will focus on the ways in which dominant discourses on rurality continue to be disseminated in the U.S.—in particular, through the definition of rurality as a spatiotemporally and culturally regressed location outside of “modern,” urban forms—I will also bring out a counter-narrative that challenges the larger view of WWPC as an irrelevant, backward and ignorant foil to U.S. norms of progress centered on the white, middle-class and sub/urban. I turn now to the particular intersection of rurality with class (working-class and poor) and race (white) that has helped solidify a hegemonic subject position within American society.

## **II. Class and Rurality**

Since rurality in the U.S. includes a substantial population of whites seen as falling below a generally accepted middle-class status, its identity is inextricably linked to the culture’s understanding of class. This raises two questions to be addressed in the present section. First: in a society where class is rarely named in any direct fashion, how is class

understood in its intersection with rurality within dominant representations? Second: can one speak of “class solidarity” in relation to rurality, and could a collective resistance to such representations be found?

Marxist schools of thought are helpful in addressing such issues related to class and the possibility of agency and resistance, and although I do not align myself with Marxist thought exclusively, I will be (selectively) considering various Marxist theorists whose work resonates with my project and is consistent with the discourse theories I employ (to be discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter). However, Marxist-inspired theories can also be problematic when considering the potential of rural subjects to assert agency because they can be just as dismissive of rurality as the dominant representations of WWPC rurality.

Before elaborating on this latter point, I will address the ways in which the intersection of rurality, class and race function within dominant discourse in America. For some sociologists, an understanding of “class” requires a look at the power relationships that occur “between and among different people or groups” (Zweig, *What’s Class* 4) of a particular society or culture. For sociologist Michael Zweig, these relationships may be defined through socioeconomic factors like income, education level and one’s level of autonomy (6), but we can also discern relationships of power more abstractly by considering the ideologies of a particular time and place and examining the discourses through which they are articulated (Althusser, “Ideology and the State”). However, as complicated as such a project would be in even the most obviously stratified

societies, it becomes more so when considering the U.S.; speaking of class within a North American context is hampered by an absence of a critical framework that fully accounts for its complexity<sup>14</sup>. According to Stanley Aronowitz, “class never appears in its pure form. It is always alloyed...with other identities, discourses and movements” (72; see also Metzgar in Russo and Linkon; Lears). Thus, as in my discussion of the term “rurality,” I am employing an interdisciplinary framework that draws on anthropology, sociology and cultural studies to capture this complexity and to grasp the ways in which class is manifested in a seemingly classless society. This framework exposes the smokescreen created by seemingly neutral ideologies like that of meritocracy, wherein other facets of identity appear more important than class in naming one’s social and cultural position. According to Sherry Linkon, the ideology associated with “the ideals of upward mobility and equality” elides the actual “class divisions” within the U.S. so that “race, gender, and ethnicity appear to have had more significance in determining our social history and our cultural identities” (*Teaching Working-Class* 8). As a result, class

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<sup>14</sup>Part of the discourse surrounding class in North America is within the academic sphere. The class bias of higher education and its negative effects on those of working-class and working poor backgrounds is an illustration of this bias. Although I do not have room to revisit this discussion here, theorists from the social sciences and the humanities have joined in this very interesting conversation (see the collections *Teaching Working Class* (Linkon); *Strangers in Paradise* (Ryan and Shackrey and *Without a Net* (Tea), and works by J. Campbell; hooks; Goad; Rimstead; Hitchcock; Sullivan; Renny in Russo and Linkon; Leonhardt; and Jaschik).



is rarely named in a society that is rife with its divisions, and discussion of those divisions is often displaced onto other dimensions of social identity.

Thus, the use of race to misdirect class analysis is a relevant issue in understanding WWPC rurality. Following previous theorists, “race” is understood as an interrelationship between “bodies and culture” (Garner 6) such that something as simple as the color of one’s skin is overlaid with the cultural assumptions of a particular context. As anthropologist John Hartigan analyzes, “white” skin is overlaid with assumptions of a dominant classed position so that any white subject who deviates becomes less than white (“Introduction” and “Blood Will Tell”). “Whiteness” is the privileged possession of the white, middle-/upper-class, and “white trash” is its refuse, what doesn’t fit in, those who are not purely “white” due to their socioeconomic position (2). Class differences thus become raced and marked as “behavioral” traits, so that “whites learned to regard a gamut of class relations in specifically racial terms,” and particularly, their intersection with lifestyle (93). In this formulation, any whites who are not in possession of “whiteness,” or a respectable middle-/upper-class position, become a generalizable other, known more familiarly as “white trash.”

Thus, the naming of the focus of this dissertation as WWPC rural subjects reflects this intersection of class, race and rurality within American discourse. First, by maintaining a distinction between “working-class” and “poverty-class” (note that I am not using the designation working- and poverty-class, for example) I seek to resist the tendency, noted by Hartigan and other theorists from different fields, to essentialize all

those who fall below the middle-class (see also Aronowitz 69; Rimstead; Adair). In maintaining the distinction, I wish to acknowledge the differentiation that occurs at a more local, experiential level<sup>15</sup>. Second, the inclusion of “White” in the acronym WWPC seeks to foreground the racializing discourse that informs dominant representations of rurality as a nebulous space inhabited by the detritus of proper whiteness, by an ignorant, unrespectable class made up of rednecks, rubes, hillbillies, white trash.

In addition to reinforcing the role of race in determining one’s class position, the ideologies surrounding class mobility and meritocracy mentioned above also help figure rurality in a way that centralizes middle-classness as a normative perspective. As Raymond Williams points out (see “Pastoral and Counter-Pastoral” in *Country and the City*), the rise of a middle-class urban consciousness led to a need to justify its privileged existence and, in so doing, placed itself in contrast to a rurality cast as an undeveloped realm outside the modern world. Rurality became tied to class through this association with regression, whether seen as idealistically regressed (a land seemingly untouched by

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<sup>15</sup>The terminology “working-class poverty-class” and the acronym is inspired by an online discussion group devoted to academics from these two backgrounds ([www.workingclassacademics.org](http://www.workingclassacademics.org)), although the use of WCPC by the list may not have been understood in the same way I am employing it here. Consider the thread “working-class poverty-class wording,” where I posed the question of how to address the issue of categorizing class. It became clear from respondents to the survey, working within disciplines ranging from the social sciences (psychology, sociology) to cultural and literary studies, that there was very little consensus on how, or if at all, working-class and/or poverty-class should be used.

class division and labor) or culturally retrograde. In both cases, rurality was posited as a place that the “modern” (read: middle-class and urban) world had moved beyond, a sentiment that continues in the U.S. through the present.

This valorization of a trajectory of geographic evolution towards the urban thus becomes another facet of the dominant ideology of meritocracy, where one’s location in society is seen as a natural reflection of her/his capabilities. Thus, the beliefs surrounding rurality pointed out by Williams can still be seen in a dominant ideology such as “classlessness” which, far from reflecting equality between the classes, in effect normalizes a middle-class perspective to which everyone should aspire. According to Robert Seguin, class difference within the U.S. has been subsumed by the appearance of attaining the norms associated with the middle-class in a move towards what he describes as *middle-classlessness*: “In this space — which is ideological, but also material, physical — class itself and the exigencies and investments attendant upon it are...at once produced but then occluded and rearticulated, to the point where the term ‘middle-class’ itself in effect becomes synonymous with ‘classlessness’...” (2). Seguin’s point is resonant here, when considering the relationship between geography, race and class: to be “middle-classless” is to appear in a classless state that is in reality the adoption of exclusive, middle-classed norms which further entail naturalizing a view of rurality, and particularly that of the working-classes, as a place “left behind” the middle-classless progress as evident in its sub/urban forms. From this perspective, WWPC rural people — the geographically contained population of rednecks, rubes, hillbillies and white trash

— are *not* white, lacking the essential properties that characterize the full humanity of the middle-class.

As also noted by Seguin, it is particularly difficult to discern the relationship between dominant and marginalized within discourses that overwrite the latter. Similarly, the positioning of the WWPC rural subject makes it difficult for it to be a viable voice in American society. Yet the project of recovering marginalized experiences is not new, as evident in analyses (Seguin being one example) that seek to reveal the hidden manifestations of class structures<sup>16</sup>. It should thus be possible to turn to Marxist theorists to help uncover the unique position of WWPC rurality in the U.S., especially in regards to the classed position of this particular subject. In this dissertation, I formulate my own methodology towards this task through the Marxist-inspired discourse theories of Marc Angenot, Gilberto Perez and Frederic Jameson. However, in doing so, one must also attend to the problematic way in which Marxist theory (like the capitalist system it critiques) has relied on the representation of rurality as a limit case in order to further its own agenda.

The devaluation of rurality within Marxist thought, past and present, aligns with the persistent use of geography as a metaphorical representation of a spatiotemporal trajectory of human progress. Antonio Callari and David Ruccio maintain that some

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<sup>16</sup> Such projects seek to uncover the relationship between the various forms in which these structures manifest and the impact of their “imaginary representation of the world” in a given time and place (Althusser 164).

Marxist predeterminations of social structure and (lack of) agency rest on spatial and temporal metaphors positing an “essential process of social being” (12). Society and individuals alike are seen as moving along a given spatiotemporal trajectory: “Within the architectonics of classical Marxism, class itself becomes but a mechanism...for the preordained trajectory of historical change” (14). Society generally and class structure particularly, then, are measured by their movement along this spatial and temporal axis of progress, with implications for understanding spaces and people that fall outside its valorized points of reference.

Rurality is an example of one of the devolved spaces in Marxist thought. According to social scientist Kieran Bonner, the phrase “rural idiocy” found in *The Communist Manifesto* is “excused or downplayed” by those more concerned with the overall “polemic” of Marx and Engels (171). However, as Bonner believes, rurality in Marx becomes the absolute lowest “limit” of what constitutes human progress and potential (172). Positing rurality in this fashion implicates the people within these spaces as well. For Bonner, “the Marxian conception of the rural connotes an image of [temporal and personal] regressiveness [...] an image which is still part of the meaning associated with rurality” (171). Rurality is given meaning inasmuch as urbanity will allow: rurality could physically exist but always within a “false consciousness” dangerous to its inhabitants and the overall good of humanity/society (170-171). Other scholars, like Tony Bradley, also comment on applications of Marxist theory where rurality is considered insofar as it has been “left behind” realizations of modernity; as such, the “social fabric of the

countryside has been interpreted, in a static manner, as a residual category” (586). Such Marxist formulations of rurality as existing outside a modern present have implications for the ability of rural subjects to realize consciousness in a Marxist sense. As we will see, the undercurrent observed by these social scientists can also be seen in Marxist scholarship centering on the interpretation of cultural products like literature and film.

Any Marxist theory that colludes with such dominant notions of rurality is likely to be shortsighted in its conclusions. According to social scientist Margaret Fitzsimmons, the disconnection between rurality-as-nature and urbanized society in Marxist theory and practice has created an “urbanization of consciousness” (“The Matter” 115) through its “partial view of the real geography of capitalism” (117). However, Fitzsimmons makes clear that while Marxist thought has generally ignored the interrelation of rural and urban space, the issue goes beyond a deterministic *Marxist* ideology of rural idiocy. Rather, this Marxist oversight is informed by a larger ideology where “nature as external, as primordial, as historically prior to the development of humans and human society” has become the “unconscious presuppositive ontology of our culture” (108). As we will see here and throughout this dissertation, this “unconscious presuppositive” of American society continues in regards to class analysis.

Even as some theorists believe that such a view of rurality in Marxism does not hinder its usefulness (see Burgess; Hinton for a couple of examples), we can see that it colors even more recent Marxist discussions in which rurality is elided at best and completely overwritten at worst. An important case in point is Frederic Jameson and, in particular his

work *Postmodernism*, especially given his relevance for my methodology in this dissertation. Jameson's theorization of postmodernism is a good example of the "urbanization of consciousness" in Marxist analyses<sup>17</sup>. Jameson formulates postmodernism as a homogenized space and time within late capitalist society, but his analysis suggests *urban* processes that have brought us beyond a rural/small-town "past," a past that can only be accessed through image. Following a typical Marxist spatiotemporal trajectory, rurality becomes the past to our capitalist present, completely overwritten by the "megalopolis" and "superhighways" (34-35). The small town, idealized or not, is only a reminder of the past, as in the present it partakes of the alienation and homogenization produced by the machinations of (urban) late capitalism, where all is reduced to nothing but the market, exchange-value and simulacra:

[...]: [in the postwar period], you might want to leave, you might still long for the big city, but something had happened—perhaps something as simple as television and the other media — to remove the pain and sting of absence from the center, from the metropolis. On the other hand, today, none of it exists any longer, even though we still have small towns (whose downtowns are now in decay — but so are the big cities). [...]. What was once a separate point on the

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<sup>17</sup>Another example would be the tendency in Baudrillard's writings to homogenize late capitalist space (see *Simulacra and Simulation*; for an application to the U.S., see his *America*). Jameson acknowledges Baudrillard's influence in *Postmodernism* (399).

map has become an imperceptible thickening in a continuum of identical products and standardized spaces from coast to coast. (280-281)

It is easy to see here the binary of capitalist/urban/future versus pre-modern/rural/past. For Jameson, there may be actual small towns, but their experience is no different than anywhere else in the U.S. because the larger socioeconomic system and its simulacra have collapsed the rural-urban experience into the same “metropolitan” decay.

Jameson’s discussion is representative of the elision of rurality in Marxist analyses where rural spaces and people do not really exist because urban late capitalism is believed to have rendered everything identical. In other instances of Marxist analysis, when actual rural places and people are considered, they are seen as un-consciously existing outside modern space and culture. Tom Brass’ *Peasants, Populism and Postmodernism* is an example from the field of history that demonstrates the persisting belief in “rural idiocy.” Brass denounces the use of an “agrarian myth,” which he sees as reinforcing structural hierarchies and inhibiting revolutionary change by deflecting attention away from the class divide within an inter/national context (37-39; “Conclusion”). According to Brass, part of the reason that the agrarian myth is so antithetical to human progress is that it harkens back to a place that is pre-modern, outside of “our” society. Brass echoes the view that rurality is necessarily traditionalist and regressive and thus existing apart from the unrealized potential available to an *urban* working-class consciousness. Rurality is for him a necessary step in a historical trajectory, a limit case for modern society: “the peasantry for Marxism does not — and



cannot — form a class, and thus cannot discharge the role of historical subject. It does, however, provide the economic foundation for capitalist development” (36; see also 321-322). Brass’ formulation, in pitting “history-as-progress” against tradition/local/rurality (138), maintains the binary outlined by Callari and Rucci. What is *not* urban is seen as stuck in a “place,” mired in rurality, in the past and its traditions.

In these formulations, the use of class analysis to understand the potential and agency of a rural population is hardly productive. Yet the oversight of rurality within some Marxist analyses does not render it irrelevant to the topic at hand. While potentially problematic in regards to rurality, Marxist-inspired analyses remain useful for considering class structure and dynamics and offer helpful tools for examining the very rurality Marxist thought tends to dismiss. In the next two sections of this chapter, I turn to the work of three Marxist-inspired theorists — Marc Angenot, Gilberto Perez and Frederic Jameson — who inform my methodology regarding the study of discourse in society. Their methodologies are particularly helpful for my consideration of representations of WWPC rurality in U.S. dominant discourse and counter-narratives.

### **III. Social Discourse Analysis**

All discourses and languages are ideological, which means that whatever may be registered and identified in them bears the marks of ways of knowing and representing the known world that are neither a matter of course nor necessarily universal, but that conceal specific social values, express more or less indirectly social interests, and occupy a given position in the economy of discourses of a given time. (Marc Angenot, “Social Discourse Analysis” 203)

Americans easily recognize the imagery of WWCP rursity, associated with the conceptions of regression that were pervasive in the postwar period and continue to pervade the present day: in popular publications, both left and right leaning; in academic disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences; in political commentary; in film, literature, and even autobiographical expression from rural subjects themselves. The continuing hold and pervasiveness of such representations should give us pause: why do we continue to rely upon these conceptions, and how do they serve the mainstream? In order to explore these questions, it is necessary to study the diverse discourses in which WWCP rursity makes an appearance, while also keeping in mind the potential of WWCP rural subjects for agency and the articulation of counter-narratives.

My approach to this challenging task requires a methodology that acknowledges the potential for dominant representations and the voices occluded by them to exist side by side in society, so as to better identify a critique of the mainstream and articulations of WWCP agency. Marc Angenot's method of Social Discourse Analysis, aimed at examining the interrelation of ideology and its manifestation in diverse representations, informs my own methodology in this dissertation as I seek to understand the incompleteness of dominant representations and the potential to counter such representations. Angenot is one of a number of Marxist-inspired theorists I could have used to inform my approach to interdiscursivity, for example a Bakhtinian approach or the work of theorists like Pierre Macherey or Raymond Williams could also have been relevant. However, I find that despite the limitations of Angenot's theorization, he

provides a more grounded framework for actually pursuing an interdiscursive analysis of the circulation of ideologies at a particular point in time and the forms they take. In the remainder of this section, I will outline this methodology and the ways in which it is applicable to my dissertation project<sup>18</sup>.

Angenot's article "Social Discourse Analysis: Outlines of a Research Project" lays out the theoretical and methodological foundation for his project *1889* where he analyzes all written material published in France in the year 1889. Although this investigation is situated within a very specific point in time, Angenot's approach is useful for considering discursive themes that run through diverse genres in other time periods as well. One of the key elements of particular relevance to my project is the notion of *Social Discourse*. For Angenot, Social Discourse refers to a "constructed object" that, while giving logic to the discourses of a given time, remains hidden behind the forms in which these discourses appear (Angenot, "Social Discourse" 200). In this way, and as Angenot admits, Social Discourse may be considered shorthand for the notion of "ideology," a more familiar term used by Marxists (200-201), and is something that can be discerned by studying the diverse representations in a given point in time. Thus, as Angenot puts it in the quote that introduces this section, one could approach texts and other cultural productions with a view to examining the ideologies and "ways of knowing and representing the known world" that underpin these cultural productions, including the social values and "interests" that mark them and that are often concealed within the

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<sup>18</sup>My engagement with Angenot is restricted to the English translations of his work.

“economy of discourses of a given time” (203). For Angenot, discourses thus mediate between shifting ideologies and the society of which these discourses and ideologies are part, forming a *discursive hegemony* in the service of dominant subject position(s) without, however, foreclosing on the “range of contradictions, dysfunctions...” etc. that could challenge the dominant ideology and its representations (203-204). Thus, it is possible to uncover within any discursive hegemony a “set of *topoi*,” defined as “a number of basic propositions” that give “full vent to ideological antagonisms, debates, disagreements, and polemics that are made possible by a host of implicit, commonly-shared axioms” (“Social Discourse” 204). Thus, these *topoi* provide an underlying logic to even those representations that appear at odds with each other.

To briefly connect this approach to my ongoing discussion, it is useful to consider Seguin’s definition of middle-classlessness mentioned in the last section. The dominant ideology underlying such a concept makes sense insofar as certain elements of society are “occluded and rearticulated,” thus making it immediately clear that there is more to the veneer of “classlessness”: the dominant ideology that equates classlessness with that of the middle-class and those elements (including differently classed subject positions) that contradict such reasoning. Angenot offers a way to examine this relationship within representations, between what is explicitly *said* within a representation and that which remains *unsaid*, including both the dominant ideology and the contradictions it inevitably glosses over (203-204). Thus, in this model, it is possible to tease out a dominant ideology underlying the representations of a particular time and place, while also

identifying those counter-narratives that contradict its logic. Accordingly, the term “unsaid” as used in this dissertation can refer to either one of these elements depending on the context.

Considering discourse in this fashion is vital to my dissertation project. The pervasiveness of certain tropes in the representation of WWPC rursality across diverse discourses in the U.S. effects a naturalized conception of rurality as the nation’s regressed other. However, this naturalized conception of rurality can be scrutinized through the dominant “unsaid” elements existing below the surface of what is explicitly “said.” Conversely, those unsaid elements associated with the marginalized, in this case WWPC rurality, may be sought out in order to provide a critique of the dominant norms that try to overwrite it. What is required in order to pursue such a conversation is an *interdiscursive* reading of texts in different genres, including a consideration of their larger social contexts. Interdiscursive reading thus entails a reading across texts with a view towards identifying both the Social Discourse (or ideology) informing such texts, and the voices that may be occluded within them. Angenot offers means of exposing these levels of the unsaid by considering the “economy of discourses” of a given time, by asking questions about the ideological work performed by the particular form a discourse takes, and by examining who articulates a given discourse, to whom it is addressed and to what ends. The intricate web that includes the forms which representations take, their valuation in relation to other discursive forms, and their audience composes a *discursive topology* that is characterized by the exchange value of the diverse discourses that

constitute it: “Discourses circulate, their value is regulated by supply and demand, they are marketed and exchanged” (207). In this way, a discursive topology evokes a spatiality that exceeds linear logic; it more fully expresses ideology as a constantly shifting negotiation instead of a deterministic model, making it easier to expose the counter-narratives that may be elided upon first glance.

I employ such an examination of discursive topology in regards to WWPCPC rurality in the U.S. in chapters Two (postwar) and Five (present). These two chapters will largely be devoted to analyzing the ways in which WWPCPC rurality is used to cement a middle-classless sub/urban dominance and the norms of progress that uphold this presence within print journalism (both right- and left-leaning) and the social sciences. Although I will briefly introduce a WWPCPC rural counter-narrative that also occurs within discourses like autobiography, historical revisionism and, at times, within dominant discourse itself, I will mostly foreground this counter-narrative and its role within the larger discursive topology in my examination of literary and filmic works discussed in chapters Three and Four.

Before turning to the role of the image within a discursive topology and Angenot’s theorizations on this matter in the next section, I want to first bring attention to the role Angenot attributes to literature within the broader print topology. For Angenot, literature holds “knowledge in the second degree,” acting as a “supplement” within Social Discourse (“What Can Literature” 219). As such, literature “reflects and records” the “discordant voices, its unregulated legitimations, its echoes and its parodies” from a

“distance” (223-224). Because of this distance, literature does not actively offer what Angenot considers an authoritarian voice through which to reinforce the hegemonic structure of a particular time and place. Literature, while part of Social Discourse and its attempt to affirm itself through discourse (225-226), can still defamiliarize the explicit forms that the dominant ideology take and the shared assumptions implicit within them: “literature shows how strange they are, it defamiliarizes them, but does so without pretending to possess the instruments of knowledge needed to oppose them” (227). The “usefulness” of literature for society is in revealing the tension between the explicit and implicit, the sayable and unsaid. In order to get to the heart of this tension, literature needs to be analyzed in relation to Social Discourse.

This view of literature’s role in Social Discourse is particularly relevant for my analysis of the literary works discussed in Chapter Three. Most of the works in question are written by men and women originating from postwar WWPC rural locations. These works, published between 1980 and 2001, look back to postwar rural settings but also interrelate the past with the present and, as a result, offer a perspective on the position of WWPC rurality in the present. My reading seeks to bring into view the “discordant voices” of WWPC rurality overlooked by postwar and present dominant representations, foregrounding the ways in which these literary works interrogate and “defamiliarize” those dominant assumptions.

As much as Angenot’s project offers a framework to consider the unsaid of Social Discourse, allowing for the interrogation of dominant representations and the articulation

of agency by those overlooked, there are also some limitations to his model. I will refer to other theorists, particularly in the next section, to help strengthen Angenot's model, and other than a few words here, I will not belabor a critique of his theories or methodologies. I have already voiced my objections regarding the tendency of Marxist-inspired analyses to overwrite or devalue rural spaces and people in their overarching formulations, and in its affinity to Marxist critique, Angenot's work could potentially present a similar problem. Moreover, applying Angenot's framework to my own corpus is potentially problematic in that he largely focuses on the written word. As Frederic Jameson points out, Angenot's focus on "written and printed" discourses excludes other "cultural practices and non-linguistic 'texts'" ("Marc Angenot" 237). However, as I argue in the next section, the framework of Social Discourse Analysis can be employed in the analysis of visual culture as well.

Another important element to consider regards Angenot's potential limitations in addressing agency within discourse and society. Theorist Marie Christine Leps has pointed to Angenot's tendency to elide agency on an individual level. According to Leps, in Angenot's model, "All agency belongs to the system, not the subjects, who are wholly absorbed by the game and its rules" (269). Clearly, this particular limitation is problematic for a project like this dissertation that seeks to bring out the agency of devalued subjects not as the *system* allows, but in spite of it. However, as Leps demonstrates through supplementing her reading of Angenot with Foucault and Bakhtin, it is possible to address these shortcomings through a reading of Angenot with other



theorists. My own reading of Angenot's work has also been informed by other theorists within the sociocritical school who bring individual agency to the fore in their analysis of cultural products (some examples being Siegle; Malcuzyński; Zavala; and Cros).

In addition to the above limitations, it is also important to address the ways in which Angenot's methodology differs from mine. First, while Angenot's project is principally historical, this dissertation is concerned with the present and a recent past (postwar U.S.) whose traces are still very apparent in the present. I recognize that my proximity to the material studied might make me susceptible to the very biases and blind spots I seek to reveal. However, I feel it is still possible to make observations on present social biases and to make qualified judgments on the effects of the recent past on our present.

Secondly, unlike Angenot, I am not restricting myself to the written word as I will be analyzing film as well. I do not think that Angenot would necessarily exclude the visual from Social Discourse Analysis, and I do think that film is an important part of our discursive topologies. This point will be more thoroughly explicated in the next section, in part using Angenot's work *Critique of Semiotic Reason*.

Putting these caveats aside, it should also be clear in what ways Angenot is useful for my dissertation. Considering various discourses in light of a discursive topology is reflected in my own use of diverse sources, from journalistic reportage to scholarly studies in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and history, and including literary and filmic representations. I undertake this interdiscursive analysis in chapters Two and Five in order to reveal the tension between what is explicitly said and what remains

unsaid in representations of WWPC rurality in the postwar and present. I will also include the experiences of subjects themselves in this discussion but will more fully consider the potential for a WWPC rural counter-narrative in chapters Three and Four. Of course, this act of “rereading” discourse to bring out the margins is itself a discourse and should be considered, in some way, as part of the existing discourses on WWPC rurality. Later in this chapter I will discuss the particular discursive topology of primary materials selected for this dissertation, but next I want to more fully situate the filmic image within Angenot’s formulations.

#### **IV. Image and Discourse**

We recognize a mediating point of view, in the position of a camera as in a narrator’s words, by our awareness that there are other points of view we could as well have adopted, other ways of seeing equally possible — that the account given leaves a remainder. (Gilberto Perez, *Material Ghost* 91)

Given that this dissertation analyzes filmic adaptations that represent WWPC rurality and the possibilities of WWPC rural counter-narratives, I would like to address the inclusion of images in Social Discourse Analysis. This inclusion is made possible through intertextually drawing on two other Marxist-inspired theorists, Gilberto Perez and Frederic Jameson, both of whom complement Angenot’s approach towards a Social Discourse Analysis that attempts to “immerse discursive forms that are traditionally investigated separately” and thus requires a dual focus on the formal qualities of different discourses and the cultural, social, and historical forces that act upon them (Angenot, “Social Discourse” 199-200). In this section, I address the role of image in Social

Discourse and specifically the interrelation of the filmic image with society, culture and the individual viewer. Further, I bring attention to the ways in which film potentially challenges the dominant representations of WWPC rural subjects through the emergence of both the dominant and marginalized “unsaid” underlying such representations. This point is particularly important in regards to the films I discuss: as popular productions with highly recognizable stars, their representations of rurality could be easily perceived as regressive, yet with the aid of these theorists I pursue the possibility of drawing out an unsaid that may otherwise be overlooked. First, I will discuss Angenot’s approach to the image, specifically focusing on his outline of the interrelationship between image, society and viewer in his work *Critique of Semiotic Reason*. Then, I will place Angenot’s discussion next to Gilberto Perez’s formal analysis of film as a *material ghost*, and more specifically Perez’s discussion of the *out-of-field*. After interrelating these two theorists, I will discuss Jameson’s notion of the *political unconscious* in order to consider the usefulness of Discourse Analysis (and considerations of “image”) for the study of the present and recent past.

Before turning to Angenot’s interrelation of image, society and viewer, it is important to note Angenot’s approach to “image.” Angenot centers his critique of semiotic theorizations of the image on one photograph. While Angenot includes film theorists like Christian Metz in his semiotic analysis, he does so cursorily; in and of itself, *Critique of Semiotic Reason* cannot serve my purposes of understanding the *filmic* image within society. However, by drawing on film theorists like Gilberto Perez, the implications for

understanding the filmic form within Angenot's Social Discourse can be made more concrete.

A further hindrance in Angenot's approach to image regards the issue of agency discussed earlier. As Leps points out, Angenot draws distinctions between "discourses and reality," recognizing agency only as a feature of "the systematic production of ideology" (271). With such a reading, both the agency expounded through a particular work and that of the person consuming this work is compromised. A reading of his critical work on the image reinforces this point. Although Angenot appears critical of "our" society "tend[ing] to assign to simulacra a kind of overriding autonomy" where the "Real has disappeared" (*Critique* 120), this critique is greatly tempered by his tendency to fold image, society and the individual into the simulacra's surface — the representation itself. Again, we can recall Leps' assertion that Angenot remains within a pre-determined system even as he criticizes it. For the purposes of my project, therefore, it is necessary to combine Angenot's methodology for considering Social Discourse with theorists like Perez and Jameson. Their perspectives help situate the image within the wider Social Discourse, introduce the agency of a viewer to challenge the image, and especially with the cultural analysis of Jameson, help bring out "discordant voices" within a filmic medium that is itself party to the dissemination of dominant representations (although with Jameson, we will see, there are limitations).

Before turning to the relevant contributions of these theorists, I will illustrate how Angenot's approach to the relationship between image, society and individual mirrors his

theories regarding print materials and Social Discourse. The image, or “simulacrum,” is “an object that offers a measurable or gradatable and, imperfect, resemblance with a model object (which becomes a primary object only when a simulacrum of it is constructed)” (78). Angenot considers the relation between the primary and secondary object (in photography) to be a “simulation” that places both the primary and secondary/simulacrum object within an economy of discourses itself informed by the social (ideological) meaning and identification by a given viewer/subject (98). Neither the simulacrum (and its primary object) nor the viewer can be held in a fixed determination, as both “circulate within an economy of symbolic production” (111) or, to refer to the above discussion of Social Discourse Analysis, both are related through a fluid discursive topology. The contemporaneous relationship between a photograph/image and a viewer/subject is part of the same sociohistorical moment, sharing the same ideological assumptions: an image makes sense insofar as the viewer/subject can recognize the conventions of the “representable” (and, implicitly, what isn’t and/or can’t be represented, including a normative dominant ideology and the marginalized components occluded by it) (109-111). For this reason Angenot calls for the consideration of the “*totality of social discourse*” in order to make sense of the relationship between an image’s representable/non-representable (sayable/unsayable) and the viewer.

Clearly, Angenot’s approach to the image is similar to his approach to written discourses discussed in the previous section. Like these written discourses, the image is part of a larger discursive topology that implicates the viewer, and this topology can be

investigated in order to reveal the “blind spots of any ideological practice, that is, of the way the world is known when that ideology seeks to make itself ‘natural’” (91). Similar to the Social Discourse Analysis discussed above, the photographic “representable”/unrepresentable mirrors that of the said/unsaid relationship of written discourse where what is literally represented is underscored by both an unrepresented dominant ideology and what this ideology leaves out: its marginalized subjects. Also mirroring this discussion, Angenot places the photographic image and the viewer in a fluid relationship that is nonetheless ultimately constrained by the ideological manipulation of a given discursive topology. Although there is the opportunity to consider those marginalized elements within the unrepresented, this restriction of viewer agency presents a potential obstacle in considering the counter-narratives that may emerge from the marginalized unsaid and one’s ability to discern these narratives. To redress this point, I will first turn to Perez’s notion of the “material ghost.”

Angenot and Perez overlap on many points, particularly regarding the social nature of the image and the relation of the viewer to a given image and its less apparent components. As in Social Discourse Analysis generally, the dominant unsaid of an image is central to understanding its explicit form and is perhaps the most fundamental part of its meaning; after all, without shared unsaid assumptions, an image couldn’t be manufactured and understood in the first place. Moreover, Perez’s discussion of the relationship between the filmic image and the spectator as agent supplements Angenot’s framework towards the purposes of my analysis.

The qualities that Angenot underscores within the photographic image are also part of Perez's formulation of film. Perez, however, suggests that film intensifies these qualities: "What lies beyond the image in the space out of frame is a suggestion in still photography that the movies make into a convention" (26). For Perez, a photograph's "suggestion" of what lies outside of it "cannot construct [the out of frame] as a movie can, it cannot make it into a full-blown fiction" (26). Where the film intensifies the unsaid of a photograph, its imagery absorbs its object (and society) into part of the "material ghost": "The images on the screen carry in them something of the world itself, something material, and yet something transposed, transformed into another world" (28). While this idea of transposition mirrors Angenot's own approach to the content of a simulacrum and one's response to it, Perez is not as restrictive when it comes to the agency of a spectator. For Perez, the "conventions" surrounding a filmic image in both its production and reception are part of an active relationship between a spectator and the image itself: "A convention is something accepted, agreed upon, established" (21). Already we can see Perez part ways with Angenot in regards to spectator agency: while a film must operate within recognized "conventions," it only "proposes a transaction to which it must win the spectator's consent" to enter into the relationship (22). Like the image, the spectator is ideologically informed, but since the spectator can choose to give her/his "consent," s/he is not reduced to these (ideological) conventions.

Perez elucidates another important link between Angenot's discussion of Social Discourse and film theory in his understanding of the "convention" of the off-screen (the

*hors-champs*, or “out-of-field”). For Perez, what is explicitly shown depends upon that which falls outside the frame: “The out of frame is not a fact, however, but a convention, a creation of film technique, in most cases not what was actually there out of range of the camera’s picturing but what we are to accept as being there in the space off screen” (137). As demonstrated in this quote, there are two points when considering the out-of-field: the formal element, and its said and unsaid discursive elements. Clearly, when discussing the convention of “film technique,” Perez is invoking a criticism of form that includes the actual off-screen space. However, this off-screen space that the viewer is asked to picture is “in most cases” not really there. The off-screen space, while in part constructed by film technique, also requires the spectator to directly construct the out-of-field through her/his own engagement with the image.

Such construction thus depends in part on shared assumptions that make the image intelligible to the spectator, much as the concept of the unsaid/unrepresentable operates in Angenot. However, unlike Angenot, Perez allows the spectator agency to navigate convention (both filmic and social) through her/his own position in the image’s out-of-field: “The convention asking us to accept the existence of that unseen larger context asks us at the same time to accept its omission from view; as we agree that it is there we also agree we don’t need to see it” (86). The representable and that which forms its basis, the un-representable or unsayable, hold common assumptions and biases with the spectator, yet it is the spectator who ultimately agrees to acknowledge these biases. Implicitly, then, a spectator may actively choose to go against this convention and, by extension, engage



directly with those unsaid elements, both dominant and marginalized, that underscore a given representation: the spectator is not controlled by the structure, but navigates it. This navigation reinforces the image as a “material ghost”—it is always tied to something larger, most obviously tied to those unsaid dominant “conventions” that inform its form and content, but also to the marginalized unsaid elements, including their potential counter-narratives, that exist in the out-of-field.

Using Perez to assert this agency of the spectator in relation to both the dominant and marginalized unsaid elements of the filmic image will be particularly important in the discussion of filmic representations of WWCP rursity in the film adaptations discussed in Chapter Four. On one hand, such representations may evoke in the spectator the familiar nostalgic tropes of regressed rurality; however, the “discordant voices” written into the literary originals might find new ways to be heard through the filmic adaptations. To return to Perez’s quote at the start of this section, the concept of the out-of-field serves to remind us that the “account given leaves a remainder,” a remainder that is open for interrogation. To actively interrogate this remainder, however, it is necessary to also introduce a cultural analysis of the out-of-field of the image, or the “unsaid” in Social Discourse generally, in order to bring forth the naturalized notions underlying filmic representations and to hear the voices of those left out. In order to clarify this latter point, I want to turn now to Jameson’s concept of the “political unconscious” and its potential for asserting counter-narratives elided by dominant representations in filmic discourse.

We have seen in the discussion of Social Discourse Analysis that Angenot's decision to study a period significantly removed from the present is guided by his conviction that this better positions him to expose the "blind spots" of the discourses he studies, a position he brings to his view of the image. In his *Critique of Semiotic Reason*, Angenot argues that a study of "contemporary society" can only be "guided occasionally by user's intuition (but the user has blind spots, distorted perceptions and personal equations)" (*Critique* 113). However, if we consider Jameson's formulation of the political unconscious and his applications of this concept to the filmic image (most notably, to *Dog Day Afternoon* [dir. Sidney Lumet, 1975]), we can see that the contemporaneous viewer can uncover a work's unsaid potential through a cultural analysis that enhances the more strict formal analyses as found, for example, in Perez.

Jameson's "rereading and rewriting" of the text (*Political* 75-76) exposes what is not explicitly shown within the material (literary) form, bringing out the political unconscious that informs the text in question, as well as the social context of the text and the critic. The political unconscious holds both the sayable and shared assumptions that give the sayable meaning; the political unconscious also holds "our collective fantasies" about this sayable, and this includes our social positionings and relations to the various cultural products we encounter (*Political* 34). Such a cultural analysis has much in common with Angenot's formulation of a discursive topology. In both cases, what is said within a text must be considered in relation to what remains unsaid. For Jameson, this unsaid goes further than Angenot: the political unconscious that is part of the unsaid is

uncontainable by hegemonic discursive forms. Further, where Angenot does not address individual agency in his theories, in Jameson's formulation agency is written more firmly within the political unconscious<sup>19</sup> (even if, ultimately, this agency too is restricted, a point to which I will return). Discourse is still a potentially closed hegemonic structure in Jameson, but it cannot completely subsume those marginalized and, as such, is open to critique: "[the text] cannot be properly assigned [its] relational place in a dialogical system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which [it is] initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence..." (85). These marginalized voices, while elided within the said of a text, are still apparent and can be drawn out by the reader.

In his conclusion, Jameson opens up the possibility of agency in the consumer of cultural products in the present, through his own critique of media theories that assume the passivity of the spectator:

if the ideological function of mass culture is understood as a process whereby otherwise dangerous and protopolitical impulses are "managed" and defused...then some preliminary step must also be theorized in which these same impulses...are initially awakened within the very text that seeks to still them. (287)

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<sup>19</sup>Perhaps one reason for this added agency is Jameson's reliance on Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic, something Leps argues would be helpful in relation to Angenot's theories.

Although at times Jameson can be accused of limiting the agency of a spectator through theorizations that conflate image with reality, or that place image as determining reality, he makes a strong point here regarding the need to consider the power of the spectator in relation to the image. Texts and images are more than manipulation as they also hold the potential for a viewer to see the political unconscious beneath the explicit form of the image and of everyday life *in the present*. Like Perez, Jameson reads the “conventions” of a society (whether they are related to form, content and/or class conflict) as an active relationship between the spectator and an image. This relationship allows for the spectator to fully engage with the political unconscious existing within the said of her/his society.

Jameson brings the political unconscious to bear upon contemporary film and society in his work on *Dog Day Afternoon* (in *Signatures*), although not unproblematically in regards to both spectator agency and content representing marginalized figures. For Jameson, any image that attempts to capture the everyday (as seen in “commercial film”) has no choice but to reveal the contradictions that lie beneath the material with which it is working (38). To get to this unsaid layer, it is imperative to read the filmic image in relation to its larger sociocultural context, while also providing a space for the spectator to read her/his own experience within the diegesis. Thus, in Jameson’s reading of *Dog Day Afternoon*, class consciousness can arise within the spectator as the working-class hero is related to other classes but also as he is placed within a larger social context demonstrated in the decaying urban *mise-en-scène*.

Particularly valuable for the project of this dissertation is the manner in which Jameson seeks to bring out marginalized voices in the present in tension with the dominant voices that have silenced them. Part of the power of film adaptations dealing with WWPC rural locations is in their potential to bring out this marginalized perspective even as they rely on mainstream representations of rurality. Such a move would be difficult to theorize without considering the interrelation of the present spectator with these marginalized unsaid elements. However, while Jameson allows for spectator agency in relation to reading an image in the present, for him it is an agency limited to what is and is not “political,” and this aspect may have consequences for considering representations of rurality. First, Jameson implies that a film must lay bare its own political unconscious in order for a spectator to see social conflict in a film and in her/his every day. In this formulation the political unconscious cannot be grasped by a layperson in the present unless the person is guided through consciously “political” images. In addition, it is unclear if an active interrogation is open to all spectators or just “intellectuals.” The following statement certainly speaks to a lack of confidence in the average viewer, albeit not a complete dismissal:

the political logic [of the everyday] will then not manifest itself as an overt political message, nor will it transform the film into an unambiguous political statement. But it will certainly make for the emergence of profound formal contradictions to which the public cannot not be sensitive, whether or not it yet

possesses the conceptual instruments to understand what those contradictions mean. (38)

This statement, particularly the necessity of teasing out a not always apparent “political logic,” exhibits the potential that a cultural analysis can add to a critique of form as found in Perez. It also exhibits the limitations found in analyses that are strongly informed by particular ideologies as demonstrated in the phrase, “what those contradictions *mean*.” In *The Political Unconscious* and his article on *Dog Day Afternoon*, Jameson makes clear his Marxist approach to class structures and society. I do not take issue with this approach in itself, but if we approach class and society through this lens, we potentially come against some problems, especially in light of what counts as “political” (who is represented in what light) and who is conscious enough to relate to the political. The risk here, as with the Marxist spatiotemporal trajectories discussed earlier, is that such theorizing would render rurality and its representation unpolitical and meaningless (as Jameson himself does in regards to the “nostalgia film”). While Jameson provides some room for agency, it becomes a question of just how much and for whom. Again, it will be important to keep in mind the potential limitations of this theoretical framework when I consider filmic representations of WWCP rursality in Chapter Four.

My readings of film adaptations in this dissertation will thus be informed by a conceptual framework that draws on Angenot’s Social Discourse Analysis, as well as the insights of Perez and Jameson into spectator agency and spectators’ responses to the said and unsaid of the filmic image that includes both dominant discourses on rurality and the

counter-narratives in response to such discourses. In the remainder of this chapter, I address three crucial parameters of my project: the choice of discursive forms that constitute my primary material of analysis, i.e. the particular discursive topology on which I will focus; the potential for representations of memory in literature and film to make manifest aspects of the unsaid; and, lastly, the interrelationship of the postwar and the present in these works.

## **V. Discursive Topology**

American notions of progress have in part relied on the dominant discourses on rurality discussed earlier in this chapter, with rurality serving to demonstrate how far our “modern” national identity has come. In this way, the dominant discourse surrounding American identity promotes both misapprehensions of WWCP rursality and a dominant position (middle-classless sub/urban) furthered by these representations. In order to analyze this dominant discourse, it is necessary to look at the discursive topology through which it manifests as well as foreground the marginalized unsaid that also exists therein. In this dissertation, I discuss a discursive topology in which different discourses represent WWCP rursality as a regressed space, but I also illustrate the potential for WWCP articulations of rural experience to emerge in spite of these conceptions. In order to illustrate this tension, I will focus on a discursive topology that includes a wide range of discourses: print journalism from both the right and the left (particularly in chapters Two and Five), academic discourse from the social sciences (chapters Two and Five), autobiographical statements (Chapter Two), literature (Chapter Three) and the filmic adaptations based upon this literature (Chapter Four). Below I explain my choice of

primary materials towards pursuing such analysis.

Social Discourse Analysis provides access to the tacit agreement of a shared community — what I refer to here as *mainstream* (middle-classless sub/urban) America in the postwar through the present — to recognize the said within a given discourse but also that which is left unsaid. Social Discourse Analysis has the potential to mine such workings of an “imagined community” (B. Anderson) in which a dominant subject position is foregrounded to the exclusion of those voices that may counter it. It is a particularly effective tool, since an imagined community is dependent upon what is explicitly said as well as that which remains unsaid; in Anderson’s words, “to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths [erasures] must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own’” (206). The idea that a national imaginary rests on the interplay between inclusion and exclusion, and that a sense of membership in the nation is predicated in part on what is “remembered/forgotten,” has important implications for the ways in which marginalized subjects like those of WWCP rursity can assert their agency. Memory narratives offer one such venue for reclaiming agency, and will be examined in chapters Two, Three and Four of this dissertation; I will present the groundwork for this analysis in the next section of the present chapter.

I begin the discussion of my particular discursive topology with print journalism and its importance in disseminating images of WWCP rursity due to the large circulation of products like newspapers and general-audience magazines to varied and diverse audiences across the political spectrum (from the “left” to the “right”). The fact that



periodicals aimed at diverse audiences similarly represent WWPC rurality as a foil to middle-classless sub/urban norms of progress illustrates just how engrained the use of this figure is within postwar and present American society. However, it is also clear that the representation of WWPC rurality is not identical across different publications or in every news story relayed within a given publication. Thus, it is necessary to consider the interrelationship between what is actually represented (“said”) and that which gives this representation meaning to its audience (the dominant “unsaid” which depends on who a publication is aimed at and where it falls within a discursive topology). My discussion in chapters Two and Five will point to the similarities and differences between representations of WWPC rurality in the postwar and present in publications ranging from the *New York Times* to *Fortune*.

One way to consider the said/unsaid in particular types of mass media is through media framing. “Framing” in media refers to how a given content is shaped to be oriented towards particular audiences (Gross and D’Ambrosio 2-3; see also D. Kendall 7 and Gros 184-185). Part of the framing of media content is tied to the position of a particular publication within society — the level of prestige attached — which is directly related to a publication’s desired audience. Thus, in one study, the distinction between “tabloid” (lowbrow) versus “traditional” (highbrow) news casting affected what and how content is shown, a distinction that deepens further if considering print journalism is seen as a more serious form of news as compared to that of television (Grabe). This distinction potentially impacts how seriously one will accept or immediately question the

representations found in front of them. For example, as Diane Kendall argues, publications like the metropolitan-focused *New York Times* “carry great weight” within print-journalism and television alike for the tautological reason that these articles were “initially published” in the *Times* itself (12-13). It stands to reason, then, that the representations carried within this publication will also be heavily weighted.

I will pursue a more in-depth analysis of representations of WWPC ruralness in print-journalism in chapters Two and Five, and it is worth pausing to outline some secondary scholarship that discusses the role of WWPC ruralness within such representations. Representations of WWPC ruralness are framed in print journalism partly through the low-classed position of this demographic and in the context of the dominant rhetoric of middle-classlessness within U.S. society and culture<sup>20</sup>. As Bullock et al demonstrate, one response to recognizing lower socioeconomic classes is through portraying the poor as “outsiders” to a normalized middle-class structure, individually demonized if represented at all (231). This is a particularly salient point in relation to WWPC ruralness. As anthropologist John Hartigan notes, even in mass media discussions of politics, “white trash” is safely used to vent “anxiety” over the difference between WWPC ruralness and the mainstream, where the former are presented as having “faded or absent intelligence,

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<sup>20</sup>An illustration of this middle-classless imagined community can be found in studies like Margo Anderson's, where even the classification of publications in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* overwrite “labor” issues into uniform “middle-class” issues through 1980s journalistic discourse (M. Anderson), a trend that continues into the 2000s (D. Kendall 2-4).

stemming from some sort of indelible physical deficiency” (157). In this case, red state constituents are portrayed as genetically inferior to the mainstream in an attempt to explain their voting patterns and lifestyle choices. We will see throughout this dissertation that the conception of a “red state” in the media is only one term in which individual deficiency is used to explain WWPC rurality in both the postwar and the present.

In addition to the mass media, the Social Sciences similarly portray WWPC rural subjects using the dominant discourse. As the conclusions arising from the disciplines of the Social Sciences often influence public policy decisions as well as the mass media, and through it the citizenry at large, we can see that the field as a whole is highly influential. This phenomenon has been documented by scholars, perhaps most notably in regards to the postwar period. As revisionist scholars have documented, the influence of postwar “expert opinion” could be found in many areas<sup>21</sup>. In relation to issues of class, the influence of the Social Sciences on the mass media can be seen through the popularization in the 1960s of the concept of the “culture of poverty.” For Alice O’Connor, the interrelation of sociological expert opinion and mass media influenced both the popular imagination (“Introduction”) and government agencies and policies (28-

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<sup>21</sup> Although not necessarily relevant to the study of WWPC rurality, revisionist scholars have discussed the influence of the social sciences on the public at large, across such diverse topics as domesticity (E. May), sexuality (Penn), the popularization of Freudian psychology (Dickstein 6), and the use of social science in the advertising industry (T. Frank).

29; see also O'Connor in Duncan, *Rural Poverty*). There was also a rural component to these discourses; as O'Connor discusses, postwar social scientists based their classifications of the poor on previous work on "underdeveloped rural communities" that were emblems of "disadvantage" in the decades before the war (19-20). This conception operated as a negative counterexample to "an American 'core' culture which was based on the values and personality traits" of the "white middle-class" (30).

However, this approach to the lower-classes — and particularly those in rural locations — is not restricted to the postwar period. Through the critique of social scientists like Matt Wray, we can see that the dominant discourses on WWPC rurality are still part of more current social science discourses. According to Wray, the tendency of the social sciences is to place "poor white rural people" as a "residual category" (3). In effect, these people "appear more like a caste than a class, and as such are thought to have no social worth and only regressive political tendencies," a conception only recently being redressed (3). In addition to anthropologists like Wray (and Hartigan, see his chapter "Blood will Tell: the Nationalization of White Trash"), scholars in political science (Carolyn Gallaher; see also Webster on WWPC rurality in the 1980s) and sociology (Paul Milbourne) address the fact that the invisibility of rurality and its intersection with lower socio-economic classes ultimately influence the findings of much scholarship in these areas (see Milbourne, *Rural* 72-74, as well as work by Cynthia Duncan and anthropologists Janet Fitchen and Kathleen Stewart).

These social scientists, among others, insist upon redressing these gaps in Social Science discourse. These gaps are harmful on a cultural level (i.e. reinforcing harmful stereotyping) and the social level (i.e. policy affecting WWCP rural subjects). This critique needs to be kept in mind when considering the use of sociological and anthropological studies in this dissertation. While I will use such studies to contextualize my analysis of the primary materials from the postwar period to the present, it is clear that some of these studies are biased against WWCP rurality and need to be addressed on this point. Thus, while I will draw on these texts for context and therefore use them as secondary sources, at times I will also engage in critique, approaching them as primary materials participating in the dominant discourse on rurality evident in other discursive forms.

Even within the dominant discourses of the social sciences, WWCP rurality at times emerges as a viable contestatory voice. However, the most consistent discourses to exhibit a clear WWCP rural experience, at least within the purview of this dissertation, are autobiographical and fictional memory narratives, a point discussed further in the next section. At the moment, I would like to consider the potential of the literary to articulate the agency of WWCP rural subjects.

Many scholars see the use of literature to assert marginalized voices as a conflicted project. Even as some scholars have actively sought out the revolutionary undertones in literary representations of the lower socioeconomic classes (see Lauter in Russo and Linkon), others have argued that literature's privileged positioning within a discursive

topology has hampered the reception of such representations. Jennifer Campbell observes in relation to working-class women's literature in academia that "The academic reception of working-class women's writing is affected by class identification and its attendant definitions of art" (n.p.). Campbell argues that literature's history as a privileged art form<sup>22</sup> has resulted in the tendency to dismiss working-class content because "Middle-class discourse is the (implied) center of meaning, the standard, the normal, while working-class discourse is the (implied) other, the deviant, the flawed" (n.p.). In this case, the middle-class "standard," in content and form, is left unquestioned due to an assumed community of academic readers and scholars who do not include the working-class represented in this literature. If the working-class subject is considered "flawed" in its literary presence, it follows that any literary representation of critique or assertion of agency by them may be similarly ignored, throwing into question just how effectively literature may assert a working-class counter-narrative<sup>23</sup>.

Compounding this problem, working-class content in literary works may be outright rejected or ignored when related to rurality. Even within scholarship that actively seeks to draw out revolutionary undertones in regards to class analysis, rurality may be seen as too regressed to attain working-class "consciousness" and thus incapable of exhibiting

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<sup>22</sup>See Raymond Williams for a more theoretical discussion surrounding the more privileged place of the written word in society due to the need for advanced literacy to participate within its discourse (*Culture* 93-94).

<sup>23</sup>See Hapke for a brief discussion of this point in relation to Russell Banks and Dorothy Allison (326).

agency. An example can be found in Sylvia Cook's literary analysis of the U.S. Southern (rural) "poor white" in working-class literature. For Cook, the literary representation of devolved, poor white rurality reflects the social "reality" of ignorant and backwards poor, white rural demographics. Cook argues that just as in society at large, a literary narrative that portrays a rural working-class inevitably fails at asserting a "working-class" consciousness. Such an approach runs counter to my own as it forecloses on the possibility of even seeking out a WWPC rural counter-narrative within literature written by rural subjects. In Chapter Three, I foreground the active interrogation of postwar and present mainstream norms and the position of WWPC rurality within these norms by using eight novels, mostly written by rural subjects, all but one of whom are well known within academia. Given the ongoing discussion, it is perhaps not surprising that my analysis differs markedly from the academic reception of these novels which has tended to overlook the importance of rurality for the characters and their communities within these fictional worlds.

A further reason for my selection of these novels is that all eight have been adapted into films, allowing me another angle from which to consider the representation of WWPC rurality in the U.S. In particular, I explore whether these (mostly popular) adaptations can carry the agency of WWPC rurality as represented in the novels, and the tensions that arise between any such expressions of agency and the mainstream conceptions that are carried within filmic representations of WWPC rurality.

A regressed and culturally retrograde WWPC rural location exists across film genres even as the actual representations of this figure may differ. Theorists have illustrated the pervasiveness of dominant discourses on rurality in both independent films (see Maggie Burns for a discussion of *Deliverance* and *Easy Rider* (Dir. Dennis Hopper, 1969)) and popular/lowbrow horror films, where the violence perpetrated by WWPC rural characters against mainstream characters pervades the entire genre (Clover; Newitz in Wray and Newitz). We can assume that whether we are watching independent films or more commercial and popular films, American film audiences have come to recognize WWPC rurality as a regressed location, invariably represented as backward and ignorant, *not* modern, *not* “us.”

This convention of American film, then, may interfere with the potential of film adaptation to give voice to the WWPC rural agency found in the literary works on which they are based; either the representations themselves will resort to more stereotypical imagery or the spectator may be unwilling to accept representations that unsettle these familiar stereotypes. In Chapter Four, I discuss this tension as I examine filmic adaptations that range from fairly well-known independent films to Hollywood films, and discuss the ways in which they manage to draw on the counter-narratives found in the novels, finding filmic means for frustrating expectations and unsettling stereotypes. However, as some of the reviews of the films analyzed in Chapter Four illustrate, it is also plausible that a spectator could be aware of this counter-narrative even as they may be more comfortable with the dominant discourses on rurality represented in



a given film. Although I have found no studies directly dealing with the reception of WWPC rural imagery in the U.S., other studies on audience reception suggest that the filmic spectator is at least tangentially aware of her/his own investment within particular filmic forms and the imagery therein (see studies like Austin; Faber et al; Hill; and Jancovich et al). In theory, we could extend this potential to the filmic representations of WWPC rurality: the spectator need not reduce this subject position to a mainstream antagonist but may also see it for the viable agency and potential counter-narrative it can pose.

Examining filmic adaptations of literary works allows me to explore the tension between images that may reinforce dominant representations of WWPC rurality and the counter-narratives that are integral to the literary narratives on which the adaptations are based. In order to posit this possibility, I draw on Julie Sanders' view of literary and filmic products as intertextually joined in a "dynamic" process she describes as "grafting," a term that encapsulates the interplay between an artistic source (in this case, a novel) and its translation into a different form (12-13). A further necessary dimension of analysis involves consideration of the larger contexts in which both novel and film are embedded. As Linda Hutcheon argues, "There is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and the adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves" (149). Such a consideration helps reveal the unsaid of a given filmic image, on one hand, helping contextualize the dominant discourses on rurality that may inform the representable, but

on the other, the potential for WWPC rural counter-narratives to emerge in concert with these discourses.

Through my particular focus on representations of WWPC rurality, I am interested in exploring both literary and filmic products in relation to larger social and cultural contexts. In Chapter Four, I pursue an analysis of filmic adaptations in relation to the novels on which they are based in order to draw out the extent to which a WWPC rural counter-narrative can be encoded within the filmic image. I also examine the reception of these films, with a view to investigating whether reviewers from both popular and academic publications have recognized a counter-narrative in these films and the likelihood of such perceptions reaching the general public.

Although my examination of novels (Chapter Three) and their filmic adaptations (Chapter Four) is physically separate from my analysis of other discursive forms like mass media publications and the Social Sciences, my findings regarding these areas will be brought to bear on the fictional narratives analyzed; conversely, the critique from these fictional narratives will be brought to bear on the larger discursive topologies in both the postwar and the present periods. One of the ways in which these fictional works assert this critique is through representations of the memories of WWPC rural subjects. It is through both form and content that memory functions in these novels and films to represent the complexity and continuing evolution of WWPC rurality, challenging the entrenched view of rural subjects as regressed. Formally, the agency of memory itself is an affirmation that WWPC rural subjects possess a *consciousness* capable of

retrospection and introspection. Thematically, such retrospection can become a vehicle for a critical reassessment of the dominant norms and the ways in which they helped shape WWPC rural locations in the post 1980s.

## **VI. Memory and Agency in Fictional and Autobiographical Narrative**

These memory narratives provide another way in which to view the juncture between the role which WWPC rurality plays in a dominant national narrative<sup>24</sup> and the re-instatement of a rural presence that critiques this very narrative. My examination of the potential of memory in these novels and film adaptations to affirm agency and generate critique draws on scholarship in the field of autobiography studies, and more particularly studies of the self-narratives of marginalized subjects. While the representations of memory discussed in chapters Three and Four emanate from fictional characters, this theoretical framework is helpful in elucidating the discursive potential of memory to give voice to the marginalized and transform the perspective of the reader or spectator so they may become more receptive to hearing these voices.

I view the novels and film adaptations examined as constituting a point of intersection between the authors of the novels, the WWPC rural locations with which these authors are associated in some way, and the social and cultural contexts within which these communities are embedded in both the postwar period and the present. Following Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson, I view the novels and films as eliciting an “intersubjective”

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<sup>24</sup> See E.J. Hobsbawm for an account on building national community across written and image discourse through the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

relationship between the product and the consumer so as to “produce a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (Smith and Watson 16). While not strictly autobiographical, these fictional works may be read as part of the “life narratives” of their authors, following Smith and Watson’s broader definition of such narratives as “acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic or digital” (4). The use of memory in both novels and filmic adaptations becomes a vehicle for enacting the intersection mentioned above of the individual, the collectivity in which this individual is embedded, and the broader context that shapes and informs both. Thus, memory in these works reflects what Smith and Watson term the “autobiographical subject” who relies on *memory* to recall one’s *experience* in the past and present, as well as construct one’s *identity* as an individual and as part of a particular community (see their chapter “Autobiographical Subjects”). The memory act requires an engagement with the past from the vantage point of a more enlightened present, one that in part understands the larger historical circumstances impacting particular life events and can thus become a testament to one’s *agency*, even if at times problematically rendered (54-61).

In addition to the backgrounds of the authors in question here, all of the novels and films achieve this intersection through their respective and diverse representations of memory. In these works, memory may refer to a general state of recollection, whether elucidated from a perspective that is personal, omniscient or communal. Memory, in this general sense, operates as a kind of factual assertion of presence which, consequently,

reclaims a WWPC rural self and/or community despite the larger discourses in the American imaginary that elide it<sup>25</sup>. However, there are also more specific types of remembrances that emerge repeatedly within these fictional works, from memories that could be defined as traumatic to those that can be classified as nostalgic. In this fiction, the remembrances of a specific character or community, whether traumatic or nostalgic, bring the personal to bear upon the larger contexts that give rise to a particular community's location within the U.S., past and present, with implications for understanding such relationships beyond the borders of fiction.

Although memory narratives originate in the personal, they offer insights that touch more broadly on the unsaid assumptions of the dominant narrative. As theorist Roxanne Rimstead has argued in regards to the Canadian working poor, the analysis of memory narratives offers one way in which national conceptions can be read in dialogue with more local experiences (“Theories and Anti-Theory: On Knowing Poor Women”). Rimstead’s focus on Canadian “poverty narratives” aims to rectify shortsighted discourses by foregrounding the voices of the poor who are often overlooked within national narratives. Feminist analyses dealing with class issues in other national contexts see a similar potential in using an autobiographical voice to assert a marginalized WWPC presence. As Michelle Tea writes in the introduction to the collection *Without a Net*, “for poor and working-class writers, writing itself is a survival skill” (xv). Although this

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<sup>25</sup> Even these more objectively portrayed memory acts are inflected with a “politics” that can be seen in the autobiographical act (Smith and Watson 24).

“survival skill” can be personally therapeutic, the recorded experiences can potentially also carry practical consequences for the larger society by challenging conceptions that damage people living in the lower-economic strata (see Joanna Kadi’s *Thinking Class* and bell hooks’ *Where We Stand* for a couple more examples).

While this “talking back” to a dominant order may be liberatory on a personal and communal level, we must also consider that the actual act of narrating memory is a discourse influenced by the very order that is being critiqued<sup>26</sup>. Mary M. Childers warns that the “conventional vocabularies for framing memories often give them accessible public form while draining them of multiple personal meanings over a period of time” (204). The narrativization of memory — in either autobiography or literary and filmic representations — tends to freeze a subject at one point in time, with the potential for simplifying and eliding the dynamic processes of identity to which the autobiographic voice originally attests. We can extend Childer’s argument concerning autobiography to the fictional representations of WWCP memory that are the focus of chapters Three and Four of this dissertation. With respect to representations of WWCP rurality, the problem of freezing memory in one point in time is particularly salient since what the rural subjects examined here most often contest is a dominant discourse that represents rurality as culturally and socially stagnant, as fixed in time.

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<sup>26</sup>See Regina Gagnier’s *Subjectivities* for a discussion concerning early 1900’s working-class autobiography.

One way to move beyond this potential limitation is to consider these narratives as being in a perpetual “process” with their own social and historical contexts, constrained yet capable of questioning these constraints. In a sense, WWCP rural memory narratives can be seen in light of Linda Hutcheon’s approach to adaptation: as “palimpsests” these memory narratives, whether autobiographical, literary or filmic, function at the intersection of dominant conception and personal experience. As scholars of autobiography note, the interaction between the personal and larger contexts is encoded within autobiographical statements, even when this negotiation is not explicitly addressed. We can see a similar process arise within the novels and films discussed in this dissertation. Written by subjects associated with WWCP rural locations in the postwar period, the fiction — written in the 1980s and later — looks at the postwar through local/personal memory, using this memory to create a palimpsest that in overlaying mainstream norms of progress and representations of WWCP rural experience makes possible an interrogation of these norms as well as an affirmation of rural subjects. The adaptation of these novels to the filmic form, a product that perhaps more literally overlays dominant imagery with that of the counter-narrative within, creates another level in which to consider this relationship.

Scholars across disciplines point to two ways of viewing representations of memory in literature and film: the use of memory as a fictional device, and the joining of fictional memory acts to spectator investment in the fictions represented. In these discussions, memory may reflect the agency of a marginalized subject (the WWCP rural

perspective) and/or give expression to the reader or spectator and in so doing, foreground the interrelation of the individual and her/his larger social and cultural context (whether the individual conforms or questions this larger context). Nostalgia in film, for example, “can be engaged by dominant and subordinate groups alike and used for ends that are enabling as much as disabling, progressive as well as reactionary” (Grainge, *Monochrome* 26). In literary studies as well, represented memory is seen as a vehicle for understanding the interrelation of society and the individual but also as an assertion of presence by those marginalized. This notion of asserting agency from a marginalized perspective as it interrelates with a larger context can be seen in Sinead McDermott’s “critical nostalgia” (“Memory” 403), where the ability to “unsettle” the present through a character’s memory space also potentially questions the nation. For McDermott, *A Thousand Acres* (a work I also discuss in Chapter Three) “both thematizes memory...and is itself a memory-work” (395), the form and content of which has the further effect of introducing voices from a place overwritten in the nation at large<sup>27</sup>.

Whereas the actual representation of memory can be a site of agency for the marginalized, another way in which larger social norms could be contested is through the spectatorial/readerly relationship to this memory. The historian Dominick LaCapra traces the potential of such individual and social questioning in regards to trauma and representations of the traumatic. LaCapra opens a space for the historian/reader/spectator

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<sup>27</sup>This potentially demonstrates Robert Barsky's discussion of the inherent memory of a literary work, where individual and “cultural” memory becomes part of a dialogic relationship.



to consider her/himself in relation to sociohistorical objects, including the aesthetic, through “transference,” or the placing of the self in relation to both history (specifically historical trauma) and one’s own position within present society (“Is Everyone a *Mentalité Case?*” and *Writing History*). In LaCapra’s understanding, the process of transference helps link the distance from a given traumatic event to a renewed perspective of its representation, a similar process that is also noted in literary studies (see Peter Middleton and Tim Woods’ *Literatures of Memory*).

While LaCapra discusses transference specifically in regards to representations of trauma in literature, his approach also exemplifies theories that join a broader context, spectatorship and film itself into a complex interrelationship. As we saw in theorists like Perez, film becomes a consumable product but also an active process as a spectator makes sense of the filmic image. This process takes on another dimension with representations of memory. As Alison Landsberg demonstrates in *Prosthetic Memory*, in empathizing with marginalized characters a spectator can experience the perspective of marginalization, and such a “prosthetic” may have practical social consequences outside filmic experience. To cite another example, Adam Lowenstein sees the horrific as a way to join an otherwise disinterested spectator with national trauma at the level of affect. However, there is a danger to such theorizations, as LaCapra points out and as also noted by film theorist Thomas Elsaesser. To assume that one can experience trauma just by consuming it is to potentially empty the power of the traumatic; hence, the need for the spectator to be aware, in some way, of their own role within “transference.”

Trauma is not the only form of memory that can propel the spectator or reader to question social and cultural contexts. Although these last few theorists focus on trauma specifically, some of their observations can be transferred to memory more generally speaking. In these discussions of fictional memory and its relation to broader contexts, we can see how spectator and reader, in experiencing this fictional memory, may bring this experience to bear on their own social or cultural position. Thus, in addition to the above discussions, non-traumatic fictional memory has been noted for its importance in questioning assumed norms — see the collection *Memory and Popular Film* (Grainge) — as well as its ability to potentially interrogate official historical records (see Rosenstone; McCrisken and Pepper). Like McDermott’s “critical nostalgia” in literature, these theorists see film as a way to bring out the “unsaid” (Rosenstone 8-9) and what our silence says of our past, present and future.

Representations of memory in fiction, as in autobiography, provide a vehicle for WWPC rural subjects to critique the dominant discourses that overwrite them in the postwar past and post-1980s present and, as will be further explored in chapters Three and Four, invite the reader/viewer to enter into this critique as well. The intersection of these components — past and present, dominant and marginalized, viewer/reader and WWPC representations — creates a palimpsest that evokes an American collective memory of the postwar period that continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **VII. Looking back on Postwar U.S.**

The evocation of a marginalized presence through memory in these novels and films, by subjects in a post-1980s present remembering postwar WWPC rural locales,

produces a counter-narrative to the dominant national imaginary. In this way, the subject matter in these novels and filmic adaptations provides another voice for the larger cultural memory within the U.S., particularly as this cultural memory recalls various facets of the postwar period.

*A cultural memory*, as defined by Marita Sturken, is a “field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (1). This negotiation implies a desire to lay claim to a particular view of the past, but it also implies that one has the wherewithal to lay this claim in the present. It should come as no surprise, then, that a dominant perspective may be centralized through a cultural memory that helps define a particular national identity (see also Olick, where the role of memory and nation building is discussed in different contexts). However, Sturken’s definition of cultural memory also includes the possibility for competing voices to emerge, to contest and in turn to become part of this larger memory. In this way, the WWCP rural memory narratives discussed here may be considered as one of the “stories” to be read in concert with the larger cultural memory that elides it.

These post-1980s novel-to-film adaptations are part of a larger trend towards remembering the postwar period in American society and culture that, specifically, attempts to assert the agency of a particular group of people. As theorists like Paul Grainge attest in relation to the representations of memory in cultural products like film, “memory has become a powerful locus for the articulation of identity in the sphere of cultural imaginings” (Grainge, *Memory*). The focus on the postwar is also in line with a

larger cultural impulse to remember that specific period. As Grainge points to in another context, the explosion of nostalgic cultural forms from the postwar on is part of a “discourse of nostalgia” in our present culture (*Monochrome* 43-44), and scholars have also discussed this nostalgia for the postwar as found in other consumer practices (see Frank; Heath and Potter; T. Hines; Hurley). These diverse discussions seem to suggest that the nostalgia for the postwar goes beyond mere engagement with the past, instead allowing for a coextension of this past, even for those who had not lived through it. Thomas Frank recognizes that the present fixation on the 1960s, for example, goes beyond nostalgia, becoming the formative influence on present U.S. culture: “For me and, I assume, for others my age, the sixties are the beginning of the present, the birthplace of the styles and tastes and values that define our world” (ix)<sup>28</sup>. While the postwar era might be perceived and represented as a remembered past, that recent past — in Frank’s case the 1960s, although this can be attributed to the postwar generally (see Hines in regards to the “Populuxe” trend; see also Hurley) — continues to inform present norms and assumptions.

A study of the postwar period in light of these fictional memory discourses may thus help uncover the unsaid that exists within these norms and assumptions, particularly as this pertains to the representation of WWCP rursality. In addition, these fictional representations of memory help address a gap in revisionist perspectives on the postwar period. While revisionist scholars have been concerned with filling in gaps in our

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<sup>28</sup>See also Heath and Potter in regards to the continuing trend of countercultural consumer practices.

understanding of postwar culture and society, WWPC rurality is rarely directly discussed, although a few examples do exist (see the chapter “The Hillbilly in the Living Room” in A. Harkins). Still, some aspects of this scholarship are relevant to my project. For example, scholars have examined the ways in which class difference is figured in various postwar discourses, from literature to the social sciences, despite the mainstream rhetoric of classlessness in the period. In this scholarship, the focus on the individual and/or the family is seen by such scholars as indicative of an insular middle-class perspective eager to ignore larger social and cultural concerns (see Schaub, *American*; Hoborek; L. May for a few examples).

This discussion of class is helpful in examining locales like the suburb, a cornerstone of the early postwar period and an important element in the dominant discourse I will be examining. For some theorists, suburbia was the physical embodiment of the insular middle-class (or, at least, the appearance of the middle-class)<sup>29</sup>. For Clifford Clark, the ranch house was “seen as creating a unity with nature, but it was a unity that pictured nature as a tamed and open environment” (179). The ranch house, and the suburban developments modeled on it, became a physical indicator of a “protected suburban environment” removed from the chaotic (and low-class) urban centers from which these suburbanites sprang (179). Although Clark highlights the sense of security this “tamed” nature created amidst a rapidly changing *urban* world, we could add WWPC rurality as

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<sup>29</sup>For a literary studies treatment of this idea, see Catherine Jurca.

yet another threat emanating from this “nature” against which the suburbs were meant to protect.

In Chapter Two I foreground this WWPC rural presence more fully in regards to some familiar topics tackled by revisionist scholars of the postwar period. I will touch upon such topics as suburbia and society; mobility to and from the sub/urbs (and out of the rural and into the urban); and, relatedly, the 1960s counterculture. These topics expose middle-classless white sub/urban conceptions, but using an interdiscursive reading we can also hear the WWPC rural voices that have been left out and their potential to critique these mainstream norms.

Bringing out the ways in which WWPC rurality was used in the postwar period to shore up the dominant norms that in turn elided them also helps us better see the persistence of such views into the present. While the bulk of this dissertation analyzes the interplay between past and present in this regard through the analysis of literature (Chapter Three), film adaptations (Chapter Four), and a broad discourse analysis of journalism and the social sciences post-1980s (Chapter Five), in the next chapter I turn to the postwar proper to examine dominant representations of WWPC rurality as found in journalism and the social sciences of that period, while also seeking out the represented experiences of these places as most effectively recovered in historical revision and autobiography. Thus will begin the application of the framework set out in this chapter to my in-depth analysis of the interplay between dominant discourses and WWPC rural counter-narratives in both the postwar and present.

## **Chapter 2: Postwar Progress and Development: Conceptions of Space, Time and Culture**

Across diverse discursive forms, WWPC rurality in America continues to be represented as a regressed time/space and culture. Conceived of as a negative counterexample, these rural locations are seen as places modern society has evolved beyond, places inhabited by ignorant, stagnant, un-conscious subjects who are unable to provide for themselves in any practical or cultural sense. However, we also see from autobiographic statements and scholarship in the rural social sciences that this conception does not adequately capture rural experience. Arguably, dominant representations tell us more about whose norms of progress are reinforced by such representations (the middle-classless sub/urban or, as I term it, the “mainstream”) than about the population represented.

In this chapter, I examine the roots of these present discourses on WWPC rurality by looking at the representation of rurality in the postwar period, roughly from 1945 to 1970. A study of WWPC rurality within American discourse of this time reveals, in Angenot’s terms, the underlying “topoi” existing within a discursive hegemony, across diverse discursive forms, and among even those representations that appear at odds with each other. To restate, these topoi embody the “basic propositions...repressed to such a concealed level of presupposition as to give full vent to ideological antagonisms, debates, disagreements, and polemics that are made possible by a host of implicit, commonly-shared axioms” (“Social Discourse” 204). Although the pervasiveness of topoi within a

given society lends logic to the dominant representations that circulate, they can also be unpacked to reveal the “debates” and “disagreements” that exist within the dominant and marginalized unsaid. The topoi in question here center around the notion of “modern” progress and its attendant features: sub/urbanity, middle-classlessness, and the valorization of the movement towards these ends. “Progress” in the social sphere is associated with middle-classless sub/urban forms and the negation of anything that appears working-class and rural. At the level of the individual, acquiring such appearances becomes a testament to one’s personal abilities and accomplishment, and of one’s “evolved” cultural state. Progress thus become synonymous with the movement away from anything associated with WWPC rurality.

Examining in detail some common topoi of the postwar period helps foreground the persistence of dominant representations of WWPC rurality across diverse discourses. Publications and writers from diametrically opposed ideological positions seem to cohere around a shared definition of progress and development, and an equally shared rejection of WWPC rurality. In order to illustrate this tendency, I have sectioned my analysis into particular thematic concerns chosen for their high visibility within both primary sources of the postwar period and revisionary scholarship written about that time. The following themes are discussed in a timeline that roughly follows from the beginning to the end of the postwar: suburban development; issues of class and mobility; the counterculture. Although discretely partitioned, it will become clear throughout this chapter that because of the “commonly-shared axioms” underlying these themes,



elements in their content intersect and overlap so that discourses surrounding mobility, for example, may emerge when the focus is on suburban development. It is my contention that within all of these thematic concerns, WWPCPC rurality is used as a negative counterexample to reinforce nationally oriented middle-classless sub/urban norms of social progress and, relatedly, cultural development.

In order to demonstrate this function of WWPCPC rurality in the dominant discourse of the postwar, I will refer to revisionary scholarship to provide context for the primary materials (journalistic reportage and scholarly studies from the social sciences) I examine in each section of the present chapter. In mapping out this dominant discourse on WWPCPC rurality in the postwar, we can also start to see the emergence of a counter-narrative within the very discourses that silenced it. However, in order to give a fuller articulation to these voices, it is necessary to turn to oral histories, revisionary scholarship, and autobiographies written about the postwar period by WWPCPC rural subjects. This counter-narrative, although discussed in each section, emerges most clearly in the discussion of the counterculture at the end of this chapter and is particularly central to chapters Three and Four.

To gain a fuller interdiscursive perspective, I have looked at as many sources as possible although, of course, it was not possible to be exhaustive. I chose to limit myself to a number of influential works in the social sciences and more accessible publications listed in the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. Since the *Guide* covers publications addressed to a variety of audiences, from highbrow urban readership to the

“nonmetropolitan” and the rural, I was able to select a corpus which represents a fair cross-section of the postwar audience. I have also drawn on scholarship examining the ideological positioning of diverse publications within postwar society, from the *New Yorker*, considered by Christopher Craig as a vehicle to uphold “snobbish attitudes” and seeking to distance itself from the perceived “boorish country lifestyles and values” (172), to the *Saturday Evening Post (SEP)*, a “middle-brow” publication aimed at the middle-classed “non-metropolitan,” considered to be not as prestigious as the more urban-directed *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly* (Appleton 423). With the exception of passing references to publications like farm journals that are most obviously directed at rural audiences proper, I limit my corpus to those publications aimed at readers most likely to align themselves with the dominant perspective of the time — the middle-classless and sub/urban — although such distinctions are not always easy to ascertain. *SEP*, an example of a “nonmetropolitan” publication, can be considered as directed at both rural and sub/urban audiences, although it is clear from its stories and advertisements that the nonmetropolitan demographic in question is assumed to be aligned with suburbia.

The highly influential Luce publications — *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, etc. — also form part of the corpus examined in this chapter. Commentators on Henry Luce’s life and influence consider his publishing enterprise a reflection of dominant attitudes in American policy (domestic and international), politics, and U.S. society and culture more generally (see Herzstein; Baughman). James Baughman classifies these publications as “moderate,” that

is, not as conservative as *U.S. News World and Report* and *Business Week* (198) but nowhere near the influence and cosmopolitanism of the *New York Times* (170). It follows that “Luce’s most attentive audience, then, consisted largely of those in the middle class, less provincial than some in their communities, yet less cosmopolitan and influential than some living closer to the seats of power” (Baughman 170). As Baughman points out, each of these publications took different approaches to U.S. society and culture — *Time* was a “news digest,” *Fortune*’s model was “business journalism,”; and *Life* was a “mass magazine” including art and culture (168) — but all three converge in presenting material deemed relevant to a white, middle-classless sub/urban audience. Symptomatic of this orientation is their similar representations of WWPC rural subjects throughout the postwar period.

That these magazines and their content were directed at a middle-classless sub/urban readership becomes clear when we consider, for example, the advertisements appearing in different publications, including literary magazines like *Saturday Review of Literature* (*SR*), or the background of a publication like *Commonweal* that historically has been considered similar to publications like the *Nation* or the *New Republic*, and is “Liberal in temperament — opinionated and engaged, but tolerant in tone” (“Brief History”). Further, the middle-classless sub/urban perspective within such publications continues to the end of the postwar; according to Godfrey Hodgson, the control of late-1960s media was by a middle- and upper-class urban elite largely divorced from the “Middle America” it was increasingly concerned with representing (374-375).

Thus, from beginning to the end of the postwar, it is possible to discern a dominant discourse that is heavily informed by assumptions about middle-classless sub/urban progress and development. I begin my analysis of this dominant postwar discourse with a section entitled “Rural past-in-present: postwar U.S.,” examining the ways in which this discourse figured WWCP rursity as a past-in-present. In subsequent sections I examine my corpus of primary materials in order to explore how this overriding conception of WWCP rursity informed the following key themes in the postwar: sub/urban development in the section entitled “Distinguishing Between the Sub/urban and the Rural,” which also includes the sub-section “Class Distinction in the Rural and the Working-Class Suburb”; class and mobility in the section “The Look of Upward Mobility”; American Culture generally speaking in “Culture”; and the counterculture in “Culture Clash and the Counterculture”.

### **I. Rural past-in-present: postwar U.S.**

To better understand the historical persistence of a view of rurality in the U.S., and particularly what is considered to be a lower-class rurality, as a *past-in-present* that is spatially, temporally and culturally regressed in comparison to “modern” progress, it is useful to turn to Johannes Fabian’s classic discussion of time and space in society and culture.

Fabian’s anthropological perspective is largely concerned with how conceptions of time are used to centralize dominant subject positions and marginalize those who appear to deviate. Fabian finds that “typological time” is used by anthropologists and laypeople

alike (30) to conceptually place cultural others in a separate and contained past: “As distancing devices, categorizations of this kind are used, for instance, when we are told that certain elements in our culture are ‘neolithic’ or ‘archaic’; [...]; or when certain styles of thought are identified as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’” (30). This helps explain the representation of WWPC rursality in the postwar as a past-in-present, inherently existing in a spatiotemporally regressed state: the use of time becomes a “distancing device” that sets apart those “elements in our culture” or “styles of thought” that are considered irrelevant to “our” *present* situation (hence “they” are archaic or savage), thereby reinforcing the devalued location of WWPC rursality. For the mainstream, rural locations are perceived as lacking markers of progress and thus as untouched by the sub/urban processes that define the *present*. In this conception of time, geography and temporality are intertwined: rursality is a *space*, but it is also a *time*. The interrelation of geography and time has implications for those inhabiting rural spaces: just as rural locales are seen as stuck in the past, their culture is seen as irrelevant to “our” modern lives.

This assumption that rursality is a container for all that is regressed in society and the use of “typological time” to naturalize such an assumption permeates postwar culture and can be seen in mainstream publications as well as scholarship in the social sciences. Familiarly, the hillbilly is frequently used throughout the postwar to represent WWPC rursality as seen, for example, in *American Mercury* (McAdoo [1955]; J. Hines [1952]), *Saturday Evening Post* (Rockwell [1946]) and *Newsweek* (“Dogpatch” [1954]; “A

Man's" [1962]). Such representations of the hillbilly, whether devalued or idealized, are co-extensive with the way in which rural spaces and people were portrayed throughout the postwar period. At times it seems that rurality can be portrayed idealistically and be devalued in the same month, year, publication, and even the same article. In both manifestations, rurality becomes a *cultural* position associated with people situated outside of postwar society, regressed relics of some imagined past.

Such use of "typological time" in the postwar underlies the distinction between a mainstream "present" and a rural "past-in-present" that informs the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality in both the social sciences and journalistic reportage. One telling example of this dominant discourse in *The American Journal of Sociology* can be found in Julie Meyer's 1951 article "The Stranger and the City," where rurality is marked by an orientation towards "place" in contrast to the urban's orientation towards "time." For Meyer, the place-oriented rural is a static entity: "Time plays a part only in so far as it is 'inclosed' in place as the periods in which its established values and ways have been formed. Time is connected to place by the past, and this connection serves as yardstick for the present and future" (480). On the other hand, in the city, place is "subordinated" to time; the urbanite is one whose "experiences" are in the present and future: "They are nevertheless his and thus constantly enlarge and transform his very substance of life" (480). It is because of the urban subject's orientation towards time, not place, that they become the "bearers of things to come, more advanced than the outsiders [*not* urban] and knowing more than they" (480). For Meyer, the urbanite is an evolved being who spurs

social changes, and there is inevitable tension and conflict between the urban, seen as aligned with the “modern” and the rural associated with the “backwoods” (481).

Meyer’s formulation — that rurality is a pre-modern, regressed space without consciousness whereas the urban is an emblem of modernity, change and humanity — reflects the larger underlying dominant assumptions of the postwar period. However, not all social scientists in the postwar subscribed to the idea that the rural and urban were inherently separated. From both sides of the Atlantic, studies in geography (see Jackson’s “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things” [1951]), rural sociology (Pahl’s “The Rural-Urban Continuum” [1966]) and urban sociology (Benet’s “Sociology Uncertain” [1963]) show that while the social sciences may have internalized the unsaid assumptions surrounding geography within American culture, there were also others who were critical of such attitudes. However, while these criticisms existed, they did not dispel the larger notion that geographic space *was* a determinate of culture. I turn now to the representations of this prevailing idea in postwar mainstream media, in particular, the notion that rurality is an inherently regressed location, a past-in-present existing separately from modern mainstream society.

The effects of this spatial past-in-present on both cultural and individual levels are positively and negatively viewed in the postwar and can be seen in early postwar debates on the initial suburban migration that was occurring. This debate may take on a light-hearted tone, as we see in the *New York Times*’ 1947 compilation of quotes defending the superiority of town or country (Rodman, “Town vs. Country”), but it may also be

illustrated in stereotypical imagery of city versus rural and stock portrayals of those who choose one or the other. Thus is the case in *Life*'s 1947 "pictorial debate" between a city writer (Charles Jackson) and a small-town writer (Granville Hicks) ("City vs. Country"). In the pictures and captions of the city, Jackson is associated with sophistication and glamour; Hicks, on the other hand, is photographed within a winter pastoral<sup>30</sup> and a community of old men in a country store<sup>31</sup>. The connotations of city and country are clear: the glamorous city is associated with intellect and culture, while the country is the province of the simple life fading into oblivion (the rural community is represented by the elderly). While no explicit judgment is passed in this article, *Life* here still evokes and reinforces the cultural conceptions of rurality as the past, urbanity as the future.

Regardless of whether particular articles or publications view rural locations in a positive or negative light, rurality in this period is generally tied to the contained "place" of Meyer's sociological formulation, a past-in-present marking a foreign land within the borders of the U.S. This foreign land may be portrayed idealistically, as a space of security existing outside modern urban society. One such example is the 1945 *SEP* article "My Town" by T.E. Murphy, in which Murphy's neighbors are said to be still "tilling the

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<sup>30</sup> Following Seguin, the pastoral can be seen as a "bourgeois daydream" where rurality is preserved outside the rapid changes associated with modernity and the resulting pressures put upon the modern subject (25-26).

<sup>31</sup>In contrast to the stereotypes presented in *Life*, Hicks defends his rural town in a 1946 *American Mercury* article. Hicks' example of his "tolerant community" depicts social progress of a sort (158).



same soil their forefathers tilled” in 1776 (14). Liberal publications like the *New York Times* also documented rural space as an idealized foreign land existing within the U.S. The very title of C.B. Palmer’s 1954 pictorial essay “Remembrance of Things Present” suggests that rurality belongs in the past as a contained “remembrance” separate from the urban readership addressed.

As rural space was perceived as a perpetual past-in-present, so were the subjects who inhabited it. Seen as existing outside modern time, they are imagined as devolved characters in contrast to the perpetually evolving sub/urbanites. In idealistic portrayals of rurality, rural people are equated to children, thus creating a safe place for the nostalgia of a mainstream reader who has moved on. For example, in *SEP*’s “They Escaped from Civilization” [1954] we are introduced to a California river community an hour and a half from San Francisco yet completely removed from its modernity. Regardless of the supposed thousands of tourists who arrive every year, the place is represented as in the grips of a perpetual Peter Pan childhood, in “a never-never land where thousands have learned to laugh at clocks, jobs and security” (Berrigan 24). The nostalgic associations of rurality with innocence and child-like freedom reinforce the dominant subject position of the implicitly evolved middle-classless sub/urban reader. Such double-edged nostalgia can be found in publications like the *New Yorker* and the *Times*, whether a writer merely evokes the “familiarity” and “sense of belonging” in pastoral rural Maine for a Christmas Eve edition (see E.B. White’s *New Yorker*’s column “Letter From the East” [1955]), or recalls his own childhood past in rural America (Wright Morris in the *Times*). Both

writers evoke a rural space from which they also distance themselves. In White's case, it is clear that he is merely a participant observer transplanted from the metropolitan, writing for the metropolitan — at one point he compares watching deer hunting to a Harvard/Yale game (62) — as is also reinforced by the advertisements for NYC restaurants and shops accompanying his text. In Morris' case, the small town is portrayed as an idealized location that formed the bedrock of modern society, yet it is a place that those of us in the present have necessarily evolved beyond. For Morris, this unreachable past is a source of ambivalence: on one hand, there is the desire to return to the familiarity of childhood yet, as we see in his pictorial essays “American Scene” [1948] and “Home Town Revisited” [1949], it is a past better left behind for greater, more modern things.

Particularly in “Home Town Revisited,” Morris equates “progress” with the evolution beyond the small town; as he states, “If there is any truth in this notion — we’re all small-town boys at heart — it may help to explain why some of these towns have never grown up. We’re from there, but we do our living somewhere else. This is known as Progress. Most of us are familiar with it.” Small towns may breed great people, Morris suggests, but great people do not make small towns: great people outgrow these places (literally, as symbolized in Morris’ picture of grass growing around sidewalk), leaving behind a population in perpetual childhood. Morris’ reference to out-migration (“most of us are familiar” with moving) distinguishes between those who had evolved out of the small town and those who remain physically and culturally behind (for an example from

the late 1960s, see D. Williamson in *SR*).

Personal recollections help reinforce such a vision of rural locations, including small towns, as past-in-present places that remain embalmed for “modern” America to remember and compare itself against. Given his own evolution from rural to urban subject, Morris is seen (and sees himself) as an expert on these rural past-in-present places, and his portrayal of them further confirms their function as a limit case for modern society. This point is also reflected in other types of mainstream reportage rooted in autobiography as seen, for example, in a reminiscence of leaving an Amish background (C. Kaufman, “My World” 74), and in the expert opinion of social scientists. An article from a 1963 issue of *Newsweek* quotes sociologist Phillip Hauser to make the point that the decimation of one Iowan small town is reflective of the inevitable, and indeed welcome, fate of rural America: “what the small town may have contributed in the past is one side of the coin; the other side is urbanism and the greatest opportunity in the history of man for him to reach his full potential...If the small town is passing, we can’t bemoan it” (Hanscom, “Smalltown U.S.A.”, 20). In this view, the declining small town has deservedly become a thing of the past, destined to fade into a place beyond cultural memory. By the end of the postwar, even this nostalgia starts to disappear; in 1970 *Time* can claim that “Few modern Americans feel much nostalgia for the farm or small town” (“American Notes”).

The notion of “rurality” as a spatiotemporal past-in-present can be seen across diverse discursive forms: news reports, literary representations, autobiographical writings and

scholarship in the social sciences. Some of these articles tie this spatiotemporal past-in-present to an inherent cultural regression, believing that rurality, in contrast to sub/urbanity, cannot provide the necessary conditions for an evolved state (for one example, see Lardner [1956]). Rurality, in these cases, becomes a place to which the middle-classless can return through memory/nostalgia, thus eliding the existence of actual rural locations and in the process figuring their inhabitants as eternally naïve, childlike, animalistic, etc. This conception of a rural past-in-present also underlies more specific topoi that arise in a postwar period marked by rapid social and cultural change: geographic shifts (suburbia; mobility), the consolidation of consumer culture, and the emergence of a late-1960's counterculture.

## **II. Distinguishing Between the Sub/urban and the Rural**

The topos of suburbia is a particularly apt place to consider the location of WWCP rurality in mainstream America because many different concerns arise in discourse surrounding the rapid suburbanization of the postwar period: issues of physical mobility arising from the reorientation of American society towards the suburbs, and issues of class difference, social and economic mobility in a society representing itself as a beacon of universal prosperity. The suburb would thus become an indicator of one's economic accomplishment and by extension of personal abilities, a place those deemed to be social, cultural and economic failures can only long for but never attain.

Revisionist scholars have touched upon the complicated role that suburbia played in the early postwar period, and their work will guide my own analysis of postwar dominant

discourse on WWPC rurality. The bulk of the present section will be devoted to analyzing representations of the postwar suburb across a wide range of journalistic sources and in influential sociological texts of the time. My focus will be on the portrayal of dissonance between the mainstream sub/urb seen as the embodiment of postwar mainstream progress and the perceived failure of WWPC rurality to live up to this dominant ideal. I will also touch upon topics such as economic and cultural mobility within a nation becoming more oriented towards a middle-classless sub/urban lifestyle, a topic that I will further pursue in other sections of this chapter as well.

It is clear from historians that the concept of "suburbia" preceded the postwar U.S. context (see Marsh; Fishman); still, its popularity in the postwar correlates with larger social and cultural changes in the period, chiefly the rapid geographic and class mobility after World War II due in part to the GI bill (access to college, affordable housing and access to home loans)<sup>32</sup>. For many revisionist scholars, the postwar suburb becomes a reflection of upward mobility and middle-classlessness. As Mark Clapson points out, the "suburban home" became a material indicator of one's achievement of the American Dream, reflecting a "suburban aspiration" marked by agrarian nostalgia, a desire for

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<sup>32</sup>See Lizabeth Cohen's discussion on the intersection of government policy and limited mobility for postwar suburbanites ("Reconversion"). For discussions on the impact on particular places, see B. Kelly, "Introduction" and "Construction" for an analysis of Levittown (NY), Hugh A. Wilson for an analysis of Nassau County in Long Island, and Barry Norman Checkoway's dissertation for the metro region of Philadelphia.

urban amenities, and a growing class division (51-52).

In Clapson's analysis, class difference sets in part the "social tone" of a suburb by a hierarchy of class and status between and within individual developments (69-71). In other words, merely owning property outside urban centers (for example, working-class suburbs, to be discussed) did not necessarily confer mainstream status of middle-classless sub/urbanity (see also Richard Polenberg 143). However, as we will see in various discourses in the postwar period, this class difference was not usually named but was understood instead through the use of geography. If "suburban aspiration" is associated with images of both the agrarian ideal and urban (i.e. modern) amenity, then the intersection of class and geography places those physically and conceptually living outside of suburban geographies and aspirations as the other to the sub/urban and middle-classless.

This distinction becomes especially pertinent in the postwar period's classless rhetoric. Geographic metaphor helped express class difference without the use of a direct vocabulary, by portraying rurality as a regressed negative counterexample to a progressed, modern period associated with the middle-classless. As pointed out by scholar Barbara M. Kelly (see particularly "Myths and Meanings"), even as a "rural ideal" may have existed within the conception and development of suburbia<sup>33</sup>, it is ultimately an ideal that functions only as a limit case for middle-class and urban

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<sup>33</sup>See also David Walbert's discussion of the figuring of the postwar rural ideal in the imaginings and reality of rurality in Lancaster County, PA ("Domain of Abundance" and "The Landscape of Progress").

development. For example, in the rhetoric of the postwar period, places like Levittown “sprang up” from “potato farms,” a perception also iterated in the testimonies of workers regarding their experience of building Levittown (*David Halberstam’s*, Vol. 1) and shared across the country (see Kelly’s discussion of similar imagery from the South and Midwest in footnote #7, 237). Even in suburbs like Levittown that were directed at lower-income and working-class people (Kelly; Baxandall and Ewen 124-125), the suburb becomes associated with a *developing* geographic space associated with a specific, middle-class outlook (Kelly, “Preface”; see also Baxandall and Ewen 144-145). In the process of being suburbanized, rural land is seen as being spatially and temporally developed to conform to “modern” social forms and satisfy the cultural ideals of middle-classless sub/urban subjects. Those who are not aligned with this ideal, like WWPC rural subjects, are cast as undeveloped figures of the past (see the equation of rural inhabitants pre-Levittown as “Okies”, i.e. Depression era; quoted in Kelly 150) and, as we see in Bloom’s revisionist analysis of “new towns,” remain so in the dominant discourse well into the 1960s<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>The distinction between the suburb and its rural counterparts existed even in the 1960s “new towns,” planned communities that attempted to improve upon the postwar critique of homogenous suburbia by integrating different classes and races (Bloom, “The Suburban Critique”). However, as one of the 1960s residents of Reston, Maryland makes clear, this integration did not extend to WWPC rural subjects: the “rural residents” outside this particular new town served as the “soda jerks and grease monkeys and janitors” who physically left town after their shifts ended (quoted in Bloom 160).

The vocabulary that aligns a middle-classless ideal with spatiotemporal and cultural progress can be found in writings about postwar suburban development that range from critiques of suburbia to celebrations of it as a new frontier developed by cultural pioneers (for a discussion of the forms that these debates took, see Clapson 6; 145). Part of this vocabulary rests on dominant notions of *developing* regressed rurality into modern, sub/urban middle-classless respectability. For example, in early celebrations of suburbia as found in a 1949 issue of *Harper's*, the suburban atmosphere is aligned with urban taste and interest and contrasted with the pre-civilized atmosphere of the country which lacks modern safeguards like paved roads, human companionship and culture (McGinley 80). In this context, the cultural pioneer reaffirms the superiority of the sub/urban middle-classless subject over the rural location s/he has come to inhabit, while simultaneously justifying the transformation of rural places in her/his image. This rhetoric, and its particular coding of geography and class, enables urban subjects to see themselves as purveyors of progress and postwar modernity who, once migrated to rural spaces, could still distinguish themselves from their regressed, rural surroundings.

The term “city yokel,” as used in mainstream publications, is a demonstration of the distinction made between the urban middle-/upper-class and their culturally regressed “country” surrounds. In 1953, John Gould writes about the phenomenon of the urban-to-rural migrants, comparing it to the rural-to-urban migrant of a “generation before” who was “properly recognized as a stock character,” a “hick, a rube, a yokel, a hayseed” (25). From the title of Gould’s article in the urban-identified *Times*, we can see that a name is



given to this urban-to-rural migrant, the “city yokel.” Within the name “city yokel” itself, we see a comical dissonance between the urban-to-rural migrant and the regressed character of the rurality in which they find themselves. This dissonance is one way that the urban-to-rural migrant can maintain a culturally superior position over their rural neighbors; a “city yokel” may live in the country, but s/he will never be *of* the country, s/he will never become just a plain “yokel.” This sentiment can be found in other publications like *SEP* (H. Smith [1960]), through phrases like “skyscraper bumpkin” (Palmer, “All Suburbia” [1955]), and even into 1970 in *SR* (Dodd).

The imagery of the city yokel illustrates a typology negotiating the shifting terrain of rural and urban, and the cultural implications of such a shift. As we see in the *Times* throughout the 1950s, some writers explicitly delineate this typology through aligning specific geographic positions with personality traits (see Palmer, “All Suburbia”; R. Martin). The need to draw a line between a modern, sub/urban “us” and a regressed rural “them” may be particularly important in those situations where urban subjects moved beyond the suburban developments to more culturally far-flung places. In those cases, attaching the term “pioneer” becomes one way to make such a move not only acceptable but laudable. Relatedly, the figure of the small farmer also becomes popular during this time, either in an attempt to actually practice farming or to use it as a scenic backdrop. Where the pioneer evokes the image of taming the wilderness, the farmer becomes a cultivator of nature and democracy. In the rhetoric surrounding both suburban development and the attempt to be a farmer in some fashion or another, the urban

subjects developing these rural areas, unlike the local rural subjects, are not devalued. This point is perhaps best illustrated in the movement of society's elite to the appearance of farming (see Callahan [1957]). Such "farming" even appealed to the less glamorous urban-to-rural migrant as can be seen in the following publications: the *Times* (B. Martin, "The (Week-end) Land" [1952]; "New Demand Seen" [1954]); *SEP* (Thruelson, "Pioneers on the 5:15" [1947]), and personal investment publications like *Changing Times* ("Buy a Farm?" [1958]).

In 1953, J.K. Galbraith satirizes the turnover of farmland to sub/urban amenity: "Poor land makes good scenery" ("Abandoned Farms" 64), foregrounding the paradoxical duality within this conception of country living which represents "poor" land as socially and culturally devalued while idealizing it as a backdrop for one's developed nature. This assumption underlies articles like *Life*'s 1948 "Escape to the Country" where professionals across the country leave the city for a "simpler existence on a farm or in a small town" (131). The lure of the country is that of an idealized simple life outside modern pressures, but also the opportunity to pursue individual interests otherwise unrealized in the city<sup>35</sup>. In other articles, this lure is explicitly tied to the past through references to childhood and feelings of home. This sentiment emerges particularly in articles like *Life*'s pictorial essay entitled "The Simple Life" (ran in 1955), where the

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<sup>35</sup>For an example of the small town as the ideal place to live outside of modern society, see 1955's "I Never Miss Chicago" in *SEP* (Bunn).

trials and tribulations of actual farming and/or primitive country living are detailed<sup>36</sup>. Through one couple's struggle with their farm, we still see the rewards gained within regressed rural spaces. As a past-in-present, these rewards are the typical "closeness to soil," the return to childhood and, of course, home: "Sometimes you recapture the simple/pleasures that delighted you as a child./The change of the seasons, the rich smell/of outdoors, the spicy kitchen smell/of cookies baking for the holidays" (164).

Many publications embrace the idealized backdrop of rurality while simultaneously maintaining distance from the devalued associations of rural locations (and people). This can be seen in articles that justify the urban subject's decision to move away from the city by arguing that the rural offers the possibility of living out regressive tendencies or perhaps fantasies because it exists outside the modern present. This sentiment is expressed in a 1956 *SEP* article, where Stewart Alsop describes why he loves his country home, which he calls his "rural slum." Alsop agrees with the description of the country home put forth by one of his "more intellectual friends": "nostalgie de la boue." Alsop's friend believes that his place is "so ugly and ill-kempt that you have absolutely nothing to live up to, and you feel as though you were back in your sandbox, happily making mud

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<sup>36</sup>One counter example to this is "Diary of a Romantic Agrarian" [1953] in the *Commonweal* (Paul).

Although the appearance of a pioneer's diary may tap into the popularity of the time, the author outlines many personal tragedies that emerged on his spiritual quest. However, as this article is written about people wishing to regain a simple, Christian existence (327), such personal tragedy may also be viewed as exhibiting the moral fortitude of the sufferer.

pies” (39). Alsop agrees: “it is really remarkable to rediscover the joys of squalor, the pleasures of being grubby,” and this rediscovery leads Alsop and his family into a pre-civilized state where they no longer “care whether the guest towel is clean — or even whether there is any guest towel at all” (39, 78). It is interesting that Alsop uses his “intellectual” friend and a French expression (always an indicator of higher class intellectualism in the U.S.) to qualify his enjoyment of a country home: his home is a *rediscovery* of squalor and a regression to childlike innocence and aimlessness (nothing more than making “mud pies” in a sandbox). The country home instills a pre-civilized consciousness in its owners although clearly, since they are aware of the difference between civilized and uncivilized, their experience of rural living is transformed by the “sophistication” of seeing it as “nostalgie de boue.” By inference, those unaware of the difference because they have never left the mud (i.e. low-class rural inhabitants) become part of what this nostalgia remembers: the unconscious mud itself. For “nostalgie de la boue” is more than merely returning to the mud: it is an “attraction to what is unworthy, crude, or degrading” (“nostalgie de boue,” *Webster Merriam Online Dictionary*). The cultural mud is there but has become scenery for the civilized, urban spectator who is capable of actively separating the “unworthy” (rural regression) from the worthy (rural amenity as defined by the pioneer/farmer, the city yokel)<sup>37</sup>.

#### i. Class Distinction in the Rural and the Working-Class Suburb

As with many representations of rurality in postwar discourse, this “nostlagie de la

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<sup>37</sup>See Taylor’s 1956 article “The Slum that Rebelled” for another example.

boue” exhibits an intersection between geography and class. Urban-to-rural migrants move into regressed rural places to live out their nostalgia while continuing to hold on to a civility they see as inherently *not* that of the working-class or working-poor. However, while the above discussion merely hints at such an intersection, it is the aim of this subsection to more explicitly foreground the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the postwar dominant discourse understood what was perceived as the division between rurality’s regression and the dominance of the middle-classless sub/urban: using an intersection of geography and class, rurality was thus portrayed as synonymous with the working-class and the working poor itself. An examination of journalistic reportage and sociological scholarship of the time shows that the figure of a devalued WWPC rurality served to mark class difference without having to directly name “class” itself.

This trend in the rhetoric of publications directed at a more general readership like the *Times* and *SEP* mirrors the upper-class attempt to set themselves apart from the encroaching middle-class(less) who in turn seek to distinguish themselves from the working-class in a growing suburban space<sup>38</sup>. As we saw in the last section, not all pioneers were considered equal: celebrity farmers were not equal to the average middle-class suburbanite, who, in turn, would never consider themselves on the same level as

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<sup>38</sup>Revisionist scholar Sharon Zukin has described the upper-class attempt to distinguish from the influx of new urbanites in Westchester County as a “de-gentrification” (141-142); see also Corey Dolgon for a discussion on “quality of life” issues in the Hamptons (67-75) and Duncan and Duncan’s discussion of the “aestheticization of politics” to preserve an upper-class vision of the pastoral (176).

working-class suburbanites. However, given the classless rhetoric of the postwar, making such distinctions using a vocabulary of “class” proved difficult. Geography, and in particular the dominant discourse on regressed rurality, was instead used as a viable substitute.

One obvious place to start is the discourse surrounding “exurbanites,” a term used to describe those urban-to-rural migrants, often associated with the upper-class, who had settled in the furthest reaches of suburbia. Within this discourse, ironically, the status of these upper-class migrants rises as they move beyond the suburban ring, their incursion affirming their claim to “new” territories in rural places beyond this ring while also signaling their rejection of a postwar society they see as degraded by such phenomena as encroaching suburbia, over-industrialization and mass society. Such representations lend an aura of superiority to the exurbanites even as they move further into the wilderness and, as such, become emblematic in their development of the cultural wasteland of rurality in their own image. Thus, in mainstream publications like *Newsweek* and book length popular press studies like Spectorsky’s 1955 *The Exurbanites*, the exurbanite is portrayed as a general “VIP” of American culture (“Exurbia” [1957]) tied to the urban (in Spectorsky’s case, New York City) and wealth (Spectorsky 6-7), elite trendsetters who “set the styles, mold the fashions, and populate the dreams of the rest of the country” (7). In the national imaginary, exurbanites exemplified a coveted lifestyle in contrast to the suburban commuters who, as Spectorsky points out, desired to attain the status of the exurbanite but were unable to do so since they lacked both the money and savoir faire of

the elites.

Through his seeming condescension towards the upper-class posturing of exclusivity, Spector sky offers an interesting postwar critique of the exurbanites, but he also appears to adopt the view of the dominant discourse of the time: that WWPC rurality is a classed population existing separately from the mainstream<sup>39</sup>. Within such a discourse, WWPC rurality provided a counterexample for the exurbanites as an idealized rustic figure amidst a pastoral backdrop, but one that was also coded as retrograde and backwards. Thus, although these rural areas had already been “settled” for about two hundred years (17), it is a settlement so irrelevant to the exurbanite society that it may as well never have happened. As such, Spector sky represents the larger belief that progress is associated with movement away from rurality and towards the modern (i.e. urbanity; capitalism): these “original settlers have, largely, removed” either to settle further West (i.e. during the 1800s) or to the “industrialism” of the city (17-8). The settlers who remain behind are thus marked by their failure to keep up with the developments that are seen as constituting this society, a cultural difference that is figured as that between the “natives” and the more enlightened exurbanites. Spector sky portrays these “original settlers” as inherently regressed, their regression easily recognizable by the “faint trace of native

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<sup>39</sup>This attitude is seen in debates concerning suburban developments and the need to introduce zoning laws in order to preserve a “quality of life” under threat. See Spector sky’s chapter “Exurbs: Fairfield, Bucks, Rockland,” as well as many *Times* articles throughout the postwar that illustrate the importance of zoning: for example, Parkes; Atchison; Oraham; Asbury; “New Canaan Aide”; Kaplan; and W. Stern.

speech” and their working-class or working poor position at the “local garage” for example (18). Described as “occasionally of a fruity vintage,” some of these residents are then likened to the “spiritual first-cousins of the celebrated Jukes family” (18). This allusion marks WWPC rural inhabitants as biologically inferior and thus culturally regressed through reference to the Jukes who were the test sample for early 1900s sociological eugenics studies that sought to prove the biological inferiority of poor, rural whites in the North (for a discussion of these studies, see Hartigan, “Blood Will Tell” and Wray). Ultimately, in discourses such as this, WWPC rural subjects are almost a different species apart from the exurbanites who have come to occupy the same space.

The exurbanite may be a blueprint for the middle-classless sub/urbanites who hope to mark their difference from the encroaching WWPC rural population in their backyards. As H.J. Gans observes in his postwar study of Levittown, N.J., the “popular desire for suburban home ownership imitates the fashion-setting upper and upper middle classes” (286). Similar to Spector’s portrayals in his work the *Exurbanites*, these suburbanites could emulate the familiar tropes of regressed rurality, perhaps most obviously seen in the prevalence of representations of the idealized pastoral in mainstream publications like *Life* (see the pictorial essay “Spring on a Farm” [1955]) and *SEP* (particularly its Faces of America series; see “Upstate” [1957] for an example). The small town also becomes associated with a pastoral space outside of modern times and troubles, as we see in the *Commonweal*’s “Why Live in New York?” [1951], the *Times*’ “American Scene — Midsummer” [1955], and Lidstrom [1969] in *SR*. Further, the coverage of “country”



fashion and commodities in the *Times* throughout the 1950s speaks to the widespread popularity of the pastoral for its sub/urban readers (see “News of Food”; “Students Present”; and Kellogg).

Represented this way, the pastoral serves the dual function of allowing “modern” society to blissfully continue its progress and development in the image of the middle-classless sub/urbanite while simultaneously overwriting the local rural subjects seen as falling outside the parameters of modern progress and development. One telling example of this rewriting can be found in *SEP*’s “The Happy Storekeeper of the Green Mountains,” an article from 1952 detailing Vrest Orton’s old-fashioned country store in the Green Mountains of Vermont after a successful professional life in the city (Shenton). Orton’s “return” to rurality — the reader is told of his childhood in Vermont and the country store owned by his father (26) — is part of a revitalization of Weston, VT that began in the 1930s (80). Despite the fact that the town had been established many decades prior, the article depicts Orton as a settler, a rugged pioneer taming the “ghost town” Weston:

Weston, a thriving and industrious village in 1860, had suffered the fate of many Vermont hill towns. Its most ambitious and energetic families had moved west; its enterprise had vanished. By 1910 it was a forgotten village where a few hundred people strove to live. (80)

In this narrative, decaying small towns become a backdrop for postwar development: towns like Weston were settled (it was once a “thriving and industrious village”), but

then those settlers with personal aptitude (“most ambitious and energetic families”) left for better opportunities in the city, their upward mobility inextricable from physical movement across geographies. As those people left, the town died (note that “enterprise” disappeared *after* the talented left and not vice versa), becoming a “forgotten village.” Never mind that a “few hundred people” still lived here: the village was, to the mainstream eye, dead. Then, from an undeveloped town (we are given a portrait of no indoor plumbing or electricity) populated by the least ambitious of the old settlers, the new settlers created a goldmine, a couple of them, incidentally, also celebrated in the “Escape to the Country” article in *Life* discussed above. By the postwar, Orton opened his old-fashioned store, “the keystone of the whole restoration project” (80), a primarily mail-order business that in turn fueled tourist stops at the actual store in Vermont (84). The catalog reflects the old-fashioned items sold in the store and the very same nostalgia that propelled Orton to rediscover his rural past after the “circle of his life had been completed” (80); according to the article, one woman compared the catalog to “getting a letter from the homefolks” (84). This pastoral slice of rural America becomes a contained past-in-present tied to home, childhood, simplicity, and is reinvoked through the nostalgic reminiscences of the middle-classless sub/urbanites consuming its wares. Note that the original settlers have all but disappeared by the end of the article.

According to this narrative, the less desirable aspects of rurality, primarily the few hundred locals left behind in Weston, pose a problem to the modernizing middle-class mainstream newcomers who have to live side by side with a regressed rural population

they perceive as incapable of progress. Just as Orton's exurbanites have the means to re-write an entire town in the image of the pastoral, the consumers of his wares can overwrite regressed rurality as their own pastoral space, perhaps within a new suburban development, hence the popularity of country life shows just discussed.

The pastoral is one example of suburbanites overwriting the less desirable WWPC rural inhabitants outside their developments. In this way, the pastoral becomes part of a broader tendency on the part of the suburbanites to find a vocabulary by which to distinguish themselves from devalued rurality and draw class distinctions between themselves and other urban-to-sub/urban migrants who do not conform to the middle-class ideal of suburbia. Mainstream publications and sociologists alike insisted on the separation between the middle-classless and their negative counterexamples. Ostensibly, this separation was used to demonstrate that suburbia was not a homogenous beast: there was occupational and, by the early 1960s, admitted class difference existing within suburbia, something that some academic treatments indirectly made sense of through geography. These treatments of suburbia relied on tropes of geographic otherness (i.e. urban versus rural) to differentiate the low-class between and within particular suburbs, using the rural background of some of its residents to explain the perceived division between the less desirable mass-produced suburbs and those that were more exclusive.

Writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s, scholars like Bennett Berger and William Dobriner concluded that the class difference within suburbia was evidence that while suburbia existed across the U.S., not all suburbs were the same. Both sociologists insisted

that the class make-up of each suburban development was more indicative of its quality than the “place” of suburbia (i.e. outside the urban) itself. Indeed, the main point of William Dobriner’s 1963 *Class in Suburbia* was to “establish that class rather than place plays a critical role in the shaping of suburbia” (83). Given that suburbs are all physically secured outside of the city, “place” alone cannot be used to recognize the social worth of a suburbanite; not all suburbs are the same in “quality” or status, as evidenced by the existence of both low-class and more prestigious middle-/upper-class suburbanites. To help explain these low-class residents within the suburban, both Berger and Dobriner tie the low-classness of less desirable suburbanites to their *geographic* origins, identifying them as low-class suburban in-migrants from rural regions. Such a conflation of rurality with low-classness becomes a way of accounting for class difference in a postwar era that viewed itself as characterized by the progress and development perfectly exemplified by the suburbs.

It is clear from Dobriner’s argument that he views class as inextricably linked to, if not determined by, geography, as we see in the following quote taken from a section entitled “Faces of the Middle Class”:

Neither do the ‘lower classes’ figure significantly in influencing the character of the suburbs. The city slum and the rural shanty-town are where the ‘lower classes’ live. [...] They are the hopeless, passive, and brutalized products of their own blunted perspectives and hooded vision. They are the current faceless waste products of the fine free, social,

economic, and political mechanisms of our time. (38-39)

In this formulation, both the "rural shanty-town" and "city slum" are detritus of sub/urban progress, as neither is aligned with the postwar progress of which suburban development is reflective. Although the suburb cannot be aligned with either of these low-class places, Dobriner also repeatedly insists on suburbia's allegiance to urbanity, the two "joined together by common *class* bonds, and relatively few place factors separate them" (59; emphasis added). Thus, the "city slum" may exist, but it can be seen as an exception to urbanity rather than the rule, in contrast to the rural slum which may very well reflect the cultural regression associated with rurality in general. It follows that through this alliance with the urban, the suburb is opposed to the rural even as it co-exists with it, allowing Dobriner to completely re-write the rural and its retrograde associations into extinction for his postwar audience:

But there was no compromise of rural and urban forms. The suburbanites carried the spirit of the city to rural areas, and, in the long run, very little of rural America remained once suburbanization invaded the rural countryside. (75)

For this sociologist, suburbanites were true pioneers who developed what had been a spatiotemporally and culturally regressed rurality. And, to absolve postwar suburbanites of any trace of the rural, Dobriner dates this process as occurring by 1925. In an edited collection on suburbia from 1958, Dobriner even links this geographic difference to personality types: the "suburban man" would be characterized by certain broad yet

salient personality configurations more typical of urban social systems than rural” (“Local” 133); he is clearly not the “faceless waste product” of postwar detritus.

It is clear that Dobriner sees the urban as an evolutionary force and rurality as an economically and socioculturally devolved space. By joining the suburbanite to urbanity, Dobriner avoids aligning the suburb with regressed, rural locations, a point explicitly made in a 1960 article he wrote for the *Yale Review*. The article, entitled “Natural History of a Reluctant Suburb,” posits a natural evolution from regressed rurality to the modern middle-classless sub/urb. Through his description of the transformed landscape, Dobriner illustrates the inherent differences between the sub/urban (the commuter’s cars and new homes) and the rural (signified by an abandoned mill):

The great shuddering bulk of the mill squats in the hollow, *intimidated* by the headlights of the commuters as they race down and through the valley, *dreary from the city* and hungry for home. *Pencils of light* search into the gaping slats and crudely intrude upon the *embarrassment of the mill’s decay* [...]. [...] Through the empty windows, across the tide basin, and over the harbor, you can see the new shopping center bathed in neon and fluorescent light. [...] Up along the darkening necks the lights are going on in the new split levels and “contemporaries” tucked into the ridges. (“Natural” 412; emphasis added).

It is worth quoting Dobriner at length as the passage exemplifies his definition of progress as everything affiliated with suburban development. In contrast, the forces

resistant to change in these rural communities are portrayed as incapable of moving forward with the rest of the nation, hostile to a modernity they cannot comprehend.

This notion of natural evolution from rural to suburban is something shared by other sociologists of the time, such as H.J. Gans who suggests in 1967 that rurality was merely a “preindustrial” holdover from the past (see pg. 29 and 286-287 for an example). Gans illustrates this sentiment further when he insists that class, and not “regional origin,” is the true demarcation of individuals within the suburbs (24). We can place Gans’ own perspective in a lineage along with Dobriner, but it is also something shared with Bennett Berger who suggests a few years prior that the class differentiation that occurs within suburbia is tied to the personal development (or lack thereof) of the residents within them. In Berger’s analysis, it is the rural background of residents that most likely contributes to a less than middle-classless position:

And if, as is not unlikely, many of the residents of [mass-produced suburbs] are rural-bred, with relatively little education, and innocent of white-collar status or aspirations, then we may expect sharp differences between their social and cultural life and that of their more sophisticated counterparts in white-collar suburbs. (12)

Berger uses the rest of his book to highlight the difference between this particular California working-class suburb and middle-class suburbia. Here, there is no upwardly mobile aspiration in terms of either job or property ownership advancement, something he relates to the in/aptitude of the individual: “The rationale *probably* goes something

like this: ‘Here I am the son of a sharecropper with a ninth grade education and no really salable skills, and look at me: ...what more do I have a right to expect?’” (25; emphasis added). The telling word here is “probably”: the above is not a quote from an actual resident but Berger’s personal reading into his interviewees’ reactions. Berger then highlights this projected attitude as a negative counterexample to mainstream upward mobility and progress, where “aspiration and anticipation are things for educated people with a fluid position in an organizational hierarchy” (98). As Berger states in his preface, the middle-class “ways of life” are not “developed” in this particular working-class suburb for “reasons which also suggest the implausibility of any such development in the near future,” since the “overwhelming majority” of the respondents are originally from “rural farm or working-class backgrounds” (ix). Berger draws a line between, on one side, the “Okies” and “Arkies,” and on the other side those with middle-class backgrounds who live in the more desirable kind of suburb. It is a distinction that operates along the intersecting axes of class (working-class versus middle-class) and geography (rural versus sub/urban).

The use of geography to naturalize the difference between the mainstream (middle-classless sub/urban) and WWPC rurality helped explain why certain segments of the population failed to achieve the appearance of modernity considered the benchmark for postwar society. In the dominant discourses found equally in scholarly studies and in mainstream culture alike, it was not a larger structural force that contributed to the socioeconomic and cultural superiority of the middle-classless sub/urban but the



undeveloped nature of WWPC rural inhabitants. Unable to establish suburban development or a respectable class status, the failings of WWPC rurality were explained by the ingrained inability of rural subjects to attain the norms so central to these modern forms<sup>40</sup>. In the process, these representations naturalized dominant norms, such as upward mobility, by which postwar progress could be evaluated.

## **II. The Look of Upward Mobility**

As the previous discussion has demonstrated, while postwar mainstream norms associated “progress” and “development” with the urban and viewed anything outside of this space (physically and materially) as behind the times and culturally “undeveloped,” it was a difficult distinction to maintain in a rapidly changing postwar society. A look at revisionary scholarship and autobiographic statements written about the postwar, and postwar journalistic reportage and scholarly studies from the period reveals the means by which the binary was reinforced in postwar dominant discourse: through representations of material forms like housing and the highway, and through representations of WWPC rural subjects that underscored the difference between their rural-to-urban migration and the valorized mobility of the mainstream.

It becomes difficult to maintain a distinction between “us” and “them” when people

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<sup>40</sup> For more mainstream examples, see Henderson [1961] in the *New Yorker*; “Live in the City or the Suburbs?” in *Changing Times* [1958]; Mitgang and Duffus from the mid-1950s in the *Times*, and Alexander in *American Mercury* [1955]. Rurality may also be used to explain the differences between women in the mainstream and their rural cousins; see Hosokowa’s articles from the mid-1950s in *SEP*.

across class and geography appear to adopt similar trends such as physical mobility. For the mainstream, physical movement out to the suburbs and towards middle-classness becomes a literal indicator of one's upward mobility. However, this physical movement also places the upwardly mobile in the vicinity of regressed rural locations, hence the need to differentiate the "city yokel" from the plain old "yokel" by foregrounding how culturally evolved the city yokel is in comparison to her/his local neighbors who pre-existed the urban in-migrants. However, actual physical mobility was not limited to the middle-classless sub/urbanite, as there was also rapid rural-to-urban migration towards the economic and cultural center. This WWCP rural migration could have been viewed as upward mobility, but it was not considered as such within the dominant discourse of the time. Whereas middle-classless mobility towards the suburbs carried valorized associations of fortitude, WWCP rural mobility of any kind was associated with "transience," suggesting this group's immoral shiftlessness.

Perceptions of mobility were thus colored by the same unsaid assumptions that naturalized middle-classless sub/urbanity in other areas of postwar discourse. Furthermore, representations of rural-to-urban mobility became part of a discursive web that also included, for example, representations of road building and different types of housing, all serving to reinforce the centrality of the middle-classless sub/urban. The "look" of upward mobility, then, underscored the cultural divide between WWCP rurality and middle-classless sub/urbia in postwar America, a point that will be teased out in this section through reference to revisionary scholarship and primary discourses like

mainstream journalism, the social sciences, and autobiographical statements looking back on the postwar. The middle-classless sub/urban model of upward mobility was reinforced by contrasting it with the negative counterexample of rural-to-urban migration of WWCP subjects, focusing on the phenomenon of trailer parks and through the seemingly neutral reporting on postwar road building.

Working our way backward through this list — examining representations of roads, then discourses on trailer parks and ending with rural-to-urban migration — we will see the ways in which material indicators were associated with particular lifestyles and used to devalue WWCP rural subjects. Thus, even seemingly neutral representations of postwar national road projects discussing the development of a national road network across the U.S. and, later, the Interstate highway system became another site for defining a proper American mobility. Roads both create new opportunities for actual movement and often serve as metaphors to convey larger sociocultural norms of progress (see Jakle for an early discussion). As the following quote illustrates, this duality was not lost on social critics in the postwar period: “A highway is not only a measure of progress, but a true index of our culture” (Bernard De Voto, quoted in Gilbert 112). As we will see, the type of road one travels can become an indicator of where one stands in relation to mainstream society and culture and becomes another trope for upward mobility.

Scholars have discussed the practical need for highway building in the postwar U.S. due to an increasing car culture (see Gilbert 110-113), but they also note that it became a site for debate reflecting particular views of the American national character (see Seely;

Rose). For historian Bruce Seely, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 helped realize the Interstate system as a continuation of previous eras where road networks moved from a rural to urban focus (see “Shaping a New Consensus, 1945-1956”). While this focus was reinforced by the ostensibly “apolitical” expert opinion of engineers (Seely 138-139), we can see mainstream publications of the time illustrate the importance of a highway system as an emblem of progress, culturally orientated towards the urban (see Thruelson [1956], “Coast to Coast” for the Interstate system and Ingraham [1954] for the opening of the New York State Thruway).

As both postwar reportage and revisionist theorists illustrate there were practical reasons for this turn towards the urban: an outdated highway infrastructure unable to keep up with increasing automobile ownership; suburban living and commuting; and the general population change shifting from rural to urban spaces. However, these social realities were also invested with a certain understanding of what constitutes culture. According to Seely, even the earliest policies for road building were motivated by a cultural imperative, the “reforming impulse” of the Progressive Era: roads were seen as central to economic growth but also as “agent[s] of democracy bringing farmers the rights, privileges, and luxuries urban Americans took for granted” (225). This view of roads as “agents of democracy” suggests that the farmer will become as enlightened as the city dweller; the road thus becomes a literal spatiotemporal trajectory that brings

regressed cultural spaces into modernity as represented by the city<sup>41</sup>. The focus on a “shared responsibility” (Seely 138-139) to uphold (urban) highway development suggests a *national* character that is becoming socially, economically and culturally more orientated towards the urban (see also Jakle 164; Rose).

The postwar book *U.S. 40*, a 1953 work chronicling George Stewart’s travels across this coast-to-coast highway, illustrates the cultural implications behind this developing road network. U.S. 40 was an emblem of progress for the postwar period, although it was eventually replaced with an Interstate system more concerned with direct routes and high speed travel than the landscape and (small) towns that the old highway system served (see Vale and Vale, “Roads and Motoring in America Today” for a brief summary). Stewart’s *U.S. 40* cross-country portrait can thus be mined for the cultural implications of progress in the early postwar period but also for the assumptions surrounding progress carried into representations of the Interstate system later on in the postwar.

Stewart’s observations acknowledge that although U.S. 40 was a new development for its time, it was also a continuing reflection of the needs of a society and a culture, just as dirt roads served the needs of progress at the origins of the U.S. (21). However, for Stewart, roads were not just examples of progress throughout U.S. history but were also instrumental to the development of its society and culture, hence his assertion that roads move not only people and “things” but also “ideas”: “Close the roads, and you block the

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<sup>41</sup>Conversely, these road networks also provided easy access into the past-in-present represented by rural spaces (see Stradling for a discussion on the Catskills 223-224; also, Phillip Terrie on the Adirondacks).

flow of ideas” (23). As Stewart goes on to suggest, part of the superiority of U.S. society and culture over countries east of the “Iron Curtain” is that the latter are closed off from the roads leading in from the west. Quite literally, Stewart’s roads are “agents of democracy” bringing in information to the unenlightened.

While Stewart does not explicitly claim that remote areas within the U.S. were in need of mainstream enlightenment or “ideas,” the subject matter he chooses to focus on suggests as much. As Vale and Vale point out in their revisionist study, Stewart does not focus on cities along U.S. 40, only on rural places. Stewart acknowledges this omission and justifies it by claiming that the American city is “highly standardized,” a justification he also uses to explain why he hardly mentions any of the people he meets on his travels across the country (34). Given the point made earlier that roads and highways of the postwar period were seen as instrumental to postwar progress as defined by the middle-class sub/urban, we can see another reason for Stewart’s choice not to focus on cities and, therefore, people in his book. The fact that cities are “standardized” for Stewart implies that rural landscape and small towns are not; that is, rurality operates as an anomaly in relation to mainstream norms that are generated from the (sub)urban. Regarding geography and progress, for Stewart the urban is not only the norm, it is *the* norm that is used to measure the anomalous countryside, those places he finds interesting precisely because they deviate from this norm. Early on in the book, Stewart articulates this “traveler[‘s]” feeling of “anomaly” when considering the difference between “busy modern cities” and “run-down, slatternly countryside” (47) or, as with other postwar

treatments of rurality, the difference between the mainstream (cities) and the undeveloped rural areas situated outside the mainstream present. This may also explain why Stewart does not focus on people along U.S. 40 either: while his comment on Americans as “standardized” may suggest a critical view of urban mass society, his writing demonstrates that he was not able to see individuality or agency in the people he encountered along the rural U.S. 40.

There are a number of instances where Stewart more explicitly dismisses rurality as spatially, temporally and culturally undeveloped. One such example emerges in his discussion of the New Jersey countryside (see 38 in particular), and it can be even more readily seen when he discusses the flow of “ideas” into the countryside. When Stewart recalls the dirt origins of U.S. 40 as this road enters the Midwest, he notes that pre-Civil War wagon traffic moved from a North-South road (joining the Midwest to the South) to an East-West road (the Midwest joining with the Northeast instead), and reflects:

The road thus must have had an effect in detaching the people of these states from their early southern connections and allying them with the East instead of with slave-power of the lower Mississippi Valley. As we must always remember, the most important freight that a road carries may be neither household goods, nor live-stock, nor munitions of war — but ideas! (117-118)

The South, via slavery, is tied to the worst kind of oppressive rural brutality, while the “East” (or, Northeast, since the road in question travels along the Mason Dixon line)

brought a potentially uncivilized Midwest into respectability. This respectability is seen in Stewart's description of "well-tended and rich farms" and "tree-shaded firmly-founded small towns" (113). Saved from the corrupting South and thanks to the "road" of progress starting in the 1800s and continuing into the postwar, the Midwest, in Stewart's narrative, materially reflects the true Heartland in its "rich" farms and small towns.

More general circulation journalism also used road metaphors to illustrate what progress consisted of and who was left behind. There were many articles on roads and road development in both left- and right- leaning publications of the time. This is not surprising given the debate at the time on how to improve traffic and road networks, a discussion surrounding the Federal Highway Act of 1956 which paved the way for the Interstate system. In these articles, roads become an "index of culture" serving to mark the difference between the mainstream and what literally remained off-road. One fitting example can be found in the 1954 article entitled "Super-Byway: The Country Road" written by Hal Borland for the *Times*, where the distinction between "super-highway" and "country road" encodes spatiotemporal and cultural difference through the description of the respective kinds of traffic and speeds native to both. Thus, the person who lives in a world of "violent and sudden change" may want to indulge in a scenic detour on a country road in order to understand "where he came from as well as where he is going" (Borland, "Super-Byway").

In representations such as those found in Borland's article, roads are subject to a classification that encodes their relative positioning within the cultural hierarchy. The



country road may have evolved from its dirt origins to have two lanes to become recognized as a county and then state route, but in the national imaginary these routes pale in comparison to urban freeways and Interstates that connect city to city and only tangentially pass by or through rural areas. Further, these metaphors reinforce an assumed difference between the upwardly mobile evolution of the mainstream and the stagnant backwaters of rurality. This is captured in late 1950s *SEP* articles like “Turnpike to Nowhere” (Thruelson) and “Our Landlocked Farm” (Stuart). This latter article uses the road as a metaphor for national progress by following the “true story” (Stuart, “Our” 43) of an upwardly mobile son, from his humble origins (a farm with no direct passage) to the eventual building of a primitive road to his father’s house. Although the road was a dirt road, it was an improvement for the family: “It wasn’t a rough road to us. This was road number one. It was the greatest road in America” (57). In this portrayal, these rural inhabitants aren’t quite up to modern civility, and their “road number one” takes on the past-in-present qualities of rurality: the road is a reminder of humble beginnings the better to illustrate how far the postwar has come. The message about “our” evolution in the postwar is deepened in the accompanying advertisement for Quaker State Oil: the picture of cars on an urban freeway heading towards a downtown cityscape (56). In another article, this time in *SR*, Stuart directly credits these roads with the cultural progress of his “backward mountain counties”: “The good roads have reached us. Automobiles have brought, and are bringing, the outside world to us” (“America’s” 5).

By 1967 *Landscape*, a journal concerned with American geography, can provide its

readers with a map of hierarchies centering around roads. The “broad highway” is that of the mainstream and is oblivious to the “dirt road” traversing poverty and leading to a “divided limited access highway”; the highway goes through the sub/urban fringe, through empty land with “For Sale” signs, working-class Levittowns and trailer parks, through “Main Street” in the center of a once small-town business district now just looking quaint, hiding junked cars and the human detritus of minorities and “unassimilated hillbillies” (“Notes and Comments” 1-2). The author calls on a familiar trope employing physical mobility on a road as an indicator of personal mobility and progress: the mainstream norms are symbolized by the “broad highway” which stands at the top of a geographic and sociocultural hierarchy; at the bottom are the dirt road (i.e. rurality proper), the “limited access highway” that goes through more populous rurality, and the Main Street of small towns with their marginal inhabitants.

Part of the reason that these rural places and people are left behind, as implied by these articles, is their unwillingness or inability to access the personal mobility that U.S. society and culture offers for everyone. This valorization of personal mobility through the imagery of roads is a thread that runs across different publications and reflects aspirations of the sub/urban middle-classless (see, for example, *Newsweek*’s 1962 “On the Move” and *Life*’s 1953 “Americans on the Move”). However, while it is clear that people of all classes were on the move in the postwar, it is also apparent that mobility was viewed differently depending on the group involved. In the *Times*’ 1962 “Portrait of a Mobile Nation,” for example, Boroff offers a side-by-side comparison of mobility between

classes. While Boroff acknowledges that physical mobility is something in which all classes participate, he goes on to typify the differences between the low-income population who “move more from residence to residence in the same locality” and the middle- and upper-classes who move mostly between counties. Boroff’s observation may be rooted in sociological fact, but the cultural implications behind such a statement for the *Times*’ reader are also relevant: low-income mobility is hardly any mobility at all as subjects fail to move away from the geography of poverty, in contrast to a bolder and directed upper-class mobility that is reflective of one’s upwardly mobile aspirations.

Having shown his reader the difference between mobilities, Boroff then continues to erase lower-class mobility from existence: “At the very time when mobility — formerly associated with the dispossessed — was becoming less attractive to working-class people increasingly anchored by their new prosperity, it became part of the life-style of the socially aspirant middle class.” Having made this case, Boroff then proceeds to examine “middle class mobility” exclusively, defining it as *modern* mobility that is tied to a culture of progress (“life-style of the socially aspirant”) and a level of consciousness necessary to attain such progress. The implication is that while such consciousness is natural for the middle-classless, it is something that rural-to-urban migrants must grow into in order to be successful, for in their case physical mobility alone does not guarantee progress. Thus, in *Life*’s “The Choice Forced Upon Us” [1965], the rural-to-urban family that is highlighted is portrayed as traveling along a natural evolutionary trajectory from a nostalgically remembered rurality (recollections of childhood tree-climbing) towards a

civilized urbanity defined in part by having left that rurality behind. And, as we see in a quote accompanying a picture contrasting the Pan Am Building with dried cornstalks, just as rurality is associated with childhood, so urbanity is with adulthood: “Leaving country like that makes a man look like an idiot unless there are compensations. I enjoy the city and I have excitement and responsibility with the company.” One must progress towards the city (“responsibility with the company”) even as the world of carefree childhood beckons.

In these articles, it is the middle-classless sub/urban subject who exemplifies proper mobility through a cluster of associations that include the suburban home, employment with a company and personal maturity. As discussed above in regards to the *Life* article, such articles at times portray rural inhabitants who have adopted this mentality of progress, but they are shown as the exception to the rule. Generally in these representations, WWPC rural inhabitants, even when they are seen to participate in postwar mobility, are shown as inherently limited and degraded. This is particularly apparent in representations of the difference between mainstream and WWPC rural mobility through reference to housing choices (trailers) and/or to actual WWPC rural-to-urban migration.

#### i. Upwardly Mobile Deviance

In the postwar era certain material indicators were seen as exhibiting the effects of geographic origin on one’s character and the degree of cultural devolution based on one’s rural or urban “nature.” One obvious way that the middle-classless of suburbia could

distinguish themselves from their WWPC rural counterparts was in the difference between suburban *houses* and postwar *trailers*. The suburban house, whether permanent or a step in upward mobility, was evidence of mobility directed towards a goal loosely associated with personal “progress.” A different connotation arises when we look at the trailer, as it is associated with the *not* urban and the lower-classes. The history of the trailer ties it to mobility but not the kind of mobility associated with the suburban home; the trailer stands in the same relation to the suburban home as WWPC rural subjects to the middle-classless sub/urbanites.

As we see in Don J. Hager’s mid-1950s sociological study “Trailer Towns and Community Conflict in Lower Bucks County,” the postwar conflict between trailer communities and their more settled, home-owning neighbors was partly rooted in the belief that the trailer was indicative of one’s station in life. This conflict was fueled by both practical matters (taxation and zoning issues) and cultural perceptions of trailer park dwellers as immoral “trailer trash” (Hager). However, as revisionist accounts demonstrate, there was a parallel between trailer park *developments* and their suburban counterparts. Wallis opens his book *Wheel Estate* with an anecdote about the construction of a trailer park in the postwar period:

The flat field, which has yet to be filled in with houses, is bounded on one side by the embankments of a new highway overpass and on the other by railroad tracks. The streets and lighting have already been constructed where just two years ago there were neat rows of cornstalks (3).

Replace potato with cornfields, and we have a replica of the building of Levittown. In some ways, the above description of a mobile home park recalls the dominant representations of postwar suburbia. Trailer parks, like the suburbs, lay outside the urban yet were seen as very different from the suburbs and the promise they carried for mainstream America. By contrast, trailers were associated with rurality, rootlessness and regression. This association of regression was in part tied to the lower-class status of those inhabiting postwar trailer parks, a status which removed them from the pretension of the middle-class aspirations of inhabitants of places like Levittown. A look at the history of the trailer in the U.S. (see particularly Thornburg; Hurley 199-204) clarifies the association of the lower-class with the kind of mobility that was very different from that which drove the exodus to the postwar suburbs: particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, trailer parks were populated in part by transient workers whose mobility was necessitated by economic conditions.

As these historical analyses of the postwar trailer industry make clear, the roots of trailer living can be traced to the preceding decades, even as trailers were needed to alleviate the housing shortage of the postwar period in addition to being utilized by the working-class and working poor (see Thornburg, “The Last House Trailer” and Hurley 206-216). The negative associations of trailer homes often had to do with the people who were living “temporarily” in them: inhabitants were often referred to as “gypsies,” “trailer trash” and “white trash” by those communities wishing to distance themselves from trailer parks (see Hurley 251-253). The portrayal of trailer dwellers as morally

degraded (see Hurley 247 for a discussion) turns them into an extreme negative counterexample to the suburban ideal; according to Hurley, “Trailer courts were different, the American public was told, and the people who lived in them were a breed apart” (251). The people living within the postwar trailer were well aware of their devalued status. Personal recollections of trailer living attest to the shame associated with trailer living at the time (Thornburg 183) and the perception of the trailer as emblematic of a failure to attain middle-class identity (see Bérubé in *White Trash* for an example).

Part of the conception of this “breed apart” rested in the specific brand of mobility (transience) associated with this working-class form of housing. The negative connotations of this combination of transience and class was further compounded by the fact that before the war, trailers were zoned out of many residential areas full of “real” houses and families (see Wallis 71-76 for some pre-war examples). As such, trailer parks and individual trailer lots were relegated to a geographic space outside of mainstream, urban centers. According to Wallis, by the postwar, these zoning restrictions forced those in trailer parks or individual lots away from urban centers and towards “more rural locations” (179). Trailers themselves became imprinted with this low-classness, transience and rurality.

We see this cluster of associations in popular journals of the time like *Life* and *SEP*. While articles like “Don’t Call them Trailer Trash” [1952] in *SEP* did not explicitly devalue trailer living, the author did point out that the average trailer dweller is inherently

unrooted (“moving is in their blood”) and tied to the working-class (“in their skills they are the aristocrats of the construction trades”) (H. Martin 85). However, *Life*’s attempt to make sense of the class structure of postwar America in “A Sociologist Looks at an American Community” [1949] indicates that the negative associations of trailers were extended to perceptions of the regressed character of the families residing within. The article describes the “lower-lower” class typified by the Sygulla family and its patriarch, a “transient worker,” as living in a trailer park “just south of the city limits” (“A Sociologist” 109-110). The captions to photos of the Sygulla’s concrete and shabby trailer park reinforce its outsider status as existing on the “outskirts of the city,” with no running water or modern amenities. The outsider status of the family is further reinforced by pointing out that neither of the Sygullas finished high school, and the main breadwinner is lacking in direction (Mr. Sygulla’s desire to *maybe* train in air conditioning *or* “go to Rio de Janeiro” appears to be a clearly thoughtless plan) (110). By the end of the postwar, other publications explicitly wrote of the low-class transient rurality exhibited within trailers themselves. In “The Invisible Suburbs,” we are told that the “space” of the trailer park is an indicator of the regressed culture inside it, a point that is reinforced temporally as well: “The turbulent 1960’s seem to have created the mobile-home bull market without touching the way of life inside in any sense. It could be 1950 in there, or even 1930. These are strangely anachronistic places” (D. Kendall 108). Note Kendall’s use of spatial metaphors: “inside” the parks is “outside” of our present — modern, urban, middle-class — society. The rhetoric used in such articles portrays trailer



park residents as caricature simpletons in contrast to the enlightened and more sophisticated “professional people” (107) and “urbanites” (108) who do not live in these parks.

The trailer park, while itself a manifestation of mobility, is kept at an arms-length from the middle-classless sub/urban mobility so prized by mainstream publications. Tied to low-classness, transience and rurality, the trailer is an indicator of the moral devolution of its inhabitants, much as a sub/urban home is emblematic of the middle-classless direction towards the progress and development of *its* inhabitants. As such, the mobility connoted by the trailer was not seen as contributing to America’s future but was instead represented as a relic of its past. The same logic is applied to those portrayals of actual rural-to-urban migration, to be examined in the next section. Although such mobility required moving away from WWPC rural spaces most associated with a stagnant past and moving into an urban present associated with progress, dominant discourses were at great pains to distinguish such mobility from that of the middle-classless and sub/urban.

#### ii. Rural-to-Urban Mobility

As already mentioned, roads may be considered as an “agent of democracy,” bringing ideas to the hinterlands. Conversely, these agents of democracy also facilitate in-migration to urban centers, also referred to as rural-to-urban mobility<sup>42</sup>. On one hand, the

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<sup>42</sup>The term “in-migration” for rural-to-urban mobility might differ from some scholars who refer to it as “out-migration” from rural areas. In-migration highlights the centrality of the urban in postwar society and

mainstream may view those moving from rural places as coming into an enlightened consciousness, moving forward spatiotemporally on a linear trajectory that logically ends with the city. However, rural-to-urban mobility in the postwar was considered in dominant discourse as an inferior movement, viewed as initiated by a regressed rural population incapable of the kind of *consciousness* naturally attained by their “modern” urban counterparts. As suggested by revisionary scholarship, part of the assumed inferiority of WWPC rural in-migrants was explained by their perceived inability to assimilate into the mainstream and embrace its norms of progress and development (see ch. 5 in *Appalachian Odyssey* (Obermiller et al)). Historian E. Bruce Tucker describes the prevailing attitude of the time: “History in the modern era *happened* to mountain people; it was not *made by them*” (ch. 6 in Obermiller et al 102; italics added). This perceived deficiency of WWPC rural subjects provoked anxiety about the absorption of rural-to-urban migrants whose mobility was aided by the roads of “democracy” championed by reformers of an earlier period<sup>43</sup>. In this section, I will examine the preoccupation with this perceived threat in journalistic discourse, but I will also refer to some social science of the time, oral histories and revisionary scholarship that consider the impact of this

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the perceived danger posed by rural-to-urban migrants because they were moving *inside* modern society, as symbolized by the city.

<sup>43</sup>In McCoy and Brown’s analysis of the migratory streams from specific Appalachian areas, we can see that the proximity to Interstates may have aided in concentrations of similar regional origin in Midwestern cities (in Philliber and McCoy 48-49; see also Berry in Obermiller et al 7).

discourse on actual rural-to urban migrants, as well as the critical eye with which these in-migrants viewed their new surroundings. This latter point in particular will begin to demonstrate the emergence of a WWPC rural counter-narrative within the postwar period, a point I will draw out further in the last half of this chapter.

To begin, it is helpful to situate this analysis within the parameters of revisionary scholarship concerned with the intersection of mobility and WWPC rurality. The treatment of rural-to-urban migration in the postwar period can be directly linked to a specific historical instance and its weight in the American consciousness: the Depression era Dust Bowl migration to California. Its impact, historian James Gregory suggests, continued into the postwar. Signifying a “failure of the American Dream” (Gregory xiv), these figures of the 1930s were regarded fearfully: they reconfirmed the “worst fears” of mainstream America that prosperity was indeed a fleeting moment, and in addition, they were stigmatized like all poor rural whites in the U.S. as carriers of disease (see Matt Wray’s historical analysis of this latter point, particularly in “Three Generations of Imbeciles are Enough” and “The Disease of Laziness”). We can see this latter sentiment emerge in regards to the “Okies” and “Arkies” of the Depression where, in various contexts, they were considered “a source of disease,” “degenerate,” people who “drag down [the] morals of California,” (quoted in 101-102). Further, the Okie figure didn’t disappear from postwar California society; as Gregory demonstrates, while those from the Dust Bowl region were more accepted amidst postwar prosperity, there was still a lingering, albeit less obviously expressed, prejudice (189; “Up from the Dust”). Indeed,

we saw an example of this bigotry in the discussion earlier in this chapter of Bennett Berger's postwar study on the presumably regressed composition of the Okies and Arkies of a working-class suburb in California.

As Gregory points out, the Okie figure was negatively viewed in its California locale due to its lower-class, rural origin and *regional* affiliation. According to Gregory, the Dust Bowl region, while situated on the border of the Midwest, was still "part of the broader South," and therefore open to the same "unfriendly stereotyping" of that region (104). This attitude is carried over to the postwar period in relation to the Southern-to-Midwest, rural-to-urban migration of WCPC whites. Gregory extends his analysis to the Midwestern regions discussed here: "Called 'hillbillies' instead of 'Okies', white Southerners in cities like Chicago and Detroit acquired the same kind of socio-cultural definition as Southwesterners [Dust Bowl region] in California" (xvii). Although Gregory discusses a slightly earlier time period, a similar vocabulary of regional difference carries into postwar attitudes towards rural-to-urban migration. Since this postwar migration is also tied to Southern origins, the same negative associations are projected onto rural-to-urban migrants to cities like Detroit and Chicago. Given their position within the privileged Heartland, these cities came to represent the threat that such migration had for the nation as a whole.

Just as rapid suburbanization helped change American society and culture in the postwar period, so did the sheer volume of Southerners migrating predominately to the Midwest (see Philiber for the Appalachian to Cincinnati migration 124-128; for Detroit,

see Hartigan in *Appalachian Odyssey* 145-146). As such, this specific region can serve as a case study for the mainstream's view on rural-to-urban migration occurring throughout the country. In collections like *Appalachian Odyssey* and *The Invisible Minority*, we see that the “Great Migration” from the rural South between 1940 and 1960 is just one example of the rural exodus across the country (Wagner et al in Obermiller et al xi-xiii), and like these highly visible rural-to-urban migrants, the cross-country exodus was most directly the result of disappearing working-class jobs in their home regions (McCoy and Brown in Philliber and McCoy 39). The tone in news accounts of this influx expresses the perceived difference between the rural-to-urban migrants and their middle-classless sub/urban peers.

There is a striking difference between the portrayals in postwar journalism of rural-to-urban migration and urban-to-suburban/rural migration. We have seen earlier that suburban and exurban living is represented with good humor, for example, in phrases like “city yokel.” A phrase like this is complicit in the devaluation of rural intellect and agency in society as it suggests, in jest and with ironic detachment, the risk a sophisticated urbanite takes in placing themselves in the proximity of this devalued geography. However, when mainstream publications approach the topic of rural-to-urban mobility, no such respect is afforded to rural in-migrants, as “they” are predominately tied to the South, and portrayed as undeveloped, sub-human, and in many cases downright animalistic.

Poor rural Southern white mobility towards urban centers, although inter-regional like

that of middle-classless mobility, was set apart from what can be seen as a *directed mobility* toward the middle-classless sub/urban and, as such, was feared. Like the poor white mobility of the Depression era, this postwar mobility was perceived as “negative mobility” (Leyda 1-2). Thus, the significance of articles like “Worker Mobility in a Labor Surplus Area” in the *Monthly Labor Review* lies not in its conclusion, but in its timing (1957) as it provides statistical proof that the least capable are trekking into the mainstream. While not necessarily passing judgment on rural-to-urban migration, this study reveals that the rural exodus into urban centers was undertaken by the least economically secure of a rural region (in this case, West Virginia) (Gegan and Thompson 1456), a most unsettling phenomenon according to mainstream publications. In fact, of all the topics I am covering here in regards to the role of rurality in the postwar, the intense vitriol — in both liberal and conservative journalism — aimed at WCPC rural whites moving into urban areas is the most appalling. The intensity of the mainstream response to this supposed menace is one reason motivating revisionist histories like *Appalachian Odyssey*<sup>44</sup>.

As already stated, the precursor to WWPC rural-to-urban migration in the postwar was the “Okie” of the Depression, and it is clear that this particular figure held great sway

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<sup>44</sup> One example demonstrating this motivation can be found in Chad Berry’s study of the role of the “hillbilly” in the Great Migration. Berry outlines the perception of hillbillies as a “disgrace” due to their imagined incivility, a disgrace that made them automatically unfit for proper, civilized living (in Obermiller et al 15-16).

in postwar considerations of rural-to-urban migration, its widespread use showing that this Depression era figure was still recognizable and strongly resonant for its postwar audience. Thus, two articles from 1950 recall this highly recognizable figure even as they discuss different topics: an article in *Newsweek* directly evokes the Okie figure to reassure the reader of postwar progress (“Field Report: the Okies Are Not Okies Anymore”), while in Kenneth Davis’ lament in the *New York Times* regarding the loss of dependable farm hands, the Depression is evoked to warn that the new rural exodus “may repeat on a vaster scale than [what happened in] the nineteen thirties” (16). Reports such as these continued to place WWCP rurality in a past seemingly removed from the postwar prosperity of the present. Using Depression era rhetoric to represent rural-to-urban migrants casts them as bodies foreign to the modern urban present and naturalized the perception of them as regressed and immoral figures directly from the past. Thus the predictable conclusion that *they* best be helped by society in their rural areas of origin lest they infect modern society by their presence in mainstream centers. The Okie descriptor — in publications ranging from *U.S. News World & Report* (note the use of the word “jalopy” to describe the cars in hillbilly neighborhoods in the 1963 article “When Whites Migrate From the South” 70); to *Time*’s 1962 “Okies of the ‘60s” — is used to make sense of the difficult condition of the hillbilly life in Northern urban centers without having to address the role of the postwar mainstream.

According to these publications, the rural background of these “Okies of the ‘60s” contributed to their cultural regression. Even in the city, this group of people was

considered temporally and culturally backwards, represented as insular enclaves of the past that dot the urban landscape. In two articles in *The Reporter* (from 1956 and 1964) we see that the inadequacy of the hillbillies in urban areas is directly tied to their barbaric, rural upbringings; they are portrayed as most likely not meaning any harm by their lifestyle, but the authors concur that unavoidable consequences follow when animals are let loose in civilized cities (see Maxwell and Bruno). For these reporters, it is the very animalism of WWPCPC rurality that makes it unassimilable to middle-classless sub/urban society.

We can infer that the continuing “isolation” of this group despite physically inhabiting the city was seen as predetermined by their rural *pasts* (the rural viewed as that which is not present and is therefore unassimilable), exacerbated by their transience and perceived aimlessness. In these publications, WWPCPC rural transience is seen as deeply rooted in the nature of these migrants, as demonstrated by the following examples: a 1958 *Business Week* article implying that all rural out-migrants, from the economically disenfranchised to the upwardly mobile heading away from rurality, would prefer to stay “back home” if there were opportunities to do so (“Why do Arkansans Vanish?”); a *Newsweek* article that defines hillbilly transience as moving back and forth between the city and “home,” a transience that keeps this group of people unassimilated to modern/urban life (“Migrations: ‘Wanna Go Home’”). Even in 1969 we see this trope appear in a *Time* article claiming that “Urban life today is such that at least a third of the past decade’s migrants in Chicago and other cities tell pollsters that they want to go home” (“End of



Exodus”). The writer presents a commonly held view: there is no hope for rural in-migrants in the city, their “urban life” consisting only of nostalgia, and a wish to physically return to their rural past/home.

In addition to being viewed as ignorant, these “Okies” of the 1950s and 1960s were also seen as posing a danger to mainstream culture itself due to their perceived immorality, traced to the migrants’ origins in WCPC rural spaces. Here again, it is the hillbilly who becomes exemplary of this threat. In these articles, the *Southernness* of the hillbilly is of particular concern given that the South is associated with a degraded rural location producing backward and ignorant people. When these people infiltrate more ideal regions, like the Midwest, there is cause for fear: once the Heart is infected, who knows how far the pathogen will carry. Albert Votaw writes in a 1958 *Harper’s* article entitled “The Hillbillies Invade Chicago” that the “rural Southern white” is, literally, “prone to disease,” but even more pressing is that these hillbillies “remain transient in fact and in spirit” and will never assimilate into urban/modern norms (65). Because the urban cannot insulate itself from the hillbillies’ degrading presence, it perceives itself as under siege, invaded by “farmers, miners, and mechanics from the mountains and meadows of the mid-South — and their fecund wives and numerous children” all representing “the American dream gone beserk” (64). Note that in this description rural Southern whites are represented as animalistic (the constantly breeding “fecund” wife), and lumped together are the WCPC occupations of farmer, miner and mechanic, as rural and any non-middle-/upper-class subjects are all viewed as similarly regressed. Votaw’s

final question to the reader: “can [the hillbilly] develop the desire to belong and to get ahead — before he packs up once and for all and goes home?” (65) reinforces the association of urbanity with progress, as the hillbilly can get ahead if s/he develops the desire to stay and become urban and resist the backwards pull of regressed rurality.

The more conservative, less metropolitan focused *SEP* also exhibits the same distaste for the Southern rural white migrant as *Harper's*. John Bartlow Martin's 1958 “The Changing Midwest: The Boosters and the Eggheads” contrasts the havoc caused in Chicago by the depraved hillbilly with that of the quaint college town of Madison, Wisconsin. By the end of the article it is clear that the comparison between the two cities is meant as a cautionary tale for Madison (and, metaphorically, all of the U.S.). For expert support, Martin turns to two Chicago police officers who provide a portrait of alleged hillbilly brutality. Their description of the hillbilly bar brings together two of the moral offenses prevalent in mainstream representations of the hillbilly: drunkenness and the inability to control violent, animalistic urges. One officer describes the hillbilly bar scene as follows: “About nine-thirty at night they [bartenders? Hillbillies?] drill a hole in the floor to let the blood run out” (85). “Drilling a hole to let blood run out” associates rurality with animalism and violence, evoking images such as slaughterhouses or barns with drains in the floor to help dispose blood or other waste material. The use of this imagery to describe hillbillies by police officers is particularly troubling in light of the Chicago police brutality against Southern whites in the 1960s (see *Uptown* [1970] for a postwar account and *Appalachian Odyssey* for a revisionist discussion of this violence).

Having described the depravity of Chicago's hillbillies and their effect on the city, Martin moves on to bucolic Madison. Passing through "rolling hills" with "fattening cattle and ripening grain," red barns and small towns with "white houses and green trees, all neat and peaceful," Martin arrives at the "lovely city of broad streets and rolling hills" of the college town Madison, WI (85). Martin asks a local banker to describe the farmer situation in Madison; he replies: "the old-fashioned farm is like the old corner grocery store — it's gone. With the expense of mechanization, a fellow with eighty acres can't show a profit, so he'll sell out, keep the house and five acres and get a job in town" (85). This banker thus raises the issue of the influx of property-less rural-to-urban migrants more generally, suggesting a deeper implication behind the economic dependence of the family farmer on urban centers. Martin tries to sum up his observations, asking: "What can we conclude about the state of the Midwest — and America — today?" His answer is that the future lies in "growth," a movement towards industry and the urban and away from farming the land with the inevitable result of prosperity for some but discontent for others (86). Martin warns that although this discontent is relatively contained (the hillbillies in Chicago being one example of the discontent that facilitates rural-to-urban mobility), it is a discontent that could exceed its rural origins and eventually spill over into urban centers across the country as these rural inhabitants make their way towards the city. In such representations, the simple rural inhabitant, once seen as the harmless rube, moves closer to the stereotype of the depraved hillbilly, potentially bringing discontent to cities across the nation.

Martin, intentionally or not, sets up a parallel between the rural Midwest and the Southern hillbillies in the Midwest's centers. This sentiment is continued in a 1960 *New Republic* article, where Gerald Johnson considers all of rurality a depraved and regressed state that will, inevitably, drag down the rest of the country regardless of region. First, Johnson lets his readers know that rural depravity is not just tied to the "Negroes of Mississippi" or the "Oakies [sic] of the Dust Bowl," but also includes "miners of Pennsylvania, inhabitants of the cut-over lands of Michigan, anywhere" in rural U.S. (14). Johnson equates rurality with regression and depravity and sees it being brought into the cities by rural-to-urban migration:

But if *children* grow up anywhere — [his description of various rural places just listed] — in an environment productive of ignorance, superstition, malnutrition, and infection, many of them will appear as *adults* in Detroit, New York, Baltimore and other industrial cities; and they will bring their ignorance, superstition, weakness and *infections* with them. (emphasis added)

While Johnson acknowledges that "the cities" owe the "rural hinterland" for its steady stream of industrial "workers," he believes that the ills imported by these rural-to-urban migrants far overshadow any good: "[the cities] also owe much of their poverty, disease, and crime to the influx of semi-barbarous denizens of the rural slums — often the most horrifying ulcers upon the body politic." In this metaphor, rural inhabitants literally eat at the fabric of mainstream America. Johnson concludes his article by calling for a complete

regimen of “self-protection”: it is a patriotic duty to enforce the mainstream upon these “foul breeding-places of bad citizenship” before they emerge to soil modern civility.

Johnson even evokes principles of Physics (i.e. natural law) to prove his point: “Pascal’s Law” (the even distribution of a fluid across a closed container) applies to social and cultural demise as well, as backwards and degrading attitudes in the “most remote backwoods community” will soon leave their “traces...in the most civilized.”

In the same way that trailers were seen as exemplifying the regressed state of the inhabitants within, so rural-to-urban migration was represented in such a way as to foreground the dissonance between “us” and “them.” Some of these discussions in the popular press used “mobility” as a point of distinction between people in a regressed state and those embracing a modern approach to progress and development. However, this distinction rested on associating one’s material “progress” with one’s personal “development,” making cultural value dependent in part on material prosperity. I want to focus next on the representations of the *cultural* dissonance between so-called undeveloped rural inhabitants and the mainstream perspective in a dominant discourse that set up a low-class rural “them” against a mainstream “us.” I will also examine writings from the perspective of WWCP rural subjects (through autobiography and oral history), as these can challenge the larger conceptions of postwar society as represented in mainstream discourses found in journalistic reportage and the social sciences. The following sections will highlight the conversation between these two sides.

### **III. Culture**

Central to the discourse of the postwar period was the intersection of “progress” and

“development,” thus drawing on the trope of evolution to explain where particular places and people fall on a spatiotemporal trajectory leading to the present and the future beyond. To recall my earlier discussion, suburban “developments” were seen as improving culturally undeveloped (i.e. rural) landscape, tying physical mobility to the socioeconomic and cultural upward mobility of the urban-to-rural/suburban migrants. Moreover, as the urban mainstream of the nation was progressing through its own avenues of development, it became clear to this mainstream that not everyone was developing equally, hence the need for rural areas to be developed (i.e. modernized, progressed) by outside, urban forces seen as superior. In this formulation, development is always positive: it always equals progress and is seen as an evolutionary improvement.

This “development” may be seen as a genuine attempt at improving conditions in rural areas, but representations also cast such development as necessary in order to avert the potential danger that the ignorance of WWCP rural subjects posed for the nation as a whole. This sentiment can be found in mainstream and scholarly reports that directly call for improved education in rural communities, as we see in the following writings of the period: O. Duncan [1956]; Dawson and Clark [1946]; a 1947 story from *Time* entitled “Neurosis out of Town”; a 1959 article by Bliven in *Times*; and even a speech by the “father of soil conservation in the United States” H.H. Bennett (“Speeches of Hugh Hammond Bennett”). However, as seen in publications like *Nation’s Business*, *Times*, *Life*, *Business Week*, *Commonweal*, *Nation* and *SEP*, this sentiment is also present in those reports aimed at improving rural life in general, whether agricultural or not,

throughout the postwar and in both right and left-leaning venues. In regards to helping the farmer, *Nation's Business* explains in 1952 that efficiency experts and stopwatches are responsible for easing the farmer's workload and improving his quality of life. Although the author acknowledges that, "The farm motion and time specialists readily admit that farmers themselves are the most fertile source of time-saving ideas" (Laycock 45), the farmer's self-improvement is ultimately relegated to outside experts. In other publications, the benefit of outside help is seen in terms of mechanization, foregrounding the belief that development always equals progress and increased prosperity for all rural inhabitants. This sentiment is captured, for example, in *Life's* 1959 pictorial essay about a farming family who is able to travel, buy store-made dresses and join golf clubs ("Rewards of Life")<sup>45</sup>. For *Business Week* in 1953, the mere increase in farm productivity is seen as testament to the inevitable good life of the farmer who is no longer a "rustic" but a "hard-headed capitalist" ("Technology takes Over"). This outside help brings the once deprived farmer up to the level of adulthood/modernity in lifestyle and even in aptitude; as another *Nation's Business* article points out in 1949, the now "grown up" farmer is capable of having a voice in community decisions (Drake). The failure of those who fall behind despite this outside enlightenment is attributed to individual ignorance and inefficiency, and the overall message is that it is our social responsibility to fix such deficiency. As Martin Shirber puts it in his 1956 article in the *Commonweal*, "The Family

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<sup>45</sup> This sentiment also underscores the ill-fated prediction of the *New York Times* that "mechanization of agricultural operations will furnish many rural jobs" ("Rural Service").

farm is endangered, then, not so much by outgrowing family proportions as by failing to reach them” (“Low” 226). This failure becomes a social concern once the uneducated begin to migrate into the mainstream of America (227-228).

This postwar concern with helping the farmer extended to other aspects of rurality as well. As we can see in the following examples, mainstream journalism of the postwar suggested that WWPC rural subjects would benefit from an array of interventions, such as the introduction of unions to benefit small-town mill workers in the *Nation* [1946] (Stevens, “Dalton”) and of labor schools to enlighten the “farmer” through contact with the “city industrial worker” (Stevens, “Monteagle” [1946]), or a 1958 *SEP* article that described a “shepherd” preacher helping to develop his working-class Southern “flock” (H. Martin, “He Works”). We can see this sentiment emerge in writings calling for education to improve the lot of regressed WWPC rural subjects, for example in the *Times*’ call for a NYC “responsibility for seeing that adequate and efficient education is provided communities in other parts of the state” in 1954 (“More State Aid”), and a 1952 case study in *SEP* where the public education of a transient child made her into a “clean and smooth” U.S. citizen (the final statement: “And I live in a house” is the ultimate indicator of such a transition) (B. Davis 108). These articles may detail the need for practical help in these rural communities, but the underlying premise is that the only valid point of reference is the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream. By the end of the postwar, the only future of the *not* urban — that is, of small town and rural America — lies in the hands of outside forces entirely. By 1969, it is clear that saving small



towns/rural America is tantamount to making rural America an appendage to urbanity and eventually subordinated into oblivion (see *U.S. News and World Report's* 1969 article "Big Changes in America's Small Towns").

Mainstream publications consistently represent rural areas and people as culturally regressed, left behind "our" middle-classless sub/urban norms<sup>46</sup>. The extent of the cultural regression of WWCP rursality is highlighted in accounts where mainstream development enters the hinterlands, and assimilation is seen as a requirement for some kind of cultural development to take place, even if ultimately it still lags behind that of the mainstream. An example of this can be found in *SEP's* "The Great Factory Sweepstakes." The 1960 article details the work of Leonard Yaseen, a man in charge of scouting new locations for factories, preferably situated in rural places for profit maximization (since low standard of living means lower wages, for example) (S. Frank 142). It is clear that for Yaseen, while these rural locations may be fit for certain kinds of development, they are incapable of attaining the full development of the mainstream: "I want to make it clear I mean only in manufacturing. There's no question the excitement of a big city stimulates people in creative work" (quoted in 148). At best, Yaseen takes a charitable perspective on the prospect of bringing industry into the regressed backwaters of America:

"I will make one prediction. Provincialism will disappear, and there will

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<sup>46</sup>As social scientist O'Connor also points out in her revisionist study, this sentiment clearly underscores the 1960s War on Poverty.

be a broadening of culture as industry branches out, providing more money for rural schools and raising the standard of living. There won't be any yokels in another decade" (quoted in 148)

Clearly, any culture that rurality is capable of absorbing has to come from the urban, brought into rural spaces through industry (which provides rurality with its chance for contact with the mainstream and modernity). Such enculturation will lead to better jobs and improved education, potentially transforming the economic and cultural wasteland of which rural ignorance is but a symptom. Yet, ultimately for Yasseen, rurality will always remain a space too regressed for creativity, since he sees the urban as the only adequate setting in which to produce creative work.

The author's observation regarding the locals' grudging acceptance into modern society reinforces the above view. Comparing an encounter with a bear to the local yokels being saved by industry, he writes, "Even the grumpiest backwoods denizens are submitting to the invasion of industry" (148). The bear, like the locals we are meant to infer, merely glanced at a surveyor and then "shambled away, as though it was reconciled to the march of progress" (148). The assumption is that middle-classless urban "development" and "progress" are naturally occurring phenomena, so rural people and animals alike accept this inevitable "march of progress."

Like the wild animals they are associated with, the rural locals illustrate the evolutionary trope that ties development to geography and class. In these formulations, any resistance to "development" and "progress" occurs not because there might be

something wrong with middle-classless sub/urban development, but because the culturally devolved rural subjects are too unenlightened to accept the mainstream's helping hand. In turn, this assumption helps justify forcibly developing WWPC rural places in the image of middle-classless sub/urbanity. This is illustrated in *SEP*'s "Vanishing Hillbilly" [1961], a news story about an Ozarkian town violently attempting to stave off the declaration of national park status. For the author, these people are trying to preserve a way of life that would be impacted by modern change, but that way of life is dismissed as too firmly rooted in the past for the hillbillies to recognize the benefits of development and modern progress as sanctioned by the U.S. government. With this assumption in mind, the author explains the actions of the locals who refuse this government buy-out: "Local people talking to [him] almost always described the Government as 'taking' the land, never buying it," foregoing the generosity of American policy exemplified in the bills passed to acquire this land "provid[ing] \$6,000,000 for buying 113,000 acres of narrow river-front strips"; a repayment of taxes to those counties affected; and estimates that say "new visitors a year [...] would spend \$5,500,000" in local services, and this is not including the estimated \$10 million from "private investors" (Asbell 94). For the author, these numbers prove beyond doubt that government-sanctioned "development" will be nothing but a boon for this otherwise regressed region, and the locals are just too culturally regressed (stupid, even) to recognize the opportunity handed them. The author does not care to address what will happen to the community itself and the well-founded fears of its residents: what of those people not on riverfront

property? Who exactly will benefit from the private investment and outside tourism, besides the inevitable low-paying service jobs that will replace their current livelihoods? What the article never considers is that the local resistance to this plan might be a sign not of ignorance, but rather foresight born of legitimate concerns.

While both articles discussed above are from the same publication, they represent a larger current of thought found throughout the postwar across diverse publications and in writings on a broad range of topics, basically representing WWCP rursality as an inherently regressed place that is a blight in an otherwise progressive and prosperous period. However, it is clear from some articles predating the 1960s that this supposedly undeveloped nether region might be reflective of many places around the U.S. and not just those necessarily associated with WWCP rursality. There are a few indicators that all was not well even before the 1960s concern with the continuing cultures of poverty existing in one's midst (for a few examples throughout the 1950s, see the *Times* "Mohawk Job Cuts Are G.O.P Burden" (Egan); Swados and "No Prosperity"). The "failure" of WWCP rursality to develop towards a middle-classless sub/urban standard was rather reflective of many other segments of the population. If WWCP rursality was not the anomaly, as posited by the mainstream, then perhaps the voices emerging from these communities could be used to legitimately question the norms of progress and development of a mainstream that was not in fact the majority. In casting a wider net, we can find voices that express the critique WWCP rural subjects were bringing to bear on the norms of progress and development that attempted to overwrite them. One example

can be found in *American Mercury*'s 1958 "Submarginal — But Contented!" where a self-proclaimed "inefficient farmer" rails against the emphasis on increased profit, an emphasis that reinforces "big-scale" farms while putting "real farmers, whose farms are their homes, off the land" (Boe 143). Boe raises the possibility that the rhetoric of development and progress applied to the most rural of occupations, farming, may do more harm than good to those deemed inadequate by mainstream norms, whether or not such people resided in WWCP rural spaces.

#### i. Recognizing Rural/Urban Difference

As these newspaper reports illustrate, according to postwar norms of progress and development, whatever was *not* urban was deemed undeveloped, spatiotemporally and culturally stuck in a regressed past. What remains unsaid, and what we can begin to consider in these reports, is that these WWCP rural spaces may have legitimate concerns that directly question the norms of progress and development otherwise held as evidence of postwar progress. In considering a range of more personal discursive forms —such as autobiography, oral history and, however briefly, statements embedded in sociological studies of the postwar period — we can better understand the impact of the dominant view on WWCP rural subjects themselves as well as their ability to critique the middle-classless sub/urban norms of progress and development that seek to overwrite them. Although the present section aims to draw out the voices of WWCP rural subjects found, often obliquely, in postwar documents and writings that reflect on that period, it is important to continue to read them in the context of the dominant discourse within which they are embedded.

In order to illustrate an awareness of the rural/urban dichotomy in the day-to-day lives of postwar America, I draw on autobiographical writings from well-known writers aligned with the postwar mainstream (for example, Hans Koning) and those who grew up within WWPC rural places (Bobbie Ann Mason and Fred Pfeil are two examples). Through these autobiographical recollections, we can see an active utilization (and in the latter two, critique) of larger tropes regarding the difference between the mainstream and WWPC rurality, foregrounding some elements of the dominant unsaid hinted at in the above discussion. These recollections from both the mainstream and WWPC rural subjects reinforce what secondary scholarship like oral history has recorded and what autobiographical statements found in sociological studies of the time illustrate: the counter-narrative that may emerge from this subject position is formulated and articulated in relation to the dominant discourse on rurality which WWPC rural subjects recognize and, perhaps in part, internalize. Furthermore, these documents also demonstrate that the WWPC rural subject position, far from being inherently regressed, may generate a valid critique of postwar mainstream norms of progress and development.

The following from the revisionist text *U.S. 40 Today* can serve as an example of the pervasive mainstream rhetoric that posits WWPC rural subjects as inherently different: “We exchanged stares with the country people...the men in bib overalls, the women in out of date dresses with a brood of children clinging to the irregular skirt” (quoted in Vale and Vale 31). This statement, by a resident of Ellicott City, Maryland on the occasion of the city’s bicentennial celebration in the 1970s, implies that these “country people” found

in Ellicott City are instantly recognizable: their appearance (their clothing is “out of date”) shows that they do not belong in the here and now; their family size (a “brood of children”); the awkwardness of even their basic familial relations (the children “clinging to the [mother’s] irregular skirt”). From this statement, there is little doubt that being “country” is easily recognizable as other, and it is something from which it would be desirable to keep a distance. What is further implied in this statement is that the distance between rural and sub/urban is a natural outcome of an unbridgeable difference: transplanted from their rural *environments*, these country people cannot assimilate and become part of the modern population of Ellicott City.

This resident’s description illustrates the pervasiveness of the rural/urban dichotomy in postwar discourse, and it is also clearly present in autobiographical statements from subjects who had lived within WWPC rural places in the postwar period. One telling example is Bobbie Ann Mason’s memoir *Clear Springs*. In addition to shedding light on the critique which runs through her fictional work, Mason’s autobiography also demonstrates the potential problems that arise when the attempt to reclaim a WWPC rural voice that had been elided by postwar rhetoric is itself embedded in the rural/urban dichotomy of the time. As in the dominant rhetoric of the period, Mason’s autobiography conflates her rurality and working-classness into a location that is socially, culturally and economically “undeveloped,” a location outside the middle-classless sub/urban. While this “undeveloped” WWPC rural space is a source of pride for Mason, it is still represented, at least in part, as ultimately inassimilable to the mainstream world in which

she primarily finds herself.

The conflation of rurality with anything undeveloped complicates Mason's critical stance towards the postwar mainstream, even as it more clearly demonstrates the binary relationship between WWPC rural locations (the *not* urban) and this mainstream. Mason's discussion points to the real and imagined differences between working-class rurality and postwar mainstream norms of sub/urban development as exemplified, for example, by her description of her visit to a Detroit suburban development that seemed like an alien world (Mason, *Clear* 20)<sup>47</sup>. However, Mason's examination of the rural/urban divide experienced in the postwar loses some of its clarity as she accounts for this difference in regional terms, i.e. the South versus the North, as she does in recounting her travails in Northeastern graduate education: "I was invisible, voiceless, stupefied by my naivete. All around me were Yankees, the foreigners of the Little Colonel books. If they noticed me at all, they gazed at me penetratingly, pinning me on the spot as if I were a specimen of bug. My accent betrayed me" (145). On one hand, Mason foregrounds the particularity of her experience as a rural subject in the context of postwar sub/urban middle-classness. Yet she also simplifies rurality by conflating it with regional differences, ultimately reiterating the familiar representation of rurality as a space outside the modern spatiotemporal and cultural entity known as the "North."

Still, by setting this WWPC rural space apart from middle-classless sub/urban norms

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<sup>47</sup>For theorists like Elizabeth Bidinger, this separation of Mason's rural background from her urban escape to the North also operates as an "exclusive asset" to buoy her own professional identity in the present (85).



of progress and development, Mason is able to more forcefully articulate a critique of the mainstream from a subject position that it dismisses. Her discussion of “Highway 45” can serve as an example. Mason’s fascination with this highway and the motel that houses its travelers is rooted in her own position within a devalued rural location in the postwar: “The allure of rootlessness — strangers passing through, stopping there to sleep — is a cliché, but if you live within sight of trains and a highway, the cliché holds power” (6). Apart from a certain romanticization of the rootless traveler, we can also infer that the fascination of this “rootlessness” for Mason is tied to the fact that while these travelers are from distant places with little resemblance to Mason’s town, they are traveling the same route that potentially opens all of these small towns to the rest of the world.

While early postwar highways brought city residents to (or at least through) small towns, they simultaneously allowed people of these towns to leave for more legitimized lives in the sub/urban mainstream. As Mason relays a little later in her memoir, the way to this mainstream was through Highway 45. In her case, Highway 45 becomes more than a practical step as it is also associated with “dreams” of escape, a sign of forward progress away from the “country” (83-85) and into the urban:

I went out with the boys — boys who wanted to settle down and work in the new factories — but I wasn’t impressed. I was always dreaming. From our house I could see the traffic on Highway 45, which ran straight south to Tupelo, Mississippi, where Elvis was born. I knew he had dreamed the same dreams. (110)

To realize “progress” one had to move away from the rural and towards the sub/urban, traveling through those metaphoric and actual routes of mobility celebrated in postwar discourse.

We see through Mason’s experience in New York City that simply moving away from one’s (Southern) rural upbringing did not guarantee acceptance into the normative mainstream. While the highway offered a literal and figurative escape route from rurality, Mason discovers that her experience in the rural South puts her at odds with the New York scene, and she becomes (potentially) aligned with the “hicks” down South viewed as ignorant of the wider world (120-121). Mason’s description of herself at that point in her life captures her experience of the dissonance between her aspirations in traveling to NYC and the mainstream view of such a trajectory: “I was remembering my younger self, spinning along Park Avenue in my Holly Golightly hat” (179). Holly Golightly, played by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Dir. Blake Edwards, 1961), was also a country girl running from the South, attempting to partake of the good life elsewhere while rightfully shirking her family responsibilities back home. Golightly represents the larger postwar conception that leaving the (rural) South was a step towards modern times, away from medieval practices like child brides and patriarchal rule as exemplified by Golightly’s husband who tries to blackmail her into coming home. Mason’s self-representation as a Holly Golightly foregrounds the postwar view of rurality as a marginal place to be left behind and the effects of such a devaluation on a rural subject like herself.

While postwar notions of progress encouraged rural-to-urban mobility, there was also the mainstream perception that the influx of culturally regressed WWPC rural migrants could threaten “modern” society. Mason does not directly discuss this in her memoir, but it does offer glimpses of the impact such a perception could have on the rural-to-urban migrant. To return to Mason’s evocation of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Holly is far from a model citizen: in addition to lying about her name and identity, Holly is childlike (i.e. naïve); criminal (running information for the Mafia, behavior bordering on prostitution), possibly as a result of her naivete; and incapable of forming close emotional connections with other people (or, even with her one true companion, a cat she simply names “Cat”). In other words, Holly has some of the characteristics of a sociopath and while her move from the South is meant to attest to the superiority of NYC, her presence in this city, however interesting to its cosmopolitan residents, is shown as potentially disrupting its smooth functioning.

Although *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is a fictional portrayal of a rural-to-urban migrant, it still reflects a larger mainstream rhetoric that is pervasive across discursive forms in the postwar, including the social sciences and general circulation journalism. Far from being isolated to the printed word, these portrayals clearly affected the treatment of rural in-migrants in the Midwest, as we can see in recollections of taunts in the workplace (Stewart and Rice in Obermiller et al 40-41) and recollections of police discrimination and brutality in Chicago (Guy in the revisionist Obermiller et al 60-63; “Peacemakers, Goodfellows, and the Police” in the sociological postwar work *Uptown*). While in-

migrants were very aware of the negative connotations of being associated with the influx of hillbillies to urban centers, their recollections attest to the pride in their birthplaces (see ch. 2 and 3 in Obermiller et al). We can see this pride in a more professionally successful writer like Mason, but it also emerges in those documents concerned with the less famous, everyday people who also experienced a WWPC rural subject position in relation to a mainstream that belittled them. Some of these in-migrants maintained their Appalachian identity whilst living in urban centers and upon the move “back home” to their towns of origin (see Stewart and Rice in Obermiller et al 46).

This pride in one's WWPC rural background ran counter to the dominant representations of this subject position. In the face of the dominant norms of progress and development that posited the rural as regressed in comparison to their new urban homes, these rural-to-urban migrants did not fail to assimilate but rather did not want to adopt these norms for themselves. Instead, these residents *chose* to remain “country.” As the urban inhabitants of the Midwest attempted to distance themselves from the influx of “hillbillies,” so we can also see the distance these rural in-migrants kept between themselves and the urban. This is illustrated in one ex-migrant’s description of family members still living in Cleveland, which also indicates her own self-identification whilst living in Cleveland: “They think they’re Ohioans, but they’re really West Virginians... transplanted West Virginians” (Stewart and Rice in Obermiller et al 46). This pride in one's rural difference from the mainstream points to a desire to identify with a region considered backwards despite having lived in “modern” urban society. While this

identification may reinforce the negative stereotypes that WWPC rural in-migrants are inherently unable to assimilate and become part of the “modern” world, it is also a critique of the middle-classless sub/urban norms that devalue this WWPC rural in-migration. As historians Stewart and Rice point out:

Often, writers and scholars of the out-migration experience debate the question of who ‘made it’ and why. The ‘successful’ migrant is the one who assimilated and/or profited economically. However, the measure of success should include more than monetary values. It can also be measured not only in the love found among families but in the love and deep respect that families instilled in members for Appalachian culture and history. (47)

In addition to affirming their own lives and experiences, measuring “success” by way of embracing (and not rejecting) a devalued background can become one way for such subjects to question postwar and present assumptions surrounding progress and development.

While some postwar documents attempted to bring out these devalued WWPC rural voices (like the sociological study *Uptown* to which I will return shortly), more recent oral histories can also be mined for their critique of mainstream assumptions concerning WWPC rurality. One of these norms, as mentioned earlier, is that of directed mobility. Since these in-migrants were seen as *outside* the consciousness of postwar America, their choices (including migrating to urban centers) were viewed as passive, a listless

movement beyond their control. However, through the historians in *Appalachian Odyssey*, we can see that much conscious choice was behind the mobility of WWPCPC rural subjects. Part of this choice may have been dictated by familial and peer connections in particular urban centers, but what is particularly highlighted in this work is the need to seek out survival in regions where there were jobs (see Chs. 1-4 in Obermiller et al). While moving in pursuit of jobs did not appear to fit larger norms of postwar progress and directed mobility, it did not fall outside of them either; to quote one Appalachian in-migrant, “A man with ambition, you know, will go till he finds food” (quoted in Berry in Obermiller et al 3). While going until one “finds food” may suggest less than a conscious choice, the acknowledgment of “ambition” speaks to the conscious choices and ingenuity lying beneath the surfaces of economic necessity.

The creative means of survival and activism by WWPCPC rural in-migrants are amply documented in the Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander postwar study *Uptown*. This study provides examples of just how directed rural in-migrants were or became over time, from individual situations (in regards to fighting the Welfare and public health systems, see John and Etta Dawson’s story) to community well-being through social protest (see “Seeing the Rules,” “Urban Renewal Means Poor People Removal” and the chapter on police brutality, “Peacemakers”) with or without the help of student activist groups. The sense of agency found in rural-to-urban migrants in their new urban environment as highlighted in *Uptown* is also confirmed by historical research that discusses the consciousness and creativity of WWPCPC rural in-migrants and their desire for upward

mobility. Berry finds in his historical research that “The overwhelming majority of southern whites came north looking for a job, found one, worked at it, and eventually moved out of the port-of-entry community” and into a working-class suburb or more removed rural place (in Obermiller et al 16). Like their sub/urban counterparts, at least some WWPC rural in-migrants were also looking to better themselves by taking advantage of national prosperity. Ironically, rather than being a limit case for postwar definitions of mobility and progress, WWPC rurality may have been the exemplar of directed mobility. The extent to which this fact is elided is evident from postwar rhetoric aimed at distinguishing between the different “cultures” of WWPC rurality and the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream, even as these subject positions were more similar to each other than ever before.

#### **IV. Culture Clash and the Counterculture**

The view of WWPC white rural inhabitants as a distinct culture from the mainstream continued throughout the postwar and, in many ways, influenced the ways this particular subject position was viewed and portrayed in movements that attempted to fundamentally break free from these norms. Thus, while the U.S. became seemingly more homogenous in many ways — geographically as more people migrated from the city and vice versa, and culturally as more people across the country had access to a shared popular culture — the distinction between rural and urban was quite vocally upheld throughout the postwar. Although theorists like James Gregory maintain that the assimilation of Southern migrants into Northern sub/urban centers by the end of the 1960s erased the distinction between the rural/South and urban/North (“Southernizing”

142-143), other theorists point to the continuing relevance of the rural/urban distinction in postwar popular culture in particular. For example, theorists as diverse as James Gilbert, Anthony Harkins, Steven Biel and Don Vaughan suggest that postwar television helped mitigate the perceived threat of WWCP rursality to a mainstream which was increasingly brought face-to-face with it through a shared mass culture, suburbanization and rural-to-urban migration. For these scholars, such popular television programming as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, while exhibiting an increasing homogeneity of the American public through its mass dissemination, also demonstrates the divide between different geographic and class statuses. It is clear that even though the assimilation of WWCP rursality was a concern of mainstream discourse as evident, for example, in discussions surrounding rural-to-urban mobility, it was equally important for the mainstream to note that there would always be differences between those who were regressed and those who were considered normative. Despite the increasing assimilation of WWCP rursality in many different areas, then, it was still necessary to maintain a distance from them, as is apparent when we consider other areas of dominant discourse concerned with suburban consumer ideals and, by the end of the postwar, the emerging counterculture. Although the counterculture articulated opposition to the middle-classless sub/urban ideals that were so normative throughout the postwar, it also exhibited the tendency to mark WWCP rural subjects as regressed others who were left behind a more enlightened present and to use this perceived difference as justification for the dominance of its subject position.



The divide between WWPC rural subjects and their mainstream counterparts, however, may not have been as great as postwar dominant discourse maintained. As we just saw in regards to the stories of rural-to-urban migration, some of these WWPC rural migrants were in fact participating in the same norms of progress and development as the mainstream, albeit with a different look, a point that is also illustrated when we consider discourses surrounding what revisionist scholar Lizabeth Cohen calls the postwar “consumers’ republic.” According to Cohen, this “consumers’ republic” encompassed the act of customer spending as an expression of both national rhetoric and one’s place within this larger national framework (see “Reconversion” for an in-depth analysis). Like their mainstream counterparts, WWPC rural subjects were also taking part in this dominant rhetoric and, in this respect, were no different than the mainstream that devalued them.

This WWPC rural consumerism was highlighted as early as the late 1940s in magazines like *Business Week* (“Progress in Rural Selling”) and *Fortune* (“The Farmer Goes to Town”) and was at times measured in terms of middle-classless sub/urban norms. Through historical accounts like those given by Stephanie Carpenter and Katherine Jellison, we see that even farm trade journals were directed towards a middle-class urban ideal in the postwar period, particularly as this ideal intersected with gender roles (see

Carpenter 473-474 and Jellison, “The Postwar Era”)<sup>48</sup>. The encouragement of the rural subject’s adoption of middle-classless consumerism in media directed at both the mainstream and rural subjects demonstrates the pervasiveness of the dominant discourse surrounding consumer patterns. Despite this rhetoric, however, it is also clear that the farmer-consumer was different from the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream.

According to revisionist studies like Ronald Kline's *Consumers in the Country*, instead of adopting technology and consumerism in an attempt to become like the middle-classless sub/urban, rural inhabitants adapted modern improvements to fit their own lifestyle.

Kline maintains that the “structure and culture of rural society were resources that enabled farm men, women, and youth to resist the inroads of (supposedly) urbanizing technologies and weave them into existing patterns of rural life” (280; see his “Part 3: Postwar Consumerism” for a detailed discussion). Instead of a sub/urban middle-class home, the rural farm family could be identified by the “pickup truck in the driveway, a long propane tank nestled against a clapboard farmhouse, and farm machinery parked everywhere,” even as they took advantage of the conveniences of postwar consumer society (Kline 280). We can infer from these studies that such material differences between the mainstream and WWCP rural consumers were portrayed in dominant discourse as the failure of rurality to conform to the “modern” ideals set by the postwar

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<sup>48</sup>Jellison’s study in particular demonstrates how advertisements and columnists in these trade journals tried to redirect their female readers towards a middle-class respectability even as this redirection ultimately failed (“The Postwar Era”).

mainstream. Yet, the fact that these rural consumers used these new advancements to reinforce their sense of place also suggests a strengthened position from which to critique such normative consumer practice and the counterculture that is interrelated with it.

The dismissal of WWCP rursity based on their different “look” and behavior as consumers, and the potential critique generated by rural subjects themselves, can be more forcefully examined in relation to the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. Revisionist scholars have tied the counterculture to the suburban developments of the early postwar period but also to the consumer patterns that had arisen from these origins. For British journalist Godfrey Hodgson, the so-called countercultural revolution of the 1960s was born and bred of middle- and upper-class suburbia and, in turn, reinforced the privilege that allowed for any kind of revolt in the first place (see Hodgson, Part III for an in depth discussion). For Hodgson (and others, like Frank and Heath and Potter), the counterculture of the 1960s mixed fashion (“culture”) with politics in a way that made the two indistinguishable: “political commitment [for the 1960s counterculture] sprang from the same sources as the urge to let a big motorbike rip without a crash helmet” (309). Other theorists like Lizabeth Cohen reflect this sentiment by maintaining that the mainstream consumer ideals of the 1950s, while seemingly rejected, were also implicated in the 1960s counterculture. By the 1960s, an entire generation had been brought up within postwar prosperity and suburban consumerism that ostensibly exhibited “self-expression and power” (L. Cohen 175), a “self-expression” that carried into the countercultural progeny of the middle-classless sub/urb. Thus, as Cohen concedes in

reflecting on her own life, suburban privilege led to real social critique even as the norms of privilege were not deeply interrogated (7). Viewed this way, the counterculture's desire for social change and breaking free from the seemingly oppressive 1950s may be considered as rooted in the same approach to class and geography that underpinned suburban aspirations earlier in the postwar and thus similarly complicit in the marginalization of rurality.

The gains and failures of the 1960s have already been extensively examined by scholars (Frank's chapter 1 has an interesting overview), so here I will be more specifically exploring connections between the counterculture and the mainstream rhetoric of geography and mobility that, as we have seen, revolved around such topoi as the suburbs, upward mobility, and rural-to-urban migration. As I will demonstrate in the rhetoric of the counterculture WWPC rurality continued to play its familiar role as a monstrosity and/or an antiquated joke. The role of this demographic is framed through the recognizable trope of a culturally and, in particular, politically regressed space and time. Despite this devaluation, we can also begin to draw out a counter-narrative originating from the WWPC rural subject position.

The cultural difference between the middle-classless sub/urban counterculture and WWPC rurality is both subtle and obvious. This difference may, in some ways, be rooted in the improved opportunities of a middle-classless sub/urban population supported by government policy. According to Cohen, the postwar GI bill did offer upward mobility to some people, although this mobility was limited to World War II

veterans and, in particular, men (see 133-150 for a discussion on gender and the “consumer republic”). Cohen points to the division reinforced by these standards, particularly in regards to access to college: the mostly middle- and upper-class vets who were already on a college-track used their benefits to remain on that track, while vets from working-class and poor backgrounds used their benefits to attend vocational schools (156-157)<sup>49</sup>. As the postwar progressed and more vets took advantage of their education benefits, the divide deepened as the middle- and upper-classes gained access to more prestigious institutions while the working-class remained in state and community colleges (157). As Cohen argues, this had significant consequences given the continuing trend towards college- and university-trained requirements in the workforce.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the 1960s counterculture was intertwined with the universities. For Hodgson, the counterculture was born from suburban discontent (299) but was fostered within the climate of postwar universities, and it was this college-educated voice that in turn “affected an entire generation of Americans” (307). This countercultural voice, however, arose from the upper-classes, not only because those below the middle-classes were not as likely to go to college in the postwar, but also because this countercultural voice originated in more elite universities (see Hodgson, “War, Peace and Two Americas”). This divide became more accentuated in material

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<sup>49</sup>Bobbie Ann Mason discusses her father's use of his Veteran benefits for vocational courses (Mason 44-45). See also *Strangers in Paradise* (Ryan and Shackrey) for a discussion of class difference and the postwar college experience.

terms, as one's political voice was reflected in a cultural uniform of dissent, creating a very noticeable "us" versus "them." As Hodgson points out, the rhetoric of "with us or against us" rebellion was defined in terms of what constituted conformity to the system ("Telegraph Avenue, Son of Madison Avenue") and intersected with clear status markers in order to tell who belonged where. We can infer that these status demarcations existed for both sides: countercultural/upper-class versus the "conservative"/working-class: "The two parties could soon be distinguished by outward badges, almost by uniforms: by the style of their clothes and the length of their hair" (363). Class difference, while serving to distinguish dissenters from conformers, was hidden behind markers of identity such as clothes. As writers Jane and Michael Stern observe in their introduction to their book *Sixties People*, "[the 60s] was also a time when it was possible to walk down any street and tell just by looking at someone where he or she stood politically, sexually, and philosophically" (5). These "uniforms" helped naturalize a structural class hierarchy and a countercultural rhetoric that, for example, equated the working-class with ignorance, typically conflating an undesirable character trait (like racism, war mongering, etc.) with an easily identifiable lower class position<sup>50</sup>.

Alongside *class*, geography became another powerful marker of difference in the rhetoric of the counterculture. Although Hodgson doesn't discuss the role of WWPC rurality in the 1960s countercultural movement, it is apparent that "hillbillies" were seen

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<sup>50</sup>Also see historian Richard Polenberg for a discussion of the manifestation of class hierarchies in U.S. popular culture and upper-class counterculture ("Vietnam").

as degenerate others in certain countercultural artifacts, just as they were in mainstream society. It is telling, for example, that in *Easy Rider* (Dir. Dennis Hopper, 1969) Peter Fonda's character is shot by pickup-driving Southern thugs. In the counterculture, WWPCPC rurality became equated with inherent conservatism (outside of a present, radical society) and the violence of an oppressive "Establishment" (police, military) that stood in the way of a radical/progressive, upper-class counterculture. WWPCPC rural subjects, in this formulation, are once again characters without consciousness, a threat to a different kind of social progress and development.

If we look at postwar articles and autobiographies written by mainstream subjects about the period, we can see that WWPCPC rural subjects are stereotypically represented as regressed individuals (associated with the South), imbued with the characteristics of racism, violence, war mongering etc. As I will demonstrate in the discussion below, this becomes a highly recognizable figure used to account for the real problems occurring in the South, while simultaneously deflecting blame from Northern (and thus, in postwar discourse, urban) backyards<sup>51</sup>. The representations of WWPCPC rurality by a self-declared "radical" counterculture are continuous with these more mainstream views that associate the rural "South" (itself seen as symptomatic of rurality in general) with racism. A look at

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<sup>51</sup>Richard Polenbergs sees this happen in changing northern attitudes towards Civil Rights legislation in the South. In particular, Polenbergs views white support as growing "distinctly cooler" when Northern urban riots drew attention to the ways in which racism and segregation existed above the Mason-Dixon line as well.

journalistic reportage directed at a seemingly more mainstream readership demonstrates the mainstream roots of such countercultural views towards WWCP rursality.

As early as 1946, the ignorance of the Southern rural white is outlined in Stevens' column "Small-Town America" in the left-leaning *Nation*. One resident describes a small town in Louisiana as in desperate need of outside help from the city, in order to cure its hopelessly racist and backward nature: "And as for progress, it doesn't start in places like this. It moves out from the cities to the country" (quoted in Stevens, "St. Martinville" 718-719). By the time of the desegregation debates of the 1950s, the pervasive view was that the South, and particularly its white, rural working-class, was responsible for this racism and that the enlightened urban North could solve this problem. This attitude can even be found in reports on the struggle of desegregation in the South appearing in more conservative publications like *SEP*. While John Bartlow Martin at times portrays middle-class professionals as actively demonstrating against desegregation, it is his attention to WWCP rursality that is particularly noteworthy. In part 3 of this 1957 series, Martin follows Sam Englehardt, an active member of the pro-segregationist Citizens' Council in Alabama, a particularly vocal Southerner who had always lived on his family farm on a "plantation twenty miles from Montgomery" ("The Deep" 21). This portrait of Englehardt is used by Martin as an embodiment of the racist impulse existing in the segregated South. On one level, Englehardt's background — an angry, racist Southern farmer — exemplifies the insulated, ignorant and oppressive attitudes produced within any regressive rural area. Further, by using Englehardt as his primary source, Martin



lends this man's observations an aura of authority: his words operate as a document of truth for this particular region, an expression of a position from which Martin clearly distances himself.

Englehardt's relatively genteel farming background and authority is then used as a window through which to view those people even further removed from the urban South, the WWPC rural population in general. Martin describes his trip with Englehardt to the "upcountry": the "rolling red-clay hills clad in scrub pine and hardwood" that litter the landscape for the "100 miles" between Montgomery and Birmingham (54). This imagery is so recognizable by this point in time that all Martin has to do is implicitly place his reader in the land of the hillbilly, and then confirm the animalistic and depraved nature associated with such a place through Englehardt's words:

"Some of those mountain counties — just let one nigger try to go to school. It'd be horrible. Those people mean business about it. They haven't been thrown with 'em like we have down here, don't know how to handle 'em" (quoted in 54)

Even for outspoken racists like Englehardt, the hillbilly operates as an other exemplifying the more violent aspects of society. It is interesting that Englehardt (a "respectable" farmer) separates himself from both blacks and hillbillies (both groups of people are referred to as "they" without qualification, even within the same sentence). Also interesting is that Martin accepts this explanation from a man who, most definitely, espouses an ideology that is out-of-step with the mainstream rhetoric (if not practice) of

progress associated with urbanity.

The spatiotemporal and cultural regression associated with the rural poor white helps Martin isolate Alabama as the “least predictable, the most explosive” example of desegregation efforts, in part due to industrial Birmingham and the “endless hill country” of the region prone to WWPC rural-to-urban migration: “It’s a migrant town, full of poor whites who come out of the hills to work for a while, then go back. You’ve got Negroes competing for jobs. You’ve got a tradition of violence. Birmingham is the worst city for race relations in the South” (54). The suggestion here is that the resistance to desegregation is due in part to economic scarcity but also to the fact that the “poor whites out of the hills” remain in the city until they make money to bring back home. In other words, the hillbillies remain in a culture of poverty, which only exacerbates their rural ignorance towards race relations and civility (hence, the “tradition of violence”) because they are not influenced by the enlightenment offered within the city. Indeed, the most extreme pro-segregation violence is attributed to the “red-neck,” as we see in the words of one of the leaders of pro-segregation: “The mountain people — the real red-neck — is our strength” (56). Nor does mainstream discourse see this violence limited exclusively to the South, viewing the situation in Birmingham as a microcosm for other cities where Southern rural poor whites oscillate between urban opportunity and their WWPC rural origins; shortly later in the postwar, Martin will outline what this community looks like (and what they bring with them) in his “Changing Midwest” article, already discussed.

It is clear from mainstream discourse that the “South,” associated with racism, is a code

word for WWPC rurality, just as the “North” became associated with urban enlightenment. Thus, we see in Martin’s discussion that it is the “Southern” Louisville that desegregated most slowly, as compared to the “Eastern” affiliated Baltimore and “Mid-western” St. Louis (“The Border” 55). While Martin uncritically reiterated a rhetoric that associated the South with regressive and racist attitudes, others challenged this simplified binary, as demonstrated in the 1960 *Times* article “‘The South’ in the North,” where the authors are critical of the mainstream equation of the “South” with racism and ignorance and in need of Northern, urban enlightenment (note that “The South” of the title is in quotes) (Dykeman and Stokely). Yet this latter critique is an exception in both mainstream and countercultural rhetoric. In both, the South/rurality functions as a convenient container for the less savory aspects of mainstream society. Ironically, in attempting to rebel against mainstream norms of progress and development, the counterculture embraced some of the dominant unsaid assumptions that helped justify these very norms throughout the postwar period, particularly in regard to the negative counterexample of WWPC rurality.

This type of rhetoric was so pervasive that even autobiographies written about the experience in the “Movement” by foreign-born members like Hans Koning represent WWPC rurality as negative counterexamples to the progress and development of the counterculture. Koning, a novelist and journalist born in the Netherlands but whose life experience spans the globe (“Hans Koning”), writes of his participation in the 1960s counterculture throughout his book *Nineteen Sixty-Eight*, a work that exhibits many of

the dominant unsaid assumptions concerning class and geography and the degree to which those who participated failed to question them. Koning admits that the college students who participated in the Movement had come from privileged origins but argues that they rejected these privileges, considering them not an asset but a shackle; as Koning writes of activists affiliated with student organizations like the SDS, “here was no ‘privileged group’ of students biting the hand that pampered them” (64)<sup>52</sup>. However, as Koning’s descriptions unwittingly illustrate, this willful ignorance of class privilege in effect reinforced the very class hierarchies, and the dominant unsaid assumptions underpinning these hierarchies, that contributed to the privileged origins of these students. In the rhetoric of the counterculture, as in mainstream rhetoric, WWPC rurality fulfilled the role of a regressed antagonist, cast as the oppressor of racial minorities but also hostile to the Movement itself, as we see in Koning’s discussion of the middle-classless, sub/urban “Northern” whites versus the violent pick-up truck driving (Southern) “them.” In his description of the Civil Rights cause in the early 1960s South, he clearly places countercultural whites as Martyrs in a contest against an inherently regressed South: “this fear of ours was different because it was *self-chosen*, self-chosen by white kids from the North who had *changed sides* of their own free will and now found themselves on a *different planet*, a hostile one” (19, emphasis added). The South is a different planet because it is in part equated with the rural; as Koning describes these martyrs later in the book as “sophisticated city students from the North” (103), we see

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<sup>52</sup>His discussion of the Chicago Seven is another notable example (170).

that the North becomes a code word for urban (as we also see in other accounts of the period)<sup>53</sup> and is set in distinction from the foreign land (or “different planet”) of rurality. Further, the South (i.e. rurality) is represented as an inherently regressed place: a different planet that is a breeding ground for racist and violent impulses in direct conflict with Northern (urban) enlightenment.

The perceived ontological difference between an enlightened, middle-classless sub/urban counterculture and WWPC rurality becomes a justification for the “inbred elitism” of the Movement (109), of its means and, by extension, its unsaid assumptions. Koning’s description of draft protesting is instructive as to who holds this enlightenment and of what this enlightenment consists:

The students who went into the countryside of nineteenth-century Russia to tell the peasants that the land should belong to the tillers were usually turned over to the police by those same peasants. It was in that tradition that some of us draft protesters had got beaten up by blue-collar workers.

(110)

Like the “students” of nineteenth-century Russia, members of the 1960s counterculture are seen as having rejected their privilege, by extension becoming one of the oppressed (violently at odds with the “peasants” and simultaneously beaten by the Establishment).

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<sup>53</sup>The conflation of “urban” and “North” in distinction from “rural” and “South” is also voiced by Jane and Michael Stern, where the “urban white kids” from the North were forced to face an impoverished, Southern situation previously known only through folk songs (115).

The negative view of rurality emerges in this analogy: as the Russian elites went to the “countryside” to help the peasants, so did the 1960s Movement, and in both cases the Russian elites/the Movement were beaten up by “peasants”/rural subjects who had joined sides with the equally unenlightened police/Establishment. Through this analogy, the counterculture comes out as the indisputable, if unrecognized, saviors of the ignorant (and rural) lower-class and, in the “tradition” of nineteenth-century Russia, offering rural subjects the possibility of reaching an enlightened urbanized consciousness, too.

Obviously, not all members of the 1960s counterculture have such a sanitized memory as Koning. As Todd Gitlin observes in his book *The Sixties*, the countercultural approach to WCPC rural subjects, for example, was informed by a larger conception of the regression surrounding these places, leading the counterculture to believe they should speak for and help this oppressed group (162-166). Such dominant unsaid assumptions contributed to alienation from and/or silencing of the very people they sought to help, ironically creating a rift between the Movement and the working-class and working poor. Gitlin’s own co-authored postwar work *Uptown*, a study of rural-to-urban migrants in postwar Chicago, illustrates this tension. As Gitlin observes, the conflict between the organizers’ “highfalutin talk” and the residents on the sideline (*Uptown* 379) ironically alienated the very people it meant to serve, causing insecurity in the WCPC residents, and condescension and distrust on behalf of their middle-class leaders.

In contrast to Koning’s autobiography, Gitlin and his co-author Nanci Hollander explore the roots of this conflict in the divide between the privileged background of

themselves and of organizations like SDS (xxi), and the realities of the downtrodden for whom they supposedly spoke, using the stories of the people in the neighborhood in order to examine this divide. This use of one's subjects as a way to interrogate power difference is a project fraught with difficulty, and as such, provides a good document for studying the ways in which WWPC rurality were viewed and used by the 1960s counterculture even within well-intentioned projects such as this. The authors allow the stories of residents to be heard, but their informants' agency is ultimately attached to a short leash as the authors maintain all editorial control. We can see an example of such containment when the authors discuss the impending break between JOIN (a student group stationed in Uptown) and some of the younger residents. After a faction of young residents form their own committee to stave off police violence, some of the leaders plead for these people to stay within the JOIN organization. The new group (the "Goodfellows") takes a bold "moral initiative" to defend their own rights, but the leaders (and authors?) resist recognizing it as such: "But now what did they want? Whatever it was, they had JOIN's permission, even JOIN's blessing, but they couldn't work in the shadow of the old history" (381). For the authors, the new organization is not a break from JOIN in any real way and is in fact a direct descendant, a blood relative of JOIN, hence the patronizing mention of JOIN giving "permission" and "blessing" for the Goodfellows to start out on its own. Thus, the initiative with which the Uptown residents approached their problems was portrayed as yet another activity emanating from the tutelage of the counterculture.

This is not to say that poor rural whites like those of Uptown did not benefit from their alliances with radical groups. My point here is that in addition to reflecting a traditional Marxist bias towards the rural working-class and working poor<sup>54</sup>, *Uptown* also reflects some of the unsaid assumptions of the mainstream from which the counterculture originated. On one hand, the authors present the experience of WWCP rural in-migrants to Chicago as a knowledge base from which to criticize the capitalist structure of the U.S.; yet this reliance on experience is far from unfiltered (as the authors admit in their “Explanations” chapter) and is repeatedly presented as a journey towards enlightenment led by the middle-class sub/urban JOIN leaders.

This enlightenment is often figured in terms of race relations, where racism is rooted in the ignorant (rural) South, even if, on occasion, the authors present someone claiming that both North and South are equally racist (see 184 for an example). A typical example can be found in the story of Linda, who says: “I been around so many people that wasn’t prejudiced [...] that I just decided, well, what’s the use of being prejudiced? There’s no need to. I guess that’s one reason why I’m not like that. I probably would be if I had stayed in Harlan [Kentucky] all my life” (267). Linda’s testimony is interesting in that personal evolution is understood in spatial terms: enlightenment in the city is set in contrast to the stagnation of the rural. Because of Linda’s experience “back home” in Harlan, she is set up as an expert on the (rural) South generally, and thus her observation

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<sup>54</sup>From their admitted membership in SDS, we can see that the authors are at least inspired by Marxist tenets if not outright socialists of some persuasion.



of Harlan as a place that lacks consciousness is extended to the region as a whole. In other interviews, JOIN is presented as directly responsible for the enlightened consciousness of the residents/interviewees from this regressed South; we see this occur in various testimonials (see 136 and 225-226 for examples) but also in author asides as discussed above with the Goodfellows. Only those with very brief ties to JOIN are shown as still vocally racist and unenlightened (see “Bill and Amanda Carter”).

Further, while the book is presented as a simple collection of interviews necessarily “framed” by the editors/interviewers (xxxvi), the perfect trajectory it presents of rural-to-urban migrants moving towards social and personal evolution in the city suggests a high degree of mediation by the interviewers. Except for a handful of times, we are rarely given the prompts and/or questions that elicit the responses in *Uptown*, and as a result, the text generally reads as a continuous story that spontaneously springs from the subjects, interrupted only by brief editorial asides to help clarify particular points in the stories “told” by their subjects. While the interviewers concede that their presence affected the interviewees (xxvi), the presentation of the individual stories erases such a concession. Every story follows a similar trajectory, starting with a person’s origins in the rural South, the poverty and hardship that led that person to Chicago, the continuing hardship upon arrival, and the eventual help provided by JOIN. The result is thus a narrative more concerned with addressing a middle-class readership that perpetuates a view of rural subjects as regressed, with the caveat that the urban mainstream could help them join “modern” society. The agency of these WWPC rural-to-urban migrants

promised in the introduction is ultimately lost to this cause.

The authors make clear that these residents should be helped because they have the potential to evolve towards “modern” society; they can be read as the exceptions to, rather than the rule of, poor rural whites generally. The people highlighted in *Uptown* are those affiliated with the JOIN organization in some way and are the “*potential* of a neighborhood, a community, a people,” the “volatile and extraordinary” among the otherwise directionless (xxiv-xxv; emphasis in original). It is clear from the book that the rural poor white needs outside direction to better one’s community and one’s self, a point clearly exemplified in the story with which the authors choose to conclude their work, the story of Bobby Joe Wright. Through Wright, we are given the life of a child prostitute, a violent (if petty) criminal who came to *consciousness* through JOIN and Movement rhetoric. It is clear from this testimonial that the Movement had offered an outlet — that of a self-identified “radical” — for the otherwise self-destructive “traditional recourse of the poor white” as described (by the authors, not the subject — 207) in an earlier scenario. As we see in the following statement, Wright also operates as a justification for student organizations like JOIN and for the motivations of the Movement in general: “I don’t like to hear about community people versus ‘students.’ We shouldn’t have to use that word, we’re all community people,” in part because the students are “poor” like Wright, as they are living in similar conditions and fighting for the same causes (426-427). Through this one quote, the authors can justify their actions in places like *Uptown*: even residents — at least those with consciousness — recognize the assumed poverty of

these students, and as a result, they become one with the regressed rural-to-urban migrants whom they help. This acceptance, in turn, allows the students to remain oblivious to the class privilege that underpins their motivations, a privilege that informs their approach to these residents throughout the book; these residents are only granted agency insofar as they are willing to adopt the consciousness of the Movement, of a better class. As a result, this “community” is one that mimics the hierarchies of the mainstream, where the WWPC rural subject remains the negative counterexample to true progress and development.

Although well-intentioned, *Uptown* demonstrates the continuity between the mainstream view towards WWPC rurality and the unsaid assumptions of 1960s countercultural movements, perhaps explaining in part the rejection of the progressive ideals of these movements by some WWPC rural subjects. If we look at the reaction of WWPC rural subjects to the student/countercultural movements of the late 1960s, we see that the backlash directed at these movements may be rooted in a feeling of cultural devaluation and not solely in a conservative mindset. Through autobiographies that portray upwardly mobile subjects from working-class rural places, we can draw out the link between the rural origins of these subjects and the dissonance they experienced upon entrance into higher education and/or the countercultural movements of the late 1960s.

The conflict felt by WCPC rural students stemmed in part from their sense of

invisibility within these middle-classless institutions<sup>55</sup>. Literary critic Fred Pfeil's account of his experience in higher education in the late 1960s speaks to the ignorance of both higher education and the counterculture towards working-class rural voices and the bitterness that the latter may have felt as a result. Pfeil is aware of the differences between these two worlds as he describes the "white working-class character" of his small mill town as:

defining both itself and the world as a place where you worked hard for little, took it gratefully and kept your mouth shut; where you voted Republican because they were right, and expected nothing for it; where in fact you expected nothing for anything, especially nothing in the end.  
(“Outside” 241)

Pfeil's description outlines this postwar town as an antithesis to the larger rhetoric of the time: resigned skepticism towards the promise of upward mobility; no expectation of personal security (keeping “your mouth shut” so as to not have it taken away, voting “Republican,” i.e. voting conservatively, to protect what you have); and above all, no hope for a better future (“nothing in the end”). The contrast could not be any greater between this rural environment and the expectations of the sub/urban middle-classless

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<sup>55</sup>Although a bit tangential to the ongoing discussion, it is worth noting bell hooks' memory of her own experience as a student in the late 1960s/early 1970s: “Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning, only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality” (36-37)

children who continued into higher education and joined the ranks of the counterculture. While these students actively protested for what they saw as a better world, the townspeople “kept their mouth shut.” As the students moved forward towards this better world, they turned their backs on what they perceived as an ignorant, backward population.

Pfeil experiences acutely the difference between his working-class rural background and that of his middle- and upper-class classmates as he enters college. Pfeil understands this difference in class terms, commenting that his “student radical” peers were able to protest due in part to people like him who “scraped their Marlboro butts, their uneaten eggs and toast into [his] buscart.” As he continues to describe his cultural dislocation, we can see this outsider position detailed in regards to both his working-class *and* rural background. Pfeil recounts his hard work in order to acquire the cultural knowledge of his peers and avoid being, in his words, “cut down...recognized as the dumbo cultural ape from a hick town that you really are” (242). Pfeil outlines the specific traits of a legitimate “culture”: the classics of “Western Civ” class, as well as the countercultural doctrines emerging in its tradition, demand a specific mindset that those lacking culture/consciousness (like “cultural apes” from hick towns) cannot have as they do not have access to these resources. As we have already seen in various discourses of the postwar period and beyond, even if they did have access, these WWPC rural subjects may be likely portrayed as below their “civilized” counterparts in these same doctrines.

Pfeil’s brief adoption of the counterculture speaks directly to the counterculture’s

rejection of those perspectives outside its middle-classless sub/urban foundations, and the inevitable tension between his working-class rurality and the doctrines of his fellow students. Pfeil states that the “counterculture became my official scripture, its precepts and prophecies serving to cover my redneck American Legion anger without ever quite replacing it” (243). Pfeil is forced into erasing his background because the counterculture (like higher education) demanded he do so. However, Pfeil’s “trip on a U.S. Navy destroyer to Southeast Asia” in the 1970s (i.e. Vietnam) exhibits a return of his working-class rural background by serving in war, quite possibly a more comfortable expression of his roots than his flirtation with the counterculture.

While one can infer through Pfeil’s account that there was little room for working-class rural voices to emerge within the liberatory politics of the period, Bobbie Ann Mason takes a different perspective, as we see in her statement, “The counterculture saved me” (150). Part of the reason that the counterculture “saved” Mason is due to the very rhetoric of choice that has been criticized by Hodgson and others mentioned above; for Mason, the rhetoric of “Go with the flow; be here now, do your own thing” allowed her to forget the middle-class (Northern) sub/urbanity that she had been seeking since she was a child in Kentucky (151). The informal uniform of the counterculture, “blue jeans, the garb of country people,” that was used by the middle-class students of the late 1960s/early 1970s to escape their sub/urban backgrounds also offered Mason a way to reconnect with her roots, it allowed her to “come back to [her]self” (151).

However, as we saw in Pfeil’s own account, the freedom that Mason had within the

counterculture was also marked by conflict. Just prior to her praises of the counterculture, Mason relays a couple of instances detailing her rejection by her Northeastern “friends” that “threw [her] into despair” at the time (149). The most telling of these stories occurs while Mason was in graduate school, where Mason “became involved” with an “artist” who “was too sensitive for the Army to make use of him” (147). This description illustrates Mason’s difference from her middle-class sub/urban boyfriend, Larry, who had seemingly evaded the Vietnam draft, and prepares us for the tension that occurs between them as a result of her WWCP rural background. Her wish to disavow a Southern background that became synonymous with “ugly scenes of beatings and murders,” and her fear of being equated with “hillbillies eating Moon Pies and swigging moonshine on the way home from a lynching” (146) are rooted in a sense of shame and fear of being considered inferior by Larry and her other countercultural friends.

Mason’s relationship with Larry illustrates the uneven power relationship between WWCP rural subjects and the middle-classless sub/urban counterculture that saw rurality as both backwards and irrelevant. Her striking critique emerges when Mason describes an occasion in which she showed Larry the marriage quilt made by her grandmother:

I wanted to impress Larry because he seemed to like things that were lovingly crafted. (He threw pots on a wheel). But instead he was taken aback by this simple creation with its five-point stars, pieced from the print dresses I had worn as a child.

What Larry said was “Ugly!”

“My grandmother made it,” I said in a faltering voice. Of course I could see, now that he mentioned it, how crude and primitive it was. Granny hadn’t been to art school. I had so much to learn. (147)

Mason’s depiction of this moment is marked by her awareness of the cultural significance of this particular exchange. A product of his middle-class privilege, Larry has nothing but disdain for what he considers an un-cultured and sentimental object. For him, the marriage quilt, with its “primitive” design, could never be considered art but merely a tool, nothing more than a blanket. For Mason, this episode captures both the devaluation of her “primitive” background by the counterculture and her desire to embrace her WWCP rural background as a source of strength. The potential of the counterculture to “save” her is deeply fraught: it releases her from her desire to emulate the middle-class sub/urban notions of propriety so important to her in her youth, yet it undermines her by devaluing her rural origins.

Mason’s portrayal of this contradiction helps explain the reluctance of many WWCP rural subjects to embrace the counterculture. Immediately following Mason’s declaration that the counterculture saved her, she writes of her father’s reaction to the riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago:

Daddy cheered for the police, who were handcuffing the demonstrators, mostly students, and tossing them into paddy wagons. “There’s another one dragged off,” he said, as if he were keeping score.



“You don’t really mean that,” I said. “*I’m* a student. That could be me.”

But I didn’t quarrel with him. [...]. The world seemed to be separating into two camps, and somehow I belonged to both. (154)

Mason here suggests that her father’s opposition may have stemmed from an alienation from the demonstrators on-screen, an alienation that she also feels as her own: she wished to be a liberated member of the Movement, yet this Movement did not want her WWPC rural voice. Although Mason clearly identifies with the students and their cause, she also partly aligns with her father’s displeasure, and in giving voice to him in these terms allows for a critique on the counterculture to emerge: the scene suggests that something more than ignorance makes her father object so strongly to the middle-classless sub/urban counterculture. We are invited to infer from her own experiences with the counterculture as well as her father’s reactions that there were legitimate objections to the counterculture, including the Movement’s devaluation and rejection of WWPC rural subjects.

Pfeil’s and Mason’s autobiographies are testaments to the antagonism experienced by WWPC rural subjects who, in their upward mobility, came into a counterculture that did not accept them. However, it is also clear from both revisionist and postwar scholarship that the divide was not as stark as dominant discourse represented it. Hodgson points out that while the fashion of the time was to represent America in binary terms, in reality the outlook of Americans regarding the changing 1960s could not be simply attributed to one’s geographical, classed or raced position. As Hodgson points out

in his examination of opinion polls, it was not possible to clearly distinguish between those who held liberal or conservative opinions based solely on one's stereotyped subject position ("War, Peace and Two Americas"). This point is upheld by postwar sociologists like Lillian Rubin who questioned, for example, whether the conservative backlash associated with the working-class in dominant discourse was actually a widespread occurrence. In her postwar study of working-class suburbanites in the late 1960s, we see her subjects exhibit a more nuanced view towards the changes in American culture instead of the ignorance so often associated with their subject position (see *Worlds of Pain*).

Even in regards to the Vietnam War, perhaps the most iconic point of contention between the counterculture and the lower-classes, historian Howard Zinn reports that the less formally educated and working-class were more likely to be against sending troops overseas from as early as 1964, contradicting the dominant discourses that attested otherwise: "It seems that the media, themselves controlled by higher-education, higher-income people who were more aggressive in foreign policy, tended to give the erroneous impression that working-class people were superpatriots for the war" (in Sevy 173). According to Zinn, the reality was that even "poor blacks and whites in the South" (read: rural) felt Vietnam was a useless war impacting the poorest sectors of the country (173), a point that was often overlooked by a counterculture that in turn accused this very group of being ignorant, fascist pigs. This irony is deepened when we consider the statistics of who did and did not serve in the War: the working-class and working-poor served

predominately in Vietnam while the upper-classes had access to measures through which to evade the draft (see Holbfinger and Holmes; Baskir and Strauss in Horne for an analysis of these figures in Vietnam).

The fact that many in the lower-classes were fighting in a war they did not necessarily support escaped much countercultural and mainstream rhetoric, a point that is criticized by some of the members who aligned with this rhetoric during Vietnam. James Fallows recounts his own evasion of the draft and comments on the countercultural rhetoric that turned a blind eye towards the working-class “proles” who were lumped into the same category as all oppressors:

They had been the “pigs” holding down the black people in Mississippi, the children of the pigs were being sent off to die in Vietnam, and now “pigs” were clubbing our chosen people, the demonstrators, in Chicago. We hated the pigs, and let them know it, and it was no great wonder that they hated us in return. (in Sealy 222)

Here, Fallows’ critical eye illustrates some of the themes discussed thus far: an “us” versus “them” binary split along class lines, as well as the equation of the working-class and rural with ignorance (hence, the reference to racists in Mississippi). Fallows explicitly addresses the irony that those opposing the war using countercultural rhetoric not only escaped actual service but went on to sustain careers in the professional middle-class, whereas those who more or less accepted their fate either died or most likely continued to inhabit the lower rungs of the class ladder where they began (217).

The perceived cultural divide between “us” and “them” was literally written upon the bodies of those who served and those who did not, and became a striking example of how a dominant discourse can impact the actual composition of a society and culture. From the beginning of the postwar to its countercultural conclusion, the mainstream hierarchies built around the middle-classless sub/urban were instrumental in how people saw themselves in relation to the progress and development of the period, but also in assigning who received what opportunities and who remained as outsiders. While WWPC rurality was not the only group to be cast off within these norms, its persistent presence throughout the dominant discourse of the postwar period and beyond was one of the more recognized.

#### **V. Conclusion: Rurality Disappears**

Despite this persistence, “rurality” was rarely seen beyond the role it played in the dominant discourse. The obsession with WWPC rural subjects and their role within postwar norms of progress and development seemed less necessary as these very norms were naturalized in American society. Thus, it is unsurprising that the proclamation of the death of rurality in dominant discourse occurred by the end of the postwar even as actual rural locations continued on.

In the dominant discourse of the postwar period, “progress” and “development” were portrayed as moving along a spatiotemporal and cultural trajectory towards the middle-classless sub/urban in contrast to a past-in-present rurality that also coincided with the lower-classes. As this chapter has demonstrated, WWPC rurality was considered “developed” by middle-classless sub/urban standards only when it lost its “rural” nature.

Any practical and cultural “progress” was attributed to urban influence alone, thus rendering “rurality” a space of irrelevance in and of itself. As a result, as regressed rurality was “fixed,” i.e. as it was seen to reflect the norms of the middle-classless sub/urban, dominant discourse represented it as a disappearing space.

As was pointed out in articles throughout the 1960s in *U.S. News & World Report* (“The Way”) and *Business Week* (“Surprises”), rural locations and small towns were losing population as compared to those locations defined sub/urban. But the interpretation of this loss within postwar dominant discourse mirrors the idealized/devalued dichotomy attached to understandings of rurality: the loss is seen as either a threat to the moral fabric of the U.S. or it is a step forward towards social and cultural progress. Thus, throughout the postwar period, the actual out-migration from the family farm and the small town was also viewed through a cultural lens. For example, modernization may have brought comfort to the farmer through things like electricity, indoor plumbing, even access to “modern” consumer attitudes. Yet, it was also modernization that increased the exodus off the farm by those farmers unwilling or unable to adapt to the increased mechanization of agriculture in this time period, a point exhibited in works from the 1950s like the aptly titled editorial “County Seats Languish as County Farm Population Succumbs to Machine Age” and in more personalized accounts like “How Long Can We Stay on the Farm?” both in *SEP*. This modern progress brought on the farmer’s demise, an irony captured in the *Times*’ “Winter on the Farm is Cozier, but —“ (D. Murphy) and mourned in *America*’s “Vanishing Farmers,” a disappearance that helped reinforce rurality as a place

securely in the past. In mourning the loss of the family farmer, these rural locations are discussed and quite often pictured in the past tense. This lens is one way to view pictorial essays foregrounding rural America throughout the postwar, for example, in *SEP*'s pastoral "The Face of America" series where photo essays foreground rural America, and *Life*'s "Spring's Old Sweet Challenge," a eulogy for the disappearing family farm.

Although representing "rurality," publications like these illustrate the failure of dominant discourse to engage with the real challenges faced by rural America, seeing the problems that arose due to the mechanization of farming, for example, as minor setbacks on the way towards "modern" society in both socioeconomic and cultural senses. As revisionist historian Jellison observes, "The disappearance of those small farms that could not compete in the postwar economy helped create the illusion that all farm families shared in the era's financial success and achieved the goal of farmhouse modernization" (152). From the earliest years of the postwar, for example, the reader is reassured by *Fortune*'s "The Farmer Goes to Town" (1947) that farming is changing: while mechanization and technology have improved the lot of the farmer, they have also forced many farmers to leave for more prosperous jobs in town ("The Farmer"). However, these first page statistics quickly blur into irrelevance as the article details the modern amenities that farmers have access to and their relative comfort due to increased production capabilities and income. The message of the article is that while progress has created a disparity between the small farmer and the productive farmer, the disappearance of the family farm and the out-migration of its members should not be a cause of concern;

this mobility is not a sign of the Depression, but of prosperity.

The out-migration outlined on the article's first page is used to exemplify rural life in the present, a point driven home as *Fortune* discusses the appearance of abandoned farms. Although the reader has already been told that, statistically, fewer and fewer people are able to stay down on the farm, the author claims that, appearances notwithstanding, farmers are doing better than ever before:

After driving on Highway 50 through Kansas to Denver, my sister from Louisville asked me why the boarded-up, deserted farmhouses along the road in western Kansas. Was it a hangover from Dust Bowl days? I couldn't tell her then. I can now. It's not poverty; it's prosperity. Farmers there don't have to live on their land any more. They can live in town and hire men with huge machines to plant and harvest the wheat and summer-fallow the land. Everything requiring chores and constant attendance — cattle, chickens, horses, gardens — is gone. (200)

In this formulation, abandoned farmhouses are not signs of rural problems but rather mainstream progress, little factories running themselves. From the mainstream perspective, greater production and efficiency are signs of unquestionable progress, the empty landscape a sign that rurality has evolved beyond its origins.

As the postwar moved into the 60s, discussion of the disappearing family farmer appeared to give way to a focus on the fortunes of the small town. The disappearance of the small town was linked to the agricultural out-migration as farmers leaving the land

took with them the money they used to spend in small town stores, and those who did stay were taking their business to more accessible sub/urban centers for cheaper and more varied products. This predicament of small towns across the country was considered in the national imagination throughout the 1960s: from a *Newsweek* article on an Iowa town hard hit by agricultural decline (Hanscom) to *SR*'s article on another Iowa town in decline, exemplary of small town America (Schrag). Some of these articles refer to the actual factors behind the decaying small town dependent on agriculture for its well-being, such as a 1963 *Time* article entitled "The Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" which argues that, "The emergence of large-scale, highly mechanized farming has decreased the number of farmers. And the ever expanding network of highways has made it possible for farm goods in trucks and farmers in automobiles to bypass formerly flourishing small towns." "Progress" has depleted the small town in question on two fronts: literally, as both mechanization and highways make it easy to avoid the small town, and metaphorically, as the town is "left behind" those markers of postwar progress/modernity like the highway that bypasses it. Boarded up towns come to represent the past-in-present left behind by Progress.

Even those small towns not directly associated with agriculture were mourned by the nation as inevitable casualties of evolutionary progress. In these discourses, the small town was but one step towards the more populous sub/urban centers that typified progress and, as such, arrested on a spatiotemporal trajectory towards the sub/urban postwar moment. As seen in *U.S. News*, this arrested development was at times viewed



favorably throughout the 1960s (see “Pleasant Places”, 1965; “Not all”, 1967; “Where it’s Still”, 1968). Other articles in publications like the *Saturday Review* took a more ambivalent approach, where the disappearance of the small town was mourned even as its cultural place was still associated with regression. In David Butwin’s “Portrait of a Declining Town,” we are shown the coastal town of Eastport, Maine having little social or economic opportunity to buoy its existence, a stagnation captured by its physical location: “Even on the map, Eastport looks like a dead-end town” (17). In this depiction, while the mainstream has moved beyond small towns like Eastport a hundred years earlier (17), the town still clings to the last vestiges of its former glory: weathered buildings, nine churches (19), and an establishment wary of outsiders. Nor is Eastport alone; as Butwin shows the reader, this town is a microcosm of all declining small towns, from Colorado to Kentucky and Massachusetts (17). Butwin may have sympathy for the residents of Eastport — as he ends his article, he wishes the town “would still be there when [he] returned” (42) — but it is also clear that the economic and cultural viability of this small town is limited to a past that the mainstream has already moved beyond.

Two years later in the same publication, Peter Schrag analyzes Mason City, Iowa in his article “Is Main Street Still There?” For Schrag, the small town might literally still be there, but it has been profoundly transformed and *urbanized*. This urban influence may help explain for the reader the existence of radical sentiment from students and townspeople alike — see the Vietnam protest (23-24) — within such a rural place. The small town has become merely a microcosm of the urban, it no longer exists as its own

entity and can only be returned to through nostalgia:

And yet, when Ozark 974 rises from the runway, off to Dubuque, over the corn and beets, over the Mississippi, off to Chicago, you know that you can't go home again, that the world is elsewhere, and that every moment the distances grow not smaller but greater. Main Street is far away.

(Schrag 25)

Schrag's use of geography to orient his reader is telling as to why the small town has disappeared. As with earlier postwar writers, Schrag conflates geographic distance with temporal distance — “every moment the distances grow not smaller but greater” — to represent rurality as the *not* urban, a regressed place antithetical to urbanity (here exemplified by Chicago) as the progenitor of progress. Schrag's unsaid assumptions underlying geography and time are still left unquestioned: if Main Street is indeed culturally on par with the sub/urban mainstream, it is insofar as it has left its rural origins.

In the mourning of the family farm — primarily in the early postwar — and the small town — primarily towards the 1960s — there is a nostalgic longing and a related sigh of relief. This mourning casts the *not* urban — be it farm, countryside or small town — as something belonging to the past: quaint but backwards, safe but ignorant. The death knell was sounded for these geographically othered locations, and their inhabitants became more culturally removed in the social imagination. By the 1980s, when considered at all, these places were seen as increasingly regressed even as the country became more interconnected.

### **Chapter 3: Literary Representations of WWCP Rurality**

"And I think that small towns, certainly ... my fictional small towns, have become places where people are hanging on to hope and hanging onto pride, and hanging on by a thread that seems to me now at least much more slender than it was when my father's generation came home at the end of the Second World War." — Richard Russo ("Richard Russo's," *NPR* interview)

Although in the dominant imagination rurality was pretty much written off by the end of the postwar, its specter has continued to haunt America. This preoccupation with rurality has taken many forms: expressed anxiety, well into the 1980s, about the disappearing family farm and small town; scholarship in rural sociology examining the real conditions of rural spaces; representations of the degrading influence of WWCP rurality within U.S. politics, society and culture through the figures of "white trash," the violent hillbilly, and the politically regressed redneck; a concern with "brain drain" as rural people submit to the allure of the city and leave. These ongoing manifestations of the perceptions of rurality in the post-1980s U.S. will be discussed by way of conclusion in the last chapter, further extending the scope of the discussion pursued in the present chapter and Chapter Four which examine, respectively, literary works and filmic adaptations of these works, all produced after 1980 but set in the post-World War II period. All of these works are concerned with WWCP rurality and its relationship to postwar and present mainstream society. These literary and filmic representations of WWCP rurality are particularly noteworthy when we consider that all of the novels discussed in the present chapter and the filmic adaptations based on them which are the

focus of the next were written by women and men familiar with postwar and present WCPC rural spaces. These novels and films offer ways to interrogate both the postwar period and our present context.

I begin this discussion with a focus on the following eight novels: *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison; *Affliction* by Russell Banks; *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* by Peter Hedges; *In Country* by Bobbie Ann Mason; *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson; *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo; and *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley. In addition to the fact that all of these writers either grew up in or have intimate familiarity with WCPC rural spaces in the postwar period, these novels also share the following characteristics: each work introduces memory/nostalgia and the presence of the past in these rural locations; all touch on postwar conceptions of WCPC rurality using many of the tropes outlined in Chapter Two (i.e. suburbia; mobility; counterculture; etc.); all were adapted into films (the focus of the next chapter). Furthermore, all of these novels offer a WCPC rural counter-narrative directed at both the postwar and present. My focus on this counter-narrative will carry into the last chapter, laying the groundwork for considering the continuing presence of such a counter-narrative in post-1980s America.

The counter-narrative that can be found to varying degrees across these works is reflective of the “discordant voices” which Angenot finds literature to be capable of asserting (“What Can Literature” 223-224). However, as I will demonstrate, these voices may be overlooked by readers and critics because of the dominant view on WCPC rurality that also carries into literary studies. In some ways, these novels may be seen as complicit with such a view: as some of the interpretations of these novels demonstrate (I

will comment on them throughout the chapter), it is possible for a reader to overlook this counter-narrative, perhaps due to the non-didactic nature of these novels. The complexity of these novels must be brought out; thus, in considering these novels, it is crucial to examine the ways in which they represent both the dominant discourses on rurality and the resisting voices of fictional WWCP rural subjects, in both the postwar and present. Despite the specific subject matter of each novel, all eight novels touch upon similar thematic foci as they negotiate the dual articulation of dominant and counter-narratives. Thus, rather than discussing each novel separately, my analysis in this chapter is organized around selected prominent themes. It should be expected that any given novel would involve more than one theme and that I may not discuss every novel within every theme. As an entry point into this analysis, in the first section entitled “Postwar in Present,” I discuss the different ways these novels approach the interrelationship of the postwar and present and their use of “memory” as a device to explore the location of WWCP rurality in both the postwar and present. This section requires the most sustained analysis as it also lays the groundwork for the subsequent sections: the novels’ representation of devaluation of rurality in the dominant discourse in the section entitled “Bad Locations”; the novels’ articulation of a critique of dominant conceptions of progress and development in the section entitled “Evolution of Progress and Development”; and the novels’ exploration of the conflicted responses to upward mobility in the final section entitled “College Education — here versus there.” Each section is further divided into smaller sub-sections to better attend to the complexities of the subject matter. Before turning to the analysis of the novels, I briefly introduce some key concepts from narrative theory that inform my engagement with narrative prose, and

comment on the ways in which WWPC rurality has figured in the field of literary studies.

Narrative memory, a term I am using to refer to the representation of memory in fiction, may be seen as a device for eliciting the active participation of the reader, akin to what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes as a strategy of “delay”: “Delay consists in not imparting information where it is ‘due’ in the text, but leaving it for a later stage” (126), and as such “turns the reading process into a guessing game, an attempt to solve a riddle or a puzzle” (127). In some of the cases discussed in the present chapter, narrated memory is quite literally a delay in a “local” sense, where only a “portion or an aspect of the text” is directly impacted (128), for example through a singular memory act by a particular character or the evocation of the past by an omniscient narrator. However, some of these novels employ a more “global” type of delay, where a “major portion of the text or its entirety” (128) is affected by a memory act, for example in works where the entire narrative is framed by recollection. Regardless of the type or frequency of such delays, through narrative memory the novels draw the reader closer to characters whom s/he might have otherwise dismissed as simple or unsympathetic, and as a result potentially invite a more critical approach towards the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality that is represented in these novels.

As touched upon in the Introduction, one obvious way that WWPC rurality is dismissed in literary studies is through its classed position. Some literary theorists have touched on the issue of class and work in literary works, from revisionary perspectives on

the postwar<sup>56</sup> to contemporary literature examined in Laura Hapke's *Labor's Text*. Hapke studies the ways in which exceptionalist rhetoric in the U.S. — such as that largely associated with Henry Luce and the dawning of the postwar period (see his canonic article, “The American Century”) — continues into the 21st century within both fictional portrayals and literary studies of the worker: “Despite this nation's history of sharp labor-capital antagonisms, it remains Americans' ideology of 'exceptionalism' that class boundaries seem fluid in a country of such unlimited economic possibility” (5). In other words, exceptionalism rests on notions of meritocracy and upward mobility, according to which failure to achieve what society values is attributed to personal inadequacy. Literary scholars who adhere to such ideology may, consciously or not, dismiss portrayals of the hardships associated with working-class life as an inevitable result of personal inaptitude and thus forego any potential critique such portrayals may offer (for some examples, see Hapke’s chapter “Working-Class Twilight”). Recovering a viable counter-narrative in the novels discussed here (and the film adaptations in the next chapter) is one of the primary objectives of this dissertation.

Another relevant assumption of exceptionalist rhetoric in the postwar, in addition to those concerning class and mobility as demonstrated by Hapke, is that which connects the “progress of man” (Luce 28) to geographical location, whereby modernity becomes increasingly equated with the sub/urban. As we saw in the last chapter in regards to both journalism and the social sciences, rurality — especially when tied to the working-class

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<sup>56</sup>Concerning work and class issues in the postwar see Hoborek, and for a reading of class and suburbia see Jurca. For a general overview of class analysis and literary theorists in the postwar, see Schaub.

and working poor — was depicted as a regressed spatiotemporal limit case demarcating the boundaries of civility. Through their attention to geography, many of these publications took up Luce’s call for the “blood of purposes and enterprise and high resolve” to flow across the country, “from Maine to California” (28), spelling out the desirable attributes associated with such progress. WWPC rurality was clearly not seen as the source of such ideals as made abundantly clear through the early 1960s, for example in sociologist William Dobriner’s endorsement of suburban developments or in scathing portrayals of “barbaric” rural-to-urban migrants in the reporting of journalists like Gerald Johnson in his piece from 1960 entitled “Denizens of the Rural Slums.”

Thus, Hapke’s observation that American society still insists upon a doctrine of classlessness at the dawn of the 21st century can be expanded to include the disparaging attitudes towards rurality that continue into the present, a point she hints at in her discussion of literary “white trash” (312-313). My contention here is that the attitude towards the geographic component of exceptionalism — equating the “progress of man” with sub/urban geographic locations, or at least anything deemed *not* rural — also continues into the present. As postwar society saw rural people (again, particularly those of the working-class and working poor) as devolved and unenlightened beings, so we too continue this trend, a point I will illustrate more thoroughly in Chapter Four in regards to the film adaptations of the novels analyzed in the present chapter, where critics of these films adhere to a dominant discourse on rurality in order to come to grips with the filmic representation of WWPC rurality in both postwar and present settings. As will be discussed in the present chapter, this dominant perception colors reception of the novels, perhaps in part due to the readers’ lack of familiarity with WWPC rural spaces, a



condition exacerbated by the negative representations of rurality in which it is “valued only as a touchstone for the cultured, urban, therefore, civilized human” historically and in the present (Conlogue 6)<sup>57</sup>. For Conlogue, these negative representations can be found as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the “farm novel” (19-20) and its reception, although his analysis of the family farm genre also brings out a potential counter-narrative the novels offer to the dominant norms of progress and development.

This type of rural counter-narrative has not been limited to the farm novel; in the works discussed here, a WWPC rural counter-narrative emerges in novels focusing on the family farm as well as novels set in industry-less small town locales. The reclamation of a WWPC rural voice involves an interrogation of the dominant unsaid assumptions about class and geographic location. Moreover, a shared counter-narrative emerges from these literary works which were published over a period of twenty years, are diverse in subject matter and portray different regional experiences: the West (Idaho) portrayed in Robinson’s *Housekeeping*; the Midwest (Iowa) portrayed in Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* and Hedges’ *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?*; the South (South Carolina and Kentucky) as we see in Allison’ *Bastard out of Carolina* and Mason’s *In Country*; and the Northeast (New York and New England) as represented in Banks’ *Affliction* and Russo’s *Nobody’s Fool* and *Empire Falls*. It is interesting to note that there still exist many commonalities despite these regional differences, based in part on the classed and geographic position that the characters share. The unique sense of place found within each novel contributes

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<sup>57</sup>Duayne Carr analyzes this point in relation to the South in his book on the redneck stereotype in the dawn of the 21st century literature.

to a counter-narrative that is capable of critiquing the devaluation associated with WWCP rural places more generally.

The analysis of the literary works in the present chapter seeks to explore the counter-narrative they offer in relation to the dominant discourses on WWCP rurality in both the postwar and post-1980s, using the fictional intermixing of postwar and present as an access point through which to do so. This intermixing of postwar and present in each of these novels is narratively accomplished through both overt and covert “ulterior narration,” a concept narratologist Rimmon-Kenan uses to describe the portrayal of events after they have happened (90). Three modalities of ulterior narration can be found in the novels discussed here: 1. the postwar is the de facto setting of the novel, as relayed through a narrator who has directly experienced the events recounted; the narrator is both “intradiegetic” (a character in her/his story) and “homodiegetic” (a participant in the story told) (95-96); 2. the postwar and present are overtly interwoven throughout the novel by an omniscient narrator who is both “extradiegetic” (outside the events recounted) and “heterodiegetic” (not involved in the story) (96), and/or by the intradiegetic-homodiegetic narration of one of the characters; and 3. the homodiegetic narration, whether extra- or intradiegetic, makes the postwar covertly palpable within the present action. In the next section, my sustained discussion of these different narrative modalities and uses of memory will begin to demonstrate the articulation of WWCP rural counter-narrative and its relationship to a larger dominant discourse. This discussion thus lays the groundwork, in subsequent sections, for a more thorough analysis of the expression of this counter-narrative in relation to specific topoi associated with progress and development in the postwar and present, such as the valuation of geographic location,

housing, roads and the dislocation of upwardly mobile WWCP rural characters.

## **I. Postwar in Present**

In the next few sub-sections, it will become clear that the use of ulterior narrative devices in these novels become the most forceful tool in asserting a WWCP rural counter-narrative: it creates a sense of continuity between actions in the past and their effects in the present and, relatedly, a sense of place associated with these WWCP rural locations. In the analysis that follows I explore the ways in which temporal interweaving in these novels allows for the articulation of a critique of postwar notions of progress, development and modernity that also connects these postwar attitudes to the present predicament of rurality in America. My exploration of this critique and the range of manifestations of a WWCP rural counter-narrative will rely on a close examination of the novels as well as their critical reception.

### i. Postwar setting

The first two novels I would like to discuss in regards to temporal interweaving — *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson and *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison — employ “analepses” or flashbacks (Rimmon-Kenan 47) to depict traumatic childhoods in the postwar period. These analepses are homodiegetic in the sense that they emerge from the subjects who name themselves (both, incidentally, named Ruth) in the first line of each novel: in *Bastard*, “I’ve been called Bone all my life, but my name’s Ruth Anne” (1) and in *Housekeeping*, simply “My name is Ruth” (3). The analepses that structure these novels provide background information about these individual characters and their personal traumas, but also become heterodiegetic in that they provide information about

the WCPC rural locales of the main characters. Interestingly, while this rural context has been a focal point for critical discussion of *Bastard*, it has been largely overlooked in the critical reception of *Housekeeping*.

A number of factors could account for this difference in reception. While critics have approached both books from a feminist perspective, Allison's has been most directly linked to the white trash figure in U.S. society, perhaps due to her widely publicized childhood. For critics like Carolyn E. Megan, "Allison's own struggle to identify, name, understand, and move beyond the poverty she experienced as a child" is crucial to understanding her work (in Perry and Weaks; see also Tokarczyk 24). This attempt to "move beyond the poverty" of her childhood is understood by both Allison and her critics to involve an interrogation of the physical and sexual abuse she experienced as a child but also the broader devaluation of her "white trash" position within American society. These elements are linked, in turn, to Allison's faith in the power of writing: "I can tell you now that I became a writer in order to change the world" (Allison, "Between Fiction" 235; see also Megan in Perry and Weaks). Further, the novel repeatedly draws attention to the fact that Bone's family is considered white trash within their own locale, thus inviting the reader to consider the family's devalued position within U.S. society more generally. The location of this particular family in the South also makes their poor white rurality more visible to the reader than the less recognizable WCPC locale of *Housekeeping's* rural Idaho. *Housekeeping's* location in Idaho firmly places it in the West that has been associated, as Jean Beck notes, with the core of American identity: "the frontier myth has long been used as a paradigm for the formation of an 'American' identity..." (2). Representations of poor white rurality in novels located in regions

associated with a normative “America” may be less likely to be noted than those set in the rural South, which continues to hold regressed connotations to this day.

This difference in the critical reception notwithstanding, both novels are centered around traumatic childhoods lived out in relation to WWCP rурality and register rurality’s fraught place within the postwar imaginary. The main focalizer of *Bastard* is a young girl, Bone, whose immediate and extended family occupies the lowest rung of their town’s socioeconomic ladder. The most oppressive aspect of her life, however, is her mother’s second husband Daddy Glen, whose own failings in life manifest in the physical and sexual abuse he inflicts on Bone. Bone’s narrative conveys both the pain she experiences on the familial and social level and a sense of strength she is able to draw from her “white trash” background. *Housekeeping*, on the other hand, does not directly evoke the devalued position of Fingerbone, the rural Idahoan town where the young protagonist Ruth is raised by her aunt Sylvie after her mother’s suicide. Instead, the reader must gather this elusive information through Ruth’s own struggle with the middle-classless normative structure in relation to which both the town and her sister Lucille try to find their place. Through Sylvie, Ruth discovers the power in foregoing such norms, and while her WWCP rural experience may not be directly evoked in this reclamation of self, it is crucial that its own failings allow Ruth to imagine herself outside the middle-classless ideal of the time. Despite these differences, both novels illustrate the uses of personal memory in helping make sense of one’s past and gain insight into how this past continues to impact the present. Further, the novels suggest that representations of memory can have social implications for those remembering as well as those bearing witness to that remembrance.

It is unnecessary to elaborate on what many critics have already pointed out in regards to *Bastard out of Carolina*: the personal trauma and memory of Bone can be read as a critique of the postwar (and present) attitude to WWPC rurality or “white trash” (see Bouson; Park; G. Harkins; and Harad). To further support such a reading, some critics point to the semi-autobiographical nature of *Bastard* evident, for example, from Allison's own recollections of shame growing up amongst the working poor (see particularly Bouson; Park chapter 2; G. Harkins; Tokarczyk chapter 3). In addition, and as already mentioned, the evocation of the term “white trash” from the very beginning of the novel (Allison, *Bastard* 3) invites the reader to see the personal saga of the Boatwrights in the context of mainstream conceptions of this subject position. What I aim to draw out in my analysis of the novel here, to be continued in other sections of this chapter, is the emergence of a WWPC rural counter-narrative that is an extension of such a critique and that Allison's novel shares with the other novels discussed in this chapter.

A number of the scenes in Allison's novel explicitly connect Bone's family situation to her larger WWPC rural location. One such instance occurs after she and her cousin Grey rob the local Woolworth's, an act of retribution rooted in a desire to attain dignity through material possessions, as suggested by Bone's experience immediately upon exiting the store. As Bone and Grey run from Woolworth's with their bounty, she notices a “little group of gray-faced men just down from the Texaco station” and has a strong visceral reaction: “all of them looking so much like my uncles it made my throat hurt” (226). The material and cultural deprivation experienced by Bone and her family is connected to the community at large through Bone's affect (“my throat hurt”) upon seeing the nameless group of men. When she tells the men that the Woolworth's is open

for looting, she experiences vicarious happiness at the prospect of the men having this opportunity to provide for their families: “That was what made me happy, the sound of those boots running down the street and the thought of what all those men would carry home” (226). By providing the strangers with this opportunity, Bone is extending by proxy the promise of justice for her uncles, and in particular her Uncle Earle whom she visits in the county jail at the beginning of this same chapter (215-217). Although deprivation is felt personally, its retribution, in this case, becomes a social act.

The manner in which the novel presents Bone's personal experience invites us to reflect on the experience of her larger community and critique the mainstream norms which view families like Bone's as deficient and regressed. The contempt thrown at the Boatwrights by those of the professional middle-class, as represented by Glenn's father and brothers, has created a “hunger” (102) in Bone that is only in part tied to material possessions. It has become a hunger for redeeming one's own self-worth despite such normalizing attitudes, a hunger that by extension accounts for the actions of her Uncles and those “nameless” people in the wider community. In the scene just discussed, Bone's delight at having access to the cheap consumer goods of Woolworth's ultimately has little to do with the goods themselves, and is more about gaining a sense of power by claiming access where access had been denied. Then, instead of defaulting to anger and bitterness at being denied, as does Daddy Glenn, Bone returns to her WWCP rural origins and redefines herself. Bone recognizes that the “things” of middle-classless consumerism that she once longed for are nothing more than appearances that have been lent an arbitrary exchange value; she questions: “What was there here that I could use?” (224). For Bone, these “tawdry and useless” items pale in comparison to the “things” of her Aunt

Raylene's, the canned fruits and vegetables grown and preserved by her family that Bone considers “worth something” (224-225). Bone’s judgment, thus, is both a direct critique of mainstream middle-classless consumption and a vindication of the WWCP rurality that the mainstream so categorically devalues.

Through Bone's focalization, critique and counter-narrative extend to two of the key markers of civility in the postwar period: the suburban ideal and “proper” mobility. The mobility of Bone's immediate family can best be described as listless, motivated by their grueling poverty: “Moving had no season, was all seasons, crossed time like a train with no schedule” (64-65). An outsider may view Bone's recollection as a testament to the negative mobility of WWCP rurality, a counterexample to the “scheduled” upward mobility of the middle-classless towards the suburbs. However, as Bone points out, in this small town there were few options for upward mobility: “What was I going to do in five years? Work in the textile mill? Join Mama at the diner? It all looked bleak to me. No wonder people got crazy as they grew up” (178). Bone gives voice to those people who cannot access mainstream prosperity; further, she does not attribute this lack of access to the personal inability to “develop” or “progress.” These people still “grew up,” but they “got crazy” through circumstance.

It is clear that Bone's immediate family desired to be part of the mainstream in their attempt to buy “brand-new houses clean and bought on time we didn't have” (64). Instead, Daddy Glen sought out more affordable knockoffs in an attempt at respectability. These houses are clearly an attempt at the middle-classless suburban ideal unreachable by the working poor of the postwar period. Instead of the ranch house, garage and piece of lawn, Bone's houses were unforgiving pieces of land paling even next to a Levittown (see



79 for a description). What is noteworthy about these failed attempts at middle-classness is Bone's turning away from the “jalousie windows, carports and garbage disposals that never worked” and towards the “big old rickety houses” of her Aunt Alma (79). Bone turns away not just from her stepfather's abuse that is rooted in his frustration at the failure to attain the ideals associated with middle-class domesticity, but also from the middle-class ideal itself which her family so hopelessly fails to achieve. Bone recognizes that this failure has contributed to Glenn's unwarranted abusive behavior: “Our lack of faith made him the man he was, made him go out to work unable to avoid getting in a fight, made him sarcastic to his bosses and nasty to the shop owners he was supposed to be persuading to take his accounts” (81). Bone feels that the sphere of love and comfort she seeks is not to be found in the failed attempts at middle-classness and its manifestations in Daddy Glenn's violence, but within her white trash background.

While Allison's writing is set specifically in the South, using highly recognizable “Southern” white trash characters, her representation of WWPC rural spaces in the south could be seen as speaking to experiences of rurality throughout the U.S.<sup>58</sup>. *Housekeeping*, too, joins the personal recollections of a traumatic childhood to its larger WWPC community and national conceptions of this community. As mentioned earlier, this connection has been largely overlooked in the critical reception of the novel. Critics

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<sup>58</sup>See the description of Allison as the “Roseanne of literature” in an article discussing her work. This title obviously references the Midwestern-set popular TV show of the 1990s, *Roseanne* (itself seen as rooted in the “white trash” background of comedian Roseanne Barr) (Jetter).

seem content to draw on feminist criticism (see Guitierrez-Jones; Geyh; Galehouse; Smyth), focus on issues such as gender and the pastoral (Aldrich; Florby; Kirkby) or the limning of radical change by the white privilege of the characters (Beck chapter 2). Other critics see Robinson's novel as an insular narrative with little political import (Thomas Schaub, "Lingering Hopes" 317). Because Robinson's novel is focalized through the "consciousness" of one protagonist, Schaub finds little social transformation within the narrative: "Admittedly, [Robinson's] story produces the effect of revelation, but it cannot be 'true' in the sense that her story will set us free. Instead, as I have been suggesting, it may confirm us in our nostalgia" (319).

In this reading, Schaub maintains that *Housekeeping* has no political import, that it in fact universalizes one individual perspective at the expense of social context. Such an interpretation overlooks Ruth's family and Fingerbone's specific location within a WWCP rural space in the postwar U.S. Admittedly, Robinson does not make this task easy for the reader: unlike Allison, she never directly evokes the working lower-classed position of her protagonists, or the community in which they live. But this elusiveness may be in keeping with Robinson's approach to writing as detailed some years later in her essay "Imagination and Community": "as a writer, I continuously attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said — or said by me, at least" (Robinson, *When I was 20*). Admittedly, Robinson may very well be referring to working with the limitations of language itself — in struggling to express what she "cannot find words for" (20) — rather than actual subject matter. Yet, perhaps we can understand her statement that, "the unnamed is overwhelmingly present for me" (20) to mean that the unsaid of a particular language is not mutually exclusive of subject matter that also exists in its

margins. Thus, even as critics have not uncovered the significance of the postwar WWPC rural location of Fingerbone perhaps due to the elusiveness in which Robinson approaches it, it is possible to uncover this “unnamed” element of her work if we consider Robinson’s own working-class background as relevant to an understanding of her novels. In keeping with the idea that all of the works discussed here, while not autobiographical are tied to their authors’ experiences, I contend that an analysis that brings Robinson's own experience to bear on the novel would help draw out the marginal unsaid in *Housekeeping*.

Robinson grew up in rural Idaho as the daughter of a lumberjack (Voss 23), and she speaks to the sense of devaluation due to this cultural position in interviews (28) as well as in her autobiographical essay “My Western Roots.” Even as she states that her childhood was devoid of a “sense of social class” (“My Western” 166), Robinson, like Mason in her autobiographical exposition, references class through a discussion of regional difference and identity as tied to geographic location:

On learning that I am from Idaho, people have not infrequently asked,  
“Then how were you able to write a book?”

Once or twice, when I felt cynical or lazy, I have replied, “I went to Brown,” thinking that might appease them — only to be asked, “How did you manage to get into Brown?” One woman, on learning of my origins, said, “But there *has* to be talent in the family *somewhere*” (“My Western” 166; emphasis in original)

This scenario is clearly not taking place in the low-class New England of Banks or Russo, but in the upper-class elite institutions that have historically excluded all low-class

“backwaters,” West or Northeast alike. Robinson’s recollections here illustrate the manner in which, in the mainstream discourse, regional difference is used to obliquely reference hierarchies based on class as well as the division between “rural” (in this case, the West) and “urban” (here, the Northeast). Robinson’s observations invites us to seek out the marginal unsaid in her novel, and in my reading of *Housekeeping* I see the locale of Fingerbone as standing in contrast to the dominant postwar images of the middle-classless suburban pastoral. Robinson’s focus on a socially marginalized voice can thus be seen not as nostalgia but as a choice that has the effect of exposing the reality of social divisions and contesting dominant postwar images and representations of that reality.

As with Allison's narrative, Robinson’s *Housekeeping* intersperses personal memories with descriptions of a WCPC rural locale. One example of this interrelationship occurs when in the midst of recounting the reactions of her sister and Aunt Sylvie to a particularly heavy spring flood that hits the town, Ruth pauses to describe Fingerbone to an “implied reader” (Rimmon-Kenan 88) who is unfamiliar with the town: “Fingerbone was never an impressive town. It was chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere” (62). Through this “descriptive pause” (Rimmon-Kenan 53) in the action of the story, we see that the town, like Ruth, is aware of what it is not: it is not even on the level of human history. This awareness becomes a source of shame and fuels a desire to live out a respectable life “elsewhere.” We can infer that this desire becomes more acute in the face of the memory objects destroyed by the flood, as “fungus” and “mold” destroy “headstones,” “wedding dresses” and photographs (62-63). As these are destroyed, an erasure of the people of Fingerbone occurs, both to the outside world and to

themselves. It is at this point that the “sharp smell that rose when we opened [the memory objects] was as insinuating as the smells one finds under a plank or a rock” (62-63), as the smell emanating from these ruined objects is a reminder of both the identity destroyed and its value. Not only is the town unrecognizable to the nation at large, it is now unrecognizable even to its self.

In this way, Fingerbone with its failed attempts at middle-classness reflects Robinson’s remark in a later text that ideology “inspires in its believers the notion that the fault here lies with miscreant fact, which should therefore be conformed to the requirements of theory by all means necessary” (Robinson, *When I was* 49). Although written in a different context, this observation expresses the ways in which a dominant ideology may function, compelling those who deviate from its models to conform in order to belong. The desire to be part of something from which one has been excluded colors the WWCPC rural counter-narrative that runs through both *Bastard out of Carolina* (as we have seen) and *Housekeeping*. In *Housekeeping*, the desire to attain such connection to a more mainstream and urban U.S. can be seen in the most “prized” event in the town’s history, the train derailment occurring decades earlier that was reported “in newspapers as far away as Denver and St. Paul” (5-6). We can infer that this event was so prized because it was noteworthy, if even momentarily, for the rest of the country, thus tying the more individualized desire to maintain connection to the mainstream, as exhibited by Lucille, to the town’s imperative for such a connection to the national imaginary at large.

In Robinson’s novel, this desire is not to attain the normative in and of itself — since the normative is seen as rooted in arbitrary appearances — but to feel the legitimization

that follows from attaining such norms. Fingerbone is clearly not a place conducive to such legitimation. Like Allison's town, Robinson's Fingerbone was a place devoid of the middle-classless opportunities prized elsewhere in the postwar:

There was not a soul there but knew how shallow-rooted the whole town was. It had flooded yearly, and had burned once. Often enough the lumber mill shut down, or burned down. There were reports that things were otherwise elsewhere, and anyone, on a melancholy evening, might feel that Fingerbone was a meager and difficult place. (177-178)

Opportunity for upward mobility was not something easily attained for such a "meager" town. Instead, Fingerbone attempted middle-classless appearances, a dangerous proposition for those without the sturdy foundation to stand on. However, there was an attempt to abide by these norms, as evident from Lucille's attempt at middle-classless domesticity and her eventual desertion of Sylvie and Ruth, and as demonstrated by the normative institutions of the town, such as the sheriff and the church (182-187). And yet the "shallow-rooted" nature of the town could potentially make such achievement quite impossible. This sense of "difficulty," then, may be tied to the inaccessibility of dominant norms in and of themselves, but it can also be linked to a feeling of personal deprivation at failing to achieve such a status. We can see this linkage between exclusion and personal affect emerge when Ruth ponders the state of loneliness: "Loneliness is an absolute discovery" (157). Ruth links "loneliness" to anger and bitterness, but also to a desire to change this state of being, as she recalls her own absolute loneliness during her sojourn with Sylvie in the woods surrounding Fingerbone:

When one looks from the darkness into the light, however, one sees all the

difference between here and there, this and that. Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts, and would like to break the roof, spine, and ribs, and smash the windows and flood the floor and spindle the curtains and bloat the couch. (158).

In smashing the windows, these imagined “unsheltered people” seek literally and figuratively to bring down the walls that separate inside from outside, exclusive spaces from those they exclude. This violence, as Maggie Galehouse points out in her reading of *Housekeeping*, can be tied to feelings of disconnection, feelings that are not Ruth's alone. In this way, Ruth's angry reclamation of this space may be extended to the community at large, and thus her focalization blurs the line between the personally “retrospective” (Rimmon-Kenan 79-80) — as she recalls the ruined objects of the flood through a reference to the “bloated couch” (see the original reference to the flooded couch in chapter four) — and an “external focalization” that evokes the desire of the “unsheltered” to reclaim voice through violent outbursts. Ultimately, Ruth's decision to turn away from this connection to the material world — “It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing” (159) — becomes an accusation aligned with the bitterness of those who may remain “unsheltered,” and aimed at a location like Fingerbone whose residents try to gain access to the very mainstream norms that initially excluded them.

While *Housekeeping* has been read as a trauma narrative using memory as a way to insert the subjectivity of a girl silenced by the tragedy in her life (Caver), memory also serves in the novel, however obliquely, to assert a more collective voice. In this way, the narratives in *Bastard* and *Housekeeping* overlap. Yet this reclamation of voice leads each

protagonist in a different direction. While Ruth's critique of the appearance of the norms that her town attempts to abide by is nihilistic (she can find "nothing" for her by the end of the book), Bone finds relief in her WWPC rural background. Still, Ruth's memory, like Bone's, is a testament to her community and bears witness to the community's exclusion from and devaluation by the mainstream.

ii. Using the Personal to Critique the Past and its Effect on the Present

The intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrations of *Bastard* and *Housekeeping* focalize particular WWPC rural communities in the postwar from the vantage point of a present that has been clearly affected by this past. Both novels present elements of a WWPC rural counter-narrative that overtly addresses the postwar period, but the novels only obliquely suggest that such a counter-narrative is relevant in the protagonists' respective presents. In the present sub-section, I examine three novels in which the interconnection of the postwar past and their narrative presents is explicitly foregrounded: *Affliction* by Russell Banks, and Richard Russo's *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls*.

All three novels are set in the Northeast — respectively in New Hampshire, upstate New York and Maine — and, as critics have pointed out, can be understood at least in part in terms of the working-class childhoods of their authors. Critics see Russo, for example, as concentrating on his "natural subject" (Welsch in Parini), the rural working-classes familiar to him from his childhood in the upstate NY community of Gloversville, and scholars of Banks' writing point to his growing up in working-class towns (Niemi chapter one; also Hapke 304-305). While their writing is not strictly autobiographical, the counter-narrative that emerges in their novels appears to draw on their postwar experiences and shares a number of central themes: familial abuse, decaying working-



class small towns and their representations in dominant discourses, the promise and threat of outside investment, upward mobility, and of special interest to my analysis, the interrelationship of the postwar past and the post-1980s present. *Affliction* is narrated by an upwardly-mobile son (Rolfe) who details the downward spiral of his older brother, Wade Whitehouse. Although both brothers come from an abusive family, only Wade continued to live in the working-class small town of Lawford. Wade sees within the gentrifying town a conspiracy in which outside and local money interests collude, potentially overwriting the town and its residents, a suspicion that turns out to be partly true. While trying to get to the bottom of this suspicion, we see Wade wrestle with his past and present, his own place within the town and outside its borders, a struggle that culminates in a murderous rampage in which he kills his father and a local man whom he wrongly believes was involved in the murder of a powerful, seasonal resident. *Nobody's Fool* also centralizes the struggle of a working-class man, Sully, in its narrative. Sully, too, grew up in an abusive home and lived his entire life in North Bath, NY, although he is not portrayed as angry as Wade Whitehouse. Sully's day-to-day struggle within this town parallels the town's own struggle to survive, a struggle further impacted by failed real estate speculation. Sully's own life thus mirrors the changes and hardship of working-class small towns in the post-1980s, linked in part to the postwar period. This emphasis on the socioeconomics of the postwar that continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is present as well in Russo's later work, *Empire Falls*. The story of two families — the working-class Robys and the wealthy Whitings — is set in the decaying small town of Empire Falls, Maine and portrays the working-class community that is left to inhabit it. We see the hardship experienced by the community, in both the postwar and the present,

and the culmination of the ensuing bitterness in a 21<sup>st</sup> century act of violence: a school shooting. As the community rebounds from this incident, it is faced with the reality of gentrification by outside interests that do not necessarily include the WWPC rural community that inhabits the town.

In the three novels the interrelationship of past and present is enabled through instances of intradiegetic-homodiegetic narration, focalized through particular characters, but the overarching narrative structures of all three relies on an outsider perspective. *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls* are presented through an omniscient narrator who is unconnected to the people or events therein (extradiegetic-heterodiegetic). *Affliction*, while technically the intradiegetic-homodiegetic narration of Rolfe, uses a narrator who is both “internal” to the story he tells about his brother (Rimmon-Kenan 76) and “external” or outside it (75), a duality that is significant as it reflects Rolfe’s conflicted desire to “escape” his traumatic family situation and Lawford more generally through upward mobility via a college education in the postwar period.

One aspect of the blurring of the boundaries between inside and outside in Rolfe’s narration is the switching between personal introspection and a “panchronic” (Rimmon-Kenan 79) perspective that navigates across time. This temporal modality may be viewed as central to dealing with the working-class content that critics like Niemi observe in Banks' work, the “often harrowing reality of growing up poor, pitied, brutalized and forsaken in a society that worships money and success” (in Parini 1). In *Affliction* these temporal shifts become a means to represent a personal conflict, as the trajectory of Rolfe's narration throughout the novel illustrates. Early in the novel, Rolfe qualifies his ability to re-tell his brother's final violent act, including Wade’s personal motivations and

his environment: “Memory, intuition, interrogation and reflection have given me a vision, and it is this vision that I am telling here” (47). Rolfe believes that his personal memory/past experience growing up with Wade in Lawford provide him with the knowledge needed to understand a man who, at least from Rolfe’s initial description, seems to conform to the small working-class town that “has no connection to modern life...” (5). Moreover, Rolfe does not consider his recollections to be merely personal or separate from the realities of his family and the community, as they tie him to and bring him into Lawford: “my memories of them, which are vivid, detailed, obsessive — as befits the mind of one who has extricated himself from his past with the difficulty that I have — are reliable and richly associative, exfoliating...a crystal compulsively elaborating its own structure” (47-48). Rolfe has physically left Lawford, but the place persists through “obsessive” memories; crystal-like, Rolfe’s WWPC rural origins continue to have a life even amidst his mainstream present outside of Lawford.

Throughout much of the book, Rolfe attempts distance from his brother and Lawford — his memories are merely the gateway towards understanding this WWPC rural place. However, as the narrative progresses, we see that Rolfe is also attempting to understand his own present-day conflict in Boston. Rolfe does not try to equate himself with Wade or speak for him, ultimately he is trying to understand himself. One way to read the descriptive pauses of the narrated action of Wade and Lawford that occur throughout the novel is as expressions of Rolfe’s attempt to understand his self in relation to the WWPC rural place he has physically, if not emotionally, left behind. While the reader is shown Wade’s trials and tribulations, s/he is immediately brought back to the internal conflict Rolfe feels because of his upward mobility, one example being the start of

chapter fifteen. This descriptive pause immediately follows Rolfe's description of Wade's postwar experience with his father and now ex-wife, and before detailing Wade's discovery of his dead mother upon a rare visit to his father's home. These narrative pauses underscore that rather than unrelated entities, Rolfe's, Wade's, and Lawford's conflicts are all rooted in the same location and can be used to fully grasp the larger picture of WWCP rural places in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus, Rolfe's upward mobility exceeds a mere personal conflict but results in a more complex view of his family and the town, its people, and their place within postwar and present society; once a Lawford insider, he can now not only view the town from the outside, from his present position in the mainstream city, but also brings his insider knowledge of the town to bear upon the mainstream's dismissive notions of it. Rolfe's comparison of his own upwardly mobile move out of Lawford to his brothers' postwar enlistment in the army can serve as an example. In Rolfe's understanding, his brothers sought to escape their abusive father through one of the only routes available to them, by joining the army and going to war: "as soon as we were able, all five children fled — Elbourne and Charlie running to Vietnam, where they died, Lena to marriage...and obesity and charismatic Christianity...and I, Rolfe, whom the others regarded as the successful one, to the state university" (96). As is mentioned later, Wade, too, sought the military with the hopes of going to Vietnam like his brothers, but was instead sent to Korea (302). What is noteworthy is that Rolfe regards his mainstream "success" in the same light as his dead brothers' and Wade's choices to go to war. Rolfe recognizes that under certain circumstances going to war might be one of the few means available to those seeking self-realization, even as it carries the risk of the annihilation of that self.

This point is illustrated in Rolfe's description of the community's war memorial and its effect upon Wade: "For him, when your name got listed there, you were truly, undeniably, hopelessly dead. Those were men who had no faces, who were gone beyond memory, forever, to absolute elsewhere. Even Elbourne and Charlie" (19-20). Clearly, the names inscribed on the memorial literalize the finality of the soldiers' demise, but they also have meaning beyond that. The "absolute elsewhere" Rolfe refers to transcends death as it signifies honor and pride, attributes and sentiments one could not easily attain within an abusive household and this WWCP small town. The men are "beyond memory," but they have also gained a measure of respect that escapes the residents of the town. In other words, with the tools available to them, Elbourne and Charlie "fled" to their only option: honor through death. Rolfe's own escape to an "absolute elsewhere" outside of Lawford and into his mainstream life in Boston can be read similarly.

Where Rolfe directs the reader to Lawford through his intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls* use a seemingly more neutral narrator. The WWCP rural characters in both novels are given complexity as the omniscient narrator exposes the complicated relationships within these small towns and the personal motivations underlying them. This omniscience, however, does not extend to the representation of characters who are outsiders to the town and whom we only view through the perceptions of the town's people as recounted by the narrator. This narrative strategy has a dual effect. On one hand, by not being able to penetrate or "know" these outsiders, the narrator endows them with a measure of power as they appear to be beyond the grasp of the central small town characters. Yet, by placing at the center of these novels WWCP rural characters who are commonly devalued if not ignored entirely in

mainstream culture, Russo does not allow the reader an easy identification with the mainstream outsiders, inviting us instead to engage with the dramas unfolding in the small town, on its own terms.

In *Nobody's Fool*, focalized through its main character Sully, this small town drama is related to larger structural changes within U.S. society. Published in 1993, the action of the story takes place in 1984 (9), and refers back to happenings in the postwar. I will start by examining the manifestations of the postwar past in the novel's narrative present, then reflect on the novelist's act of looking back, from the vantage point of the early 1990s, at small towns a decade earlier.

In *Nobody's Fool*, as in the other novels discussed thus far, the historical trajectory of a particular town (here, North Bath, NY) coincides with the personal stories of its residents. We can trace one of these stories through Sully, who remains estranged from his wife and child whom he abandoned during the postwar period, in reaction to his own abusive childhood with an alcoholic father (175). The novel suggests that his predicament is also reflective in some ways of the town's. This point is underscored by the novel's opening description: literally off the beaten path, North Bath was bypassed by the interstate I-87, and as a result, lost its position as a tourist center on old two-lane routes (3-4). This town thus appears to be a spatiotemporally and culturally regressed place "left behind" in both the postwar and the present.

The novel's description of the town certainly evokes tropes of regression used in the dominant discourse to represent WWPC rural places, and as critics like Theo D'Haen demonstrate, this regression may be enough to lend the town a perpetual "out-of-time nostalgic aura" circa somewhere from the "1930's to 1960's" even in its present action

(402). However, it is also clear from the narrator that the people of North Bath are invested in attaining the norms of their given time period, they are not “out-of-time” but simply cannot live up to the mainstream whose norms they seek to emulate. We can see this attempt at attaining mainstream norms and failing through the novel’s juxtaposition of the ranch-style housing so reflective of the middle-classless sub/urban, which the working-class residents tried to acquire, and the houses sought after by those who had more recently moved into town, the 1980s middle-class professionals with roots in the 1960s counterculture and with whom the residents were at odds both then and now. By 1984, the old Victorians that the locals had left for the desirable postwar split-levels with “picture windows” were becoming the new attraction and selling above their value:

Thirty years ago, such houses could have been bought for a song, but instead they had built well-insulated, new, split-level ranches with picture windows...They all knew now they could have made their killing in Victorians if they'd guessed that an entire generation of Vietnam draft protestors in torn, faded jeans would end up with money and spend it resuscitating decrepit old houses. (75)

The narrator’s description of this outside investment by draft protestors from “Albany” (74) is revealing of the social tensions between the working-class residents and these outside interests. To the town’s people, these people are not “us,” they are outsiders marked by their relative wealth and their origins in the same middle-classless sub/urbia that the townspeople have been trying to mimic with their ranch houses. Further enhancing this divide is the implication that these Vietnam draft protestors “end[ed] up with money” that had eluded the town’s residents; as the narrator explains, the “Higher

taxes were eating into their [the townspeople's] pensions and Social Security and savings" (75), telling the reader that this aging population could not keep up with the real estate pricing pushed higher by more moneyed interests. In addition to highlighting the difference between the two groups, the comparison also directs a critique at these middle-class youths of the 1960s and their yuppified resurrection in 1984; it suggests that while it is true that North Bath tried to buy into the sub/urban aspirations of the mainstream, it was an aspiration that could only be reached by those already within the geographic and classed mainstream. These children of privilege could reject the very things that the working-class strove for, and still obtain the wealth and power to transform the town's landscape in the image of their own 1984 whims.

What is happening in 1984, the novel suggests, is no different than what had been happening to the town throughout its history. Founded on tourist trade in the 1800s with mineral springs that eventually dried up, Bath was founded on the whim of outsider speculation (7). Through the background of Sully's landlady, Mrs. Beryl, we see the trajectory of American small towns, from population decline as evinced by "declining postwar enrollments" at the town's school (10) to the rising real estate costs pushing the community out of their homes in 1984 (and, as the narrator indicates, the 1990s): "taxes were skyrocketing, pressured upward by downstate speculators in real estate, many of whom seemed convinced that Bath and every other small town in the corridor between New York City and Montreal would appreciate dramatically during the eighties and nineties" (11-12).

Sully's personal story is lived within and through this WCPC rural "bad location" (12) that is developed by money coming from an urban elsewhere, but his story also bears



witness to the viability of the counter-narrative of those “left behind” in WWPC small towns. Such progress and development lie in the hands of outside interests but are not always welcomed by the townspeople, as is evident, for example, in comments made by Sully’s girlfriend Ruth regarding the new mega chain grocery store replacing the local IGA: “Ruth explained that the new supermarket at the interstate had put the financially troubled little IGA out of its final misery, just as the IGA had killed the corner groceries two decades earlier” (340). Her rejection of “progress” illustrates the agency of the townspeople — they do not approve of such manifestations of mainstream progress — but further, it can help guide our response to such taken-for-granted symbols of progress. Such evidence of agency and critique disproves the dominant view towards WWPC rurality within literary studies, as found in Annie Proulx's *Chicago Tribune* review of the novel: “Small towns disgorge the talented and able. Russo writes of the ones who stay behind, caught in invisible economic nets like gasping fish, parceling out the few jobs and mates among each other and trading both around from time to time.” While the residents of Bath have historically been struggling to make a livelihood in a context largely dependent on the whim of more powerful outside interests, the novel also shows them to have a wisdom largely lacking in the mainstream world outside the town’s borders, particularly through its portrayal of Sully as we will see later in this chapter, insights that can be brought to bear on the dominant assumptions about progress in any given “modern” age.

This counter-narrative and the force of the wisdom that underlies it are more accentuated when we consider that the narrative’s present action is set in 1984, almost a decade before novel’s publication date, thus constituting a homodiegetic “prolepsis”

(Rimmon-Kenan 49) that prophetically points to the changes that will occur to small town America. While super chains and real estate are just one way in which the town will change, there are more fundamental problems that will emerge full force by 1993 when the book was published. As stated, the viability of Bath had been in the hands of outsiders since its inception; when the lauded investment for a theme park falls through at the end of the novel, the townspeople feel that it is the final nail in the coffin. This failed investment precipitates the following statement from one of Sully's friends: "A good strong wind'll blow us all away now. I bet half of Main Street will be boarded up within a year" (533). These words are prophetic, for by the early 1990s boarded up Main Streets of small towns across America — whether as the result of loss of industry, agriculture or tourism — would become both fact and familiar icons in the national imagination. This element relates to the second level of temporal interweaving in the novel, as the characters in 1984 help focalize the continuing decline of small towns outside the novel's borders.

However, Russo does not embrace gentrification as the answer to this decline; part of the problem for North Bath, as detailed through its history, is that it has always been at the whim of outside "development" resulting in boom and bust cycles. Some critics explicitly misread this subtext of Russo's works, as does Wendy Smith in *Publisher's Weekly*, claiming that Russo is "well aware that nowadays the alternative to gentrification too often is dying towns like the ones he portrays in his fiction" ("Richard Russo"). To the contrary, the counter-narrative that is present in Russo's novels and in Banks' *Affliction* points to gentrification as at best offering short-term prosperity for the few, and at worst spelling the destruction of a WWPC rural community, as exemplified by the

failed real estate deal precipitating the prophecies of Sully and his friends at the end of *Nobody's Fool*.

Russo's *Empire Falls* also looks at a small town (in Maine, this time) whose history of outside interests via the textile industry is responsible for both its origins centuries earlier and its demise in the postwar period. The omniscient narrator ties the rise and fall of the Whiting textile empire in Maine and, relatedly, the interrelationship of the wealthy Whitings and the working-class Robys, to the small town of Empire Falls and the larger economic changes befalling both rural and non-rural locations across the country. On one hand, the novel's title represents this town as a metonymy of the U.S. itself, an empire falling much as Francine Whiting's body haphazardly drifts to the ocean in the final scenes of the novel (482-483). However, it would be incomplete to consider this novel as either a national allegory or the story of an individual (the falling of the Whiting empire). While these are indeed viable readings of the narrative, they run the risk of overlooking Empire Falls' position in the postwar and present national imagination as a working-class rural outreach, and as a result potentially ignore the counter-narrative the novel offers to such a dominant discourse.

In the novel, the Robys focalize the saga of the town of Empire Falls and its potential role in postwar and present conceptions. Through Miles' recollections, his mother Grace comes to represent the town itself, her personal story capturing the fate of Empire Falls and giving voice to other working-class places like it. Grace is associated with various landmarks around town (256-257), and for Miles there is an uncanny link between her death and the town's decline: "It was almost possible to believe her screams were responsible for the mass exodus that by now had lasted more than two decades, a panicky

flight from her pain that emptied out the town” (100).

Aligning Grace’s demise with the town’s helps personalize the economic changes that befell the town in the postwar period. Francine Whiting’s vengeful actions appear to be in response to the postwar affair between her husband, C.B., and Grace, and thus her decision to gradually sell the factory to foreign interests could appear to be rooted in jealousy. However, it is clear from the scenario outlined by the narrator following Miles’ revelations concerning his mother and the Whitings that Francine’s decision is also rooted in socioeconomic factors; thus, the use of the personal helps the reader identify with the town and its plight, instead of considering it just an inevitable casualty of progress. Empire Textile, like many other factories, fell victim to the larger globalizing processes affecting many small towns and cities built around industry of some sort: sold to a multinational firm in Germany, the mill was bought for “tax advantages” and eventually moved South and then overseas, leaving an entire town with little other economic opportunity (342-343). Clearly, that the mill was first used as a tax shelter and then sold piece meal to remain “competitive with foreign operations” (342) makes smart business sense, such ruthless practices ensuring that the bottom line will be as high as possible. In this way, Francine’s actions also reflect the dominant rhetoric of the time. In this context, the ability to manipulate wealth in such a manner is considered an example of economic exceptionalism and is underwritten by a logic that regards putting out a working-class small town as possibly unfortunate yet inevitable given the evolving geography of the “progress of man” away from the rural and towards the (enlightened) cities.

The townspeople’s rejection of this takeover can be read as part of a counter-narrative

to the dominant rhetoric of progress. Their reaction to this postwar scenario points to the town's cultural difference from a mainstream that champions such "progress," while simultaneously testifying to their pride in their heritage in this WWPC small town. In the interest of saving their jobs and the town, the workers fruitlessly tried to increase the productivity of the mill, not realizing that productivity meant little in a new economy increasingly centered on abstract figures (342). The workers' failure to understand this "new" economy indicates the town's lack of sophistication in regards to modern business practices, but also their "failure" to literally move into postwar (and present) society that does understand. This cultural difference is further illustrated when "few took up the offer to relocate" down South, citing house ownership, mortgages and local family as reasons for staying (343), all inadequate justifications when evaluated in terms of the discourses of directed mobility by which the mainstream abided. The narrator's interpretive "commentary" (Rimmon-Kenan 99-100) that "staying was easier and less scary than leaving, and because for a while at least they would be able to draw unemployment benefits" (343) can easily be read as a reflection of such a discourse. These people could never be "exceptional": they were too cowardly or lazy to fully benefit from the fruits of America laid out for anyone to capitalize on. But the narrator then gives another perspective on their perseverance:

Others remained out of pride. When the realization dawned that they were the victims of corporate greed and global economic forces, they said, okay, sure, fine they'd been fools but they would not, by God, be run out of the town their grandparents and parents had grown up in and called home. (343)

From this perspective, staying becomes an act of defiance as rural subjects seek ways to survive without giving up their identity to “corporate greed,” instead holding on to their generational linkage to this working-class town in the face of a dominant discourse that belittles such choices.

According to the narrator, these people saw the larger system and how it had economically used the town, but they would not resign themselves to that fact (“they'd been fools” but refused to be “run out of town” towards the mainstream). Miles’ own life serves as a case study for what such perseverance requires and invites the reader to a more intimate understanding and empathy with the experience. Miles begins the novel with a somewhat impotent attitude towards his personal and economic wellbeing that stems in part from his surrender to “fate.” As Miles places his future livelihood via the diner owned by Francine, and which is supposedly left to him as a “bequest in her will” (37), we see that Francine becomes the very embodiment of his fate. Miles' passivity can be seen as an acceptance of a “system” that does not grant him much say. However, once Miles realizes that this system is indeed a game that Francine has been playing on him and the town, he takes control of his destiny by setting out on his own and re-opening his ex-mother-in-law's restaurant (see Chapter 21). Miles’ own recognition and desire to persevere mirrors the larger scenario outlined in the subsequent italicized chapter that details the town's reaction to the mill’s closure.

While the town’s history can be read in parallel to Miles’ own courage to stand up to Francine, it also helps explain the seemingly foolish hope that the mill will re-open in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Empire Falls will again enjoy the relative prosperity that pre-dates the postwar period. Clinging to this hope instead of embracing upward mobility towards the

mainstream may be read as an ignorant, if typical, WWPC rural reaction if viewed from the perspective of the dominant discourses. However, the use of memory and omniscient narration creates a temporal interweaving in *Empire Falls* that is typical of Russo's books and that exposes the complexity of rural working-class communities. Although the town and its people may appear as throwbacks to a bygone era, the novel offers a different perspective by presenting the socioeconomic changes through the townspeople's experience and their profound sense of place. Like the history behind a boarded up Main Street and the empty textile mill, these people carry within them a deep relationship to their location, a relationship that is in part mediated by nostalgia but that is also critical, and reflected in the locale itself: the "undeniable physical embodiment of the town's past" but one that also held a "magnetic quality" (19). This deep relationship may appear to restrict the townspeople from moving up and into the mainstream, but it also gives them a sense of strength rooted in their WWPC rural experience, in their own individual histories but also the much longer history of the town.

This temporal depth contests dismissive dominant discourses on WWPC rurality. Nostalgia in this context fuels agency, for while it is expressive of a longing for economic security, it also reflects the desire of this working-class rural community to build on its strengths, its history and the wisdom gained. As such, this nostalgia is not an insular, regressive act, but a tool to secure one's community as well as to look to the future, as illustrated by Miles' own trajectory of self-acceptance. At the beginning of the novel, Miles' approach to the town and himself is at times as dismissive towards his WWPC rural location as the dominant discourse, and this is reflected in his inability to see the power of nostalgia for himself and the town. For example, when Miles reads a local

newspaper series that looks at the past through a nostalgic lens he thinks “the town itself was awaiting some cataclysm that would finish them all off” (297), and in his dismissal of this nostalgia he fails to recognize an opportunity for his town to legitimate itself: “Who were these people and what did they mean to us? The photos seemed to ask. Where have they gone? Why do we remain?” (297). These questions suggest more than one way to view this small town nostalgia. On the surface, such nostalgia appears pointless, as the mill’s closure decades earlier has precipitated the decline of Empire Falls with little hope for a reversal in fortune; yet, this nostalgia also speaks to a desire to hold on to an identity, as evident in the generations that have remained in town despite the lack of opportunity. While the rest of the country continued to grow more “exceptional” (middle-classless and sub/urban), at least in rhetoric, working-class small towns like Empire Falls have persevered against the odds. The question “why do we remain?” may be an accusation, but it could also invite a celebratory recognition of survival in the face of loss and tragedy.

In this way, nostalgia becomes a way of reclaiming a working-class rural identity increasingly overlooked within US society since the postwar period. Although this nostalgia may appear to be a symptom of stagnation, as Miles points to in the beginning of the book, it can also be an affirmation of a collective voice, as Miles himself enacts on the Vineyard at the end of the book. The nostalgia that helps Miles critically interrogate his relationship to his mother is also used to give voice to a sense of place for himself and the town: “It was time to return to Empire Falls, to his life. Better to be a man there, his ‘Sojourner’ dream had shown him, than a boy here” (472). Through his rejection of the Vineyard, Miles also rejects the promises of mainstream respectability associated with it.



His rejection of the “Vineyard” involves a rejection of the norms that underlie it and a simultaneous embrace of his WWPC rural background; although this latter community may be afflicted with pain and hardship, it is also a viable location in which to forge a self-respecting identity outside the norms of “progress.”

In this sense, nostalgia becomes a potential avenue for empowerment on a more social level; it does not remain the province of the individual, but shapes one side of a larger conversation in which the town participates. The nostalgia of Empire Falls, then, becomes part of its counter-narrative, especially when compared to the nostalgia visited upon the town by mainstream outsiders, as seen for example in their different relationship to the local diner. While the working-class diner is a place for its clientele to air their hopes and disappointment at the standard breakfast and lunch, the new “International Night” dinners introduced to garner more profit cater to the nostalgic associations of the local college students and faculty (42). In addition to their transient relation to the town and their material difference from the locals — their “BMW’s and Audis” disappear at the end of each school year (42) — these college-educated patrons also view the diner differently from the townspeople they will eventually “leave behind” in Empire Falls. The nostalgia with which these outsiders view the diner is an extension of their view of a WWPC rural location like Empire Falls. As focalized through Miles’ brother, the college clients “would consider the grill’s worn-out, cigarette-burned countertop and wobbly booths ‘honest’ or ‘retro’ or some damn thing” (101-102). This brand of retro nostalgia views the diner and its idealized rural working-class as existing entirely in the past, a relic preserved for the consumption of the mainstream, its relevance to the present reduced to a fashion or fad.

Another landmark that can be viewed in a similar light is that of the mill. The mill itself represents larger economic shifts in the US, from manufacturing to the white-collar and service industry signified by its restoration into a brewpub, a credit-card company and new riverfront real estate at the end of the book (462). As the diner turns “retro” to fit the needs of a more powerful mainstream, so the Mill is transformed to suit a white-collar world: the brewpub seeks to attract a wealthier clientele, as does the riverfront real estate. Far from saving the community, this new development serving the mainstream may completely rip it apart: “[Miles] didn't expect anybody to share his resentment about the way it was coming about, that once again the lion's share of the wealth generated would never reach the citizens of Empire Falls” (462). While wanting to rejoice in this new boon, Miles understands that some things never change, and that the perception of Empire Falls’ stagnation has more to do with the way it is used (and viewed) by mainstream interests, and little to do with the composition of the people living there. Just as the mill exploited the town, so will its new yuppified gentrification; the “houses” the townspeople fought to save when the mill closed may be taken from them again, this time through rising property values and taxes they cannot afford (462). *Empire Falls*, like *Nobody's Fool*, illustrates what befalls a working-class small town with little economic opportunity, but the novel also foregrounds the forces of resistance that have historically informed the WWCP rural people who have called it home.

### iii. Past Inhering in the Present

The novels discussed above explicitly show the interrelationship between the postwar and present through characters’ memories and omniscient narration. However, not all of the novels discussed in this chapter make this interrelationship clear, thus requiring the

reader to seek out this interrelationship in the unsaid of the narrative. One way in which this meaning can be brought out is through an examination of representations of landscape, both physical and cultural, in the novels. In *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley and *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (hereafter *GG*) by Peter Hedges, portrayals of locales, like farm fields help infuse the narrative with the sense of history that attaches to these rural locations and extends to the actions of the characters in the narrative present. In Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, however, the local landscape takes on an added dimension as it is juxtaposed with the larger cultural landscape of a post 1980s U.S.

All three novels are set in a (roughly speaking) post-1980s world: Smiley's novel is set in 1979, it is at points analeptic but also uncannily proleptic in imagining what would be the 1980s farm crisis that predates the publication of this book; Hedge's novel takes place in the early 1990s, but includes homodiegetic and heterodiegetic analepsis that helps us understand the protagonist Gilbert and the town of Endora; and Mason's novel is set in the early to mid-1980s, focalized through an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator. Although the first two novels are set in Iowa, their subject matter is quite different. *A Thousand Acres*, ostensibly about the deterioration of one family farm (the Cooks) and the people within that family (as focalized through the middle daughter, Ginny), is also a commentary on the larger farm crisis that occurred in the 1980s. While pointing to the victimization of the family farmer, Smiley also points out how the family farmer was complicit in his own demise through exploitative business and environmental practices, symbolized in part through the impact of childhood sexual abuse on the Cook daughters. Hedges' novel is concerned with the aftermath of the farm crisis in a declining small town in Iowa, focusing on the outlook of one man, Gilbert Grape. Through Gilbert's

dysfunctional family, the reader is shown the pitfalls as well as the strength of locations like Endora, Iowa. Mason's novel also invites the reader to consider this duality, here through the focalizations of a teenage girl, Sam, who tries to come to terms with a father she never knew and who was killed in Vietnam. In her attempt to understand her father, Sam tries to connect with her Uncle Emmett, also a Vietnam vet. Her search for understanding leads the reader towards a more nuanced understanding of the contentious issues of the time, as well as to an engagement with the working-class rural life from which Sam comes. All three novels evoke the farm crisis to varying degrees, giving even the most seemingly barren landscapes historical depth. In every action, the past becomes a force with which the characters have to reckon, thus inviting the reader to reflect on the larger contexts within which the action is embedded and reinforcing the temporal component of the WWPC rural counter-narratives discussed earlier.

Many critics tie *A Thousand Acres* to the larger sociocultural context in which it was written, perhaps due in part to Smiley's biography. Critics like Neil Nakadate feel that Smiley's time in Iowa gave her insight into the farming practices underlying the farm crisis of the 1980s (291), and informed her writing of *A Thousand Acres*. Like Allison, Smiley sees her work as addressing pressing sociocultural concerns, and in *A Thousand Acres* these concerns are the environmental and social dangers of large scale farming (see Farrell 38-40). Although Smiley eventually moved to a rural location, she did not come from a WWPC rural background. Her college education and affiliation with elite institutions, her time in a "leftist commune" in New Haven, Connecticut, her work in an "electronics factory" that gave her a "sense of social consciousness," and her attempt at subsistence living outside Iowa City as a graduate student (Nakadate 287), all point to

Smiley being part of the privileged counterculture discussed in the previous chapter.

Smiley admits to her outsider status in regards to the material of her novel: “I lived in Iowa through the farm crisis and knew many farmers. My views of farming and farm life were like those of most city folk” (“Not a” 162). We can see this acknowledgment of the difference between a mainstream outsider and a rural insider from the first line of the novel in which the main character, Ginny, addresses the reader: “At sixty miles per hour, *you* could pass *our* farm in a minute...” (Smiley, *Thousand* 3; emphasis added). There is a difference between the rural subject position of Ginny and these presumed outsiders, with whom Smiley aligns herself through her association with the “city.” Such foregrounding at the outset of the novel of the prevailing sociocultural hierarchy invites mainstream readers to reflect on their privileged status and consider ways of life very different from their own.

For scholars like historian John Faragher, Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* is an historical novel. Faragher commends the novel for presenting a nuanced understanding of the reality “behind the headlines” regarding the farm crisis (146). Although she does not explicitly discuss the factors behind the farm crisis, Smiley uses one family's situation in order to illustrate its effects on rural America, leading the critic William Conlogue to contend, “This family's story, Smiley argues, is America's story” (5). In the novel, we see the effects of government policy pushing large-scale expansion of the family farm through heavily mortgaging existing land, resulting in mortgages that could not be kept

up by the late 1970s<sup>59</sup>. Smiley's fiction thus sheds light on the factors that led to the disastrous situation of family farmers so familiar to the American public by the time of the novel's publication: "By the mid-eighties farms were rapidly foreclosing, farm-related businesses were going bankrupt, rural banks were shutting their doors, and rural towns were teetering on the edge of collapse" (Conlogue 171).

Smiley's telling of the history of the land — from its settlement to its profit motivation and finally to its demise — can accomplish what news reports about Farm Aids to faceless people in the "Midwest" (a symbol for troubled family farms cross-U.S.) could not: it humanizes its subjects and raises questions about the forces that have shaped their destiny such as the imperative from the postwar on to "develop" farmland<sup>60</sup>. In this novel, as in the others discussed here, the broader social context is focalized through the personal, through the Cook family and more specifically the first person narration of Ginny, the eldest daughter on the family farm. According to Sinead McDermott, it is Ginny's "critical nostalgia" that interconnects the personal with the "longer historical memory of the land" ("Memory" 395), creating a broader resonance for the personal story.

In some ways, McDermott's observation about Ginny's "critical nostalgia" echoes other readings of the novel which see her as reclaiming women's voices within patriarchal

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<sup>59</sup>By the late 1970s, many farmers could not keep up with their mortgages because of another government policy: the Federal Reserve's attempt to stave off inflation by raising interest rates (for a brief outline of this process, see Conlogue 169-170; see also Faragher 153-4).

<sup>60</sup>In his outline of the historical background of U.S. agriculture, Faragher points to the introduction of postwar mechanization, to its hyper realization in the early 1970s and its crash by the 1980s (149).

structures like capitalism and landownership (see Amano's "Alger's Shadows" and Carden's "Remembering/Engendering the Heartland"). However, McDermott's reading attributes to the novel a greater insight than seen by critics like Amy Levin who claim that Smiley's vision in the novel cannot "rise above community structures and social ideology" because it is "regionalist fiction" ("Familiar Terrain" 40). As critics like Conlogue and McDermott suggest in their reading of *A Thousand Acres*, even the most isolated of regions are connected to larger sociocultural change, and thus fiction set in such locations is just as likely to have broader relevance. In my reading, *A Thousand Acres* is part of a WWPC rural counter-narrative that emerges across the country and that I trace in this chapter through eight novels.

The counter-narrative in *A Thousand Acres* emerges from the story of one family's struggle and offers a viable critique of the dominant discourses that culminated in the family's and the community's destruction, and in particular the prevailing belief that "progress" entails moving out of the country and into the city. On one hand, the death of the farm allows Ginny the kind of personal freedom in St. Paul, Minnesota that she could not have had within her abusive and personally repressive family. This is a relative freedom, of course, since in moving to the city Ginny exchanged one kind of servitude for another. In some ways, Ginny becomes the anonymous reader she is addressing as the book opens, as detached from her land and family as the imagined car passing by their property. She experiences this detachment as an urban dweller, but her awareness of it allows her to formulate the harmful side of her rural exodus:

Otherwise, my life passed in a blur, that blessing of urban routine. The sense of distinct events that is inescapable on a farm...where omens of

prosperity or ruin to come are sought in every change, where any of the world's details may contain the one thing that above all else you will regret not knowing, this sense lifted off me. Maybe another way of saying it is that I forgot I was still alive. (336)

Ginny's experience in the city casts doubt on the concept of modern progress and the "blessing of urban routine." It is the experience on the farm that is equated with being fully alive; like her new neighbors, Ginny loses a piece of her humanity as she travels along the supposedly evolutionary trajectory towards the city. Further, Ginny is not alone in feeling a loss of humanity along with the loss of the rural way of life. Ginny's husband Ty, who seeks her out for a divorce in St. Paul, is forced out by debt and leaves for a corporate hog operation in Texas as a hired hand; highlighting the implications of such a move is Ty's story that a neighboring farmer kills himself before the inevitable foreclosure (339). Ty's displeasure with the urban scene and his statement "But I guess I'm gonna be getting used to it" (344) capture his resignation at the loss of a way of life.

Smiley places the demise of this family farm in an historical trajectory that interrelates the desire for progress and development with that of the family farmer and his (and, in line with other critics of this book, I use this term pointedly) devalued place in society. This trajectory is interrogated, for example, through Ginny's memories of the postwar, particularly those involving the Ericsons, who represent the desire in the postwar mainstream to "Escape to the County" (as the *Life* article mentioned in Chapter Two of this dissertation put it). The Ericsons' mainstream position sets them at odds with the local community; the husband was a veteran who became an engineer and his wife was from a "suburb of Chicago," which Ginny regards with a bit of disdain: "Her family had



owned horses, and she had been an avid equestrienne, which I suppose she thought prepared her for farm life” (43)<sup>61</sup>. Ginny’s memories make it clear that the difference between the Ericsons and the locals also manifested in farming methods, specifically the drive towards mechanization and profit exemplified by Ginny’s father Larry Cook. By contrast, the Ericson patriarch exhibited a desire “merely to get along, pay his mortgage, and enjoy himself as much as possible” (44).

The different attitudes towards farming displayed by the Cooks and the Ericsons are rooted in part in their different backgrounds of generational farmers versus mainstream newcomers. The Ericsons, in their marginal farming techniques, were embracing the regression they had come to Iowa for; as Ginny’s description implies, their farm was more like a playground than a viable business. This lack of business fortitude was viewed by the farmers not as an admirable trait, but as evidence of a failing character; thus, when the Ericsons’ daughter Ruth came to the Cooks to play with Ginny, the Cooks would consider it to be to Ruth’s benefit: “To bring Ruthie to my house... was to do her character development a favor that it was nevertheless impolite to mention” (47).

To the locals, these outsiders were clueless because they refused to follow the discourses of progress found in farming magazines and other outside experts, as followed by Larry Cook to perfection. The extent to which Larry Cook's farm embodied the idea of agricultural development is captured in a 1957 feature story in the general circulation magazine *Wallace's Farmer*, lauding the Cook farm for its innovative progress (45). This

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<sup>61</sup>This particular line could be seen as a critique of Smiley herself (see Nakadate 287 for a discussion of Smiley’s equestrienne background).

same thirst for progress and the detrimental effects that follow continue to plague the next Cook generation of which Ginny and her older sister Rose are part. In this way, the very trauma of the childhood sexual abuse inflicted upon these two women at the hand of their father symbolizes the larger historical trajectory of the family farm into big agribusiness: the farmer's desire for progress at all costs becomes tied to the rape of the land, the consequence of which are the mortgaged agribusinesses and their dissolution into the bigger corporate farms. The seemingly empty landscape at the end of the book — “you see that the fields make no room for houses or barnyards or people” (368) — resonates with this deep history and insurmountable loss.

The empty fields of post-1980s rural America also set the location of Hedges *GG*. Unlike Smiley, Hedges does not provide the reader with the deep history of a dying Iowa town. Instead, we are given the bitter aftermath of a half-century process through a young man's dysfunctional family and his own outlook on the world around him. The impact and presence of the past in the present is less obvious than in *A Thousand Acres*, but it is suggested through the character of Gilbert and can be enhanced by the reader's awareness of the farm crisis and its impact on rural America. Like Smiley, Hedges occupies an outsider position in relation to the working-class towns about which he writes. By his own account, Hedges grew up in West Des Moines, a “lovely but typical suburb of a large Midwestern city” (323). This suburban space is contrasted to his childhood visits to relatives in “small Iowa towns”: “These trips and the particular landscapes, the open sky and acres of corn, the abandoned farmhouses and the small schoolhouses, along with the always-different-but-always-the-same water tower of each town along the way, made a lasting impression” (323). Hedges' only access to these small towns is through the same

imagery available to an outsider from sub/urban America, and yet his more personal tie to relatives within these towns leaves a lasting impact on him which, in turn, marks his writing. Although Hedges notes this personal connection, in his fiction he maintains a distance from the rural landscape and its people, clearly setting himself apart from it in the dedication: “for my mother who is not fat and my father who is not dead,” an obvious reference to the main protagonist Gilbert who is surrounded by a morbidly obese mother and memories of his father's suicide. However, instead of reinserting a dominant narrative of WWPC rurality, Hedges uses the stereotypes associated with the rural subject position as an entry point into the complexity of the town. Initially, Gilbert is a WWPC rural subject who adopts the dominant discourse and rejects his locale in terms of that discourse. This helps make Gilbert a focalizer with whom the mainstream reader can sympathize, a narrative device which then helps open the reader to Gilbert's critique when its object becomes mainstream norms of progress. The trajectory traced by the novel, then, is one in which enlightenment is attained when a WWPC rural subject who had initially embraced the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality eventually sees through it and rejects it.

Gilbert Grape is an embittered man with a severely dysfunctional family and little opportunity, “left behind” in a dying Iowa town. At the beginning of the novel, Gilbert's sense of place clearly reflects the dominant discourse surrounding WWPC rurality, as he looks down upon his friends, his morbidly obese mother and the general simplicity of the town as backwards and regressed. As Gilbert later reflects on his family, “I look around the kitchen and consider my future here. The mess and stench are unbearable. Once upon a time my family had a certain fuzzy charm. Now we're like a boil on the butt

of Iowa” (240).

Although the novel is more immediately focused on Gilbert and his family, his life is also an extension of the plight of the town. There are many indicators throughout the novel that Endora, Iowa exemplifies the dying agricultural town: the youth leave for opportunities elsewhere (6), and the closure of the school symbolizes the bleak future of this location. Gilbert’s thoughts about the empty building, which holds “Too many memories for too many people” and is thus left standing (82), extend to the community at large: “I sit in my truck and remember going there. [...]. I listen for the sounds of kids playing at recess, but there is only quiet. I lift my T-shirt and wipe the sweat off my face. Minutes pass” (82). Although Gilbert believes himself superior to his location, he is very much part of it: his memory, albeit not a necessarily pleasant one as it is tied to the death of a particularly hated elementary school teacher (81), is one among many memories that are all that is seemingly left of the community.

This dismal present is in contrast to a postwar past that initially held some promise. The dysfunction of the family is directly attributed to the father's suicide and of which the run-down house becomes the symbolic reminder: “My father built this house with his own hands the year he married my mother, in honor of their nuptials. No wonder it all droops” (43). Similarly, Gilbert himself can be seen as a grotesque reversal of what his father once stood for in the town, for his father’s unyielding optimism and hope seem to be qualities Gilbert willfully disavows: “He was apparently a constant supporter, compliment giver, and always had a kind word for everyone. I was seven when he hung himself, and I don’t remember all that much, and anything I did remember, I’ve managed to forget” (49). While Gilbert seeks to dissociate himself from his father, the novel invites

us to recognize a continuity between their characters and, by extension, the time periods they represent. At the level of character, we are told that the resemblance between father and son is so striking that Gilbert is often mistaken for his father in the community (49).

A broader resonance is suggested through Gilbert's reflections: "I look at the picture. It's a man in his early twenties, messy hair, an easy smile. The man wears a red and black flannel shirt and holds a Christmas tree that he's obviously just cut down. The picture is of me if I were alive in the fifties. The picture is of my father" (250). Here, the father's hope can be seen as rooted in a past to which Gilbert has no access except through nostalgia. The picture also seems to suggest a direct trajectory leading from Albert Grape's hopeful 1950s to his son's embittered life in the early 1990s, inviting us to recognize in the larger circumstances surrounding Albert's life the very reasons for the eventual tragedy of his suicide and the broader disintegration of towns like Endora, Iowa. According to Gilbert, "I've often thought that my dad killed himself because he could see the future" (49). This future could be his dysfunctional family, but it is also the result of postwar "development" — legitimated as "progress" — which replaced local business with chain supermarkets and fast food chains built on old farmland.

While Albert's death signifies the hopelessness of the town, through Gilbert's mother the novel also seeks to represent the townspeople's memory of a better past predating their grotesque present. This becomes apparent, for example, in the town's reaction to seeing the monstrously obese Bonnie Grape when she ventures out to rescue her mentally retarded son Arnie from the county jail. Underlying the donations of diet books and money by the town, Gilbert detects something else, a chance to reclaim a lost past from its present distortion: "It's purely a natural desire on their part to recapture their lost

whatever it is they've lost that propels them to help in the reduction of my mother. Maybe if she gets thin, they'll get young" (127). Gilbert's observation "whatever it is they've lost" suggests a loss beyond youth, a memory of a time before both Bonnie Grape and Endora were grotesque distortions: a memory of when both thrived.

In some ways, *GG* could be seen as reinforcing the dominant view that the glory of WWPC rurality was in the past and that any better future would have to be sought elsewhere. Such an interpretation could be applied to Gilbert's observations upon Bonnie's death, "And we knew in some weird way that she wasn't gone, she had just moved into us and now it was time for us to move on" (314). However, as all the children gather to save their possessions before burning the house and Bonnie's body (chapter 59), it is also possible to read these observations and their actions as a refusal to disavow their past and their sense of themselves. As the novel concludes with the burning house and sirens in the distance, the resolve to move on may or may not be realized as an exodus out of Endora. What is unequivocally affirmed, however, is Gilbert's acceptance of his mother and through her the community at large — in all its loss but also its potential.

Along with Gilbert's perspective, the reader is also invited to move from viewing Endora through the lens of dominant discourses on WWPC rurality, to acknowledging the strengths of such rural locations despite their marginalized place within the U.S. Hedges also juxtaposes the town of Endora with mainstream society through references to a shared history, including cultural references to postwar icons such as Elvis (101-102). Bobbie Ann Mason also relies on cultural references in *In Country*, interweaving cultural references to the late 1960s and early 1980s with the representation of the WWPC rural location of Hopewell, Kentucky, and more specifically, the family

situation of the main protagonist, Sam Hughes. Critics like Brier and doCarmo have discussed Mason's use of popular cultural references throughout *In Country*, but what interests me here is the effect of this narrative strategy as it brings the mainstream reader closer to the rural outreaches through a shared cultural framework.

Hopewell is presented as a rather stereotypical, working-class/-poor Southern town, "behind the times" even in the early 1980s. As focalized through Sam and the townspeople she encounters, however, the town gains complexity and depth. Through Sam's desire to understand the Vietnam War, for example, the novel explores the impact of social and cultural changes on WWPC rural communities, a common theme in Mason's work (see Price 1-2; Whitton). While, as some critics have argued, Sam's journey towards understanding leads the reader (and, by extension, the nation at large) to a greater understanding of the war itself (see Price 56-57; Hinrichsen; McDermott, "The Ethics"; Hostein; Krasteva; and Carton for some examples), her search also leads the reader into a more thorough consideration of the predicament of rural locations in both the 1980s and the 1960s. Through Sam and those who had lived in the 1960s, the reader is shown the impact of the devaluation of WWPC rural space as well as the reactions of rural subjects to such devaluation in both the postwar and the present.

Mason has thus chosen a particular subject position through which to examine the role of the Vietnam War in American society. Like many of Mason's characters, the teenaged Sam represents "ordinary people living on the rural margins of geography and society" (Marwitz 1), subjects whose experience of rurality is one of exclusion tied to geography (the rural "South" as set apart from the urban "North) and class. To an extent, characters in *In Country* voice Mason's own conflation of geographic region and class that appears

to at least in some ways overlap with that of the dominant discourse. In an interview included in the collection *Passion and Craft*, when Mason is asked if she felt geographic or class difference most impacted, Mason responds: “Class. Which is bound up with the South and the North, because the South felt so inferior to the North” (Mason, “Quiet” 27)<sup>62</sup>. While characters in the novel attribute the economic and social poverty of their rural location to being part of the “South,” and associate opportunities for prosperity with moving out of the region, the perspective also generates a counter-narrative that is critical of the promises advanced by both the conservative and countercultural postwar, promises that did not come to fruition for WWPC rurality of the post-1980s.

A brief outline of the plot of *In Country* will illustrate the tension between WWPC rurality and the mainstream of the 1960s and the 1980s. Sam's father died in Vietnam before she was born; her mother, Irene, took up with the local countercultural movement in the late 1960s/early 1970s, and went on to take care of her Vietnam vet brother Emmett before remarrying and moving to suburban Lexington in the early 1980s. Sam, just out of high school, is left to take care of her uncle while she contemplates her future options, her local community and the Vietnam War generally. The novel ends with a voyage to the Wall in Washington, D.C., consisting of herself, Emmett, and her paternal grandmother, Mamaw.

Even from this brief description, it is obvious that Sam's character relays a story of the nation at large: as pointed out in other contexts by scholars like Marita Sturken, the Wall is seen as a long overdue tribute to Vietnam vets and a place of national healing (chapter

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of other interviews where Mason makes this distinction, see Price 1-2; 10-11.



2). But through Sam we also see the diverse experiences of other characters surrounding the 1960s cultural conflict and the continuation of this conflict in the 1980s. According to Joanna Price, Sam's main access point to the 1960s and its popular cultural representations in the 1980s are the real Vietnam vets of her town, and this contact "leads her to try and tap into the energy of American culture" (66) of both the 1960s and the 1980s. However, while Sam is trying to tap into this larger culture and, in the process, tap into its attendant notions of WWCP rural places like Hopewell, her story also presents a critique of these notions and their actual effects, both material and cultural, on rural locations.

Like Gilbert in *GG*, Sam appears to embrace the dominant view towards WWCP rurality, a view that her mother had also adopted in the postwar period. Like Gilbert, her perception of the town is colored by the lack of economic opportunity around her. The description of the town and its outlying area fits the stereotypical rural town afflicted with rural brain drain, as evident in a description of traffic patterns: "There were fewer people driving to work in the morning than there were kids cruising in the evening" (75). We can infer that part of this brain drain is due to the lack of economic opportunity to sustain the town. Other than college education, which would have to be pursued elsewhere, any future opportunities would lie in factories (farm equipment and paper) or chain stores (29; 32). Even the most traditional of rural economies, the family farm, has disappeared, leaving only its vestiges in the landscape: "They were on Old Hopewell Road...They passed old farms with new house trailers in front. Farm machinery lay rusting beside lopsided barns" (68). Like Old Hopewell Road, these farms have been "developed" out of existence, replaced by the newer indicators of the rural working class: house trailers on

decaying property. The rusting farm machinery and dilapidated barns speak to a past reality that is so radically different than the present that it exceeds Sam's grasp; as a result, this past becomes relegated to the unsaid<sup>63</sup>.

Sam sees little hope in her future, noting the futility of the local economy and college alike. However, Sam is also drawn to the signs of mainstream development around Hopewell and other local towns, particularly malls (43) and a local housing development (143-144). Sam's admiration of such mainstream developments is in contrast to her rejection of those parts of her community that appear undeveloped as we see, for example, in her comparison of the new houses with the old: "The old houses in town were all similar white wood or brick homes. But the new houses were large and stylish and as varied as women's fashions" (144). Although Sam's view towards Hopewell's "development" is rooted in a teenager's perspective in the 1980s, it is something shared with her mother, Irene. In her brief visit to Hopewell, Irene repeatedly voices her disdain for the family home and town itself, and makes clear that for her, rejecting Hopewell is a necessary precondition for a "successful" life. Moreover, it is clear what a successful life entails: a ranch-style home in Lexington, clearly separated from Hopewell geographically and culturally. The fact that Irene attempts to separate herself from her WWPC rural origins is evident in her use of geographic binaries ("there" is Lexington, "here" is Hopewell) when she cajoles Sam and Emmett to leave Hopewell and join her in Lexington: "I want you to come up there! I'm sick of this place. This house is a dump,

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<sup>63</sup> Such descriptions prove Price's assertion that Mason's style evokes more meaning in the "unsaid" than in what is explicitly stated (6-7).

and I'd be happy if I never saw Hopewell again in my life.” (156). Although Sam uses temporal distinctions to compare the “old” homes and “new” homes, her observations mirror the dominant discourse exhibited here by her mother.

We can see that this devaluation is rooted in the postwar, and specifically the 1960s counterculture of which Irene was part. Through Irene, we see that the counterculture came to Hopewell from a wealthier world (234), and that they did not hold Hopewell, which they mocked as “Dopewell” (233), in very high regard. Further, this clash of values is exposed in Irene’s recollection that the community at large did not accept these hippies, ostensibly causing them to leave (233). Part of the distaste towards the counterculture stemmed from the counterculture’s rejection of the war and the townspeople’s investment in a war in which many local boys fought and died. Some of the counterculture’s rhetoric carries into Sam’s worldview, provoking some of the raw sentiment that locals like her Mamaw felt at the time. Mamaw replies to Sam's and Emmett’s view that her father died for nothing:

“Well, Emmett can talk. He didn't die,” Mamaw said indignantly.

“Dwayne was fighting for a cause, and back then people didn't go around protesting. He believed in his country, and he was ready to go over there and fight.”

“If you could go back to that time, would you let him go or would you send him to Canada?” Sam asked.

“Oh, Sam,” Mamaw said, staring down at the linoleum. “People don't have choices like that.” (197)

Mamaw’s statement that “People don’t have choices like that” ostensibly refers to her

inability to change the past, but it can also be read in other ways, thus suggesting some of the reasons for the high participation of WCPC rural boys in Vietnam. This service could have stemmed from feelings of duty rooted in tradition, as attested by the sheer number of local vets and their acceptance by the community (79). In this way, Mamaw's statement regarding her son's death is a reflection of readings by critics who note her conservatism is tied to her gender (in Jason, *Fourteen Landing Zones* 43-44). However, if we read her statement a bit differently, such conservatism reflects her WWPC rural location as well: given the hardship and lack of economic opportunity in the rural areas, the army appeared as an inevitable choice. And, in light of the issue of Vietnam as discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation, this sentiment is compounded if we consider that such locations did not lend themselves to the more elite connections through which draft evasion could be possible.

The tension existing between a mainstream-informed counterculture and WWPC rural inhabitants like Mamaw create a particular conflict within those, like Sam's mother, who embraced their countercultural place in the past. This conflict can be read for a critique on the unsaid within the counterculture itself. Irene notes the privilege of her ex-boyfriend in particular, and although she doesn't deride his background, the reader is left to wonder at the following statement: "I went back to Hopewell because I could never depend on him to make a living?...Well, it wasn't five years till I heard Bob had a good job in his dad's office-supply company back in California. He's probably worth a fortune now" (235). That her ex-boyfriend could return to California despite his poverty, land a family job and within a few years make a "fortune" belies the counterculture's image of itself. While Irene is critical of "Dopewell," justifying her need to escape, her comments

also point to her disillusionment with and bitterness towards the counterculture she once embraced. As a result, she is forced to recognize the difference between their respective circumstances: they were able to go back to and move on with their mainstream lives, an option not available to her until much later.

Irene is a swing point between the devalued WCPC rural Hopewell and the counterculture, much like Mason herself (see Whitton chapter 2 for a discussion). To recall my discussion in Chapter Two, Mason's attitude towards the counterculture may be ambivalent: while on one hand she felt the counterculture gave her freedom, she was also constrained by mainstream assumptions that ultimately devalued her rural past. Further, Mason is well aware of the countercultural privilege to step out of society because its members occupied a central position within it. Her focus on the perspectives of those without such privilege reflects an imperative in her writing to give voice to the marginalized, to those, as she notes in an interview, "who had never been in the center, who had never had that advantage of being able to criticize society enough to leave it, like the hippies were able to do in the sixties" ("Quiet" 28). I believe Irene can be read similarly even if she never explicitly critiques the counterculture. Irene's devaluation of Hopewell is related at least in part to her feelings of inferiority, as focalized through Sam: "Irene had felt inferior in the city school because she was self-conscious about being from the country and so she did rebellious things to get attention" (Mason, *In Country* 191). Her adoption of the counterculture could be seen as at once devaluing her country roots and giving her the tools with which to rebel against her rural location. In this reading, Sam does more than just re-join her mother to her hippie past "Without blaming her hippie friends who 'escaped the draft'" (Dwyer 76). In fact, inasmuch as Sam allows

her mother to embrace her countercultural past, she also gives her mother the voice in which to reject the very elements of the counterculture that led “Most of those guys [to] escape[d] the draft somehow”; she advises Sam: “When you get to that memorial, you look at the names. You’ll see all those country boy names, I bet you anything” (Mason, *In Country* 235). These soldiers’ names represent the conflict between the counterculture and WWPC rural locations, but Irene’s statement also helps demonstrate an ambivalence towards cultural “progress” that leads to such divisions in the first place, thus resonating with Mason’s own sense of “inferiority” over her rural background as a child (Price 1-2), her embracing of the counterculture, and her ability to recognize the positives of “progress” while also exposing its negative impact on WWPC rural locations (see Price 13-14 for an example).

Although some critics feel that Sam's search cannot heal the rift created by Vietnam and the veteran experience (see Stewart in Jason, *Fourteen Landing Zones*), there is still an interrogation of the larger sociocultural context surrounding her journey. Sam's search forces her to investigate the nostalgia that she — and U.S. culture at large — hold for the 1960s, nostalgia that reflects the shallow understanding of this next generation and that is exposed by characters who had experienced the period, most notably Emmett's ex-girlfriend (64) and Sam's mother (236). Through Sam, the reader is also given insight beyond the dominant discourses surrounding WWPC rurality. Understanding such a geography has implications for understanding Vietnam, as some critics point out (Durham 45-46), but it also brings to light the larger location of this rural place in light of

the mainstream norms of development and progress that have greatly impacted it<sup>64</sup>, in both the postwar and the post-1980s from which this novel was written.

Despite their differences, these eight novels exhibit a WWPC rural counter-narrative that critically approaches both the past and the present. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus on a number of more specific aspects of this critique that are present in all eight novels albeit to varying degrees. As some of these novels offer more material regarding this critique, my analysis will focus on some novels more than others.

## II. “Bad Locations”

The counter-narrative demonstrated across these novels contest the dominant discourse that portrays WWPC rural locations as pasts-in-present and provide a legitimate critique of the mainstream norms of progress and development that have defined rural locations in part as regressed holdovers, existing outside of modern consciousness. This critique begins with recognizing that differences between these WWPC rural locations and the mainstream in both postwar and present settings can result in negative associations attached to WWPC rural locations. The fact that these authors foreground the rural-ness of their characters follows the tendency within American culture to distinguish between urbanity and rurality in terms of individual and cultural aptitude. As critic Andrew Lutz observes, “If we really want to strike hard at a person's character, we often resort to reaffirming the binary of city vs. country or town; we have got to say something about where that person is from in order to criticize that person” (68). The novels discussed here exhibit this binary in two ways: 1. Through

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<sup>64</sup> For one discussion, see Howell's dissertation *Rereading Agrarianism*, particularly chapter four.

WWCPC rural characters who internalize their regressed status in society; 2. Through WWCPC rural characters who challenge the social order that devalues their location.

In a sense, these WWCPC rural places may be considered as “bad locations” (12), to use a phrase from the local banker and Ms. Beryl’s son, Clive Jr. in *Nobody’s Fool*. Here, “bad” is both an economic and cultural valuation, as these locations are viewed as economically undeveloped — places marked by almost non-existent industry and low real estate values — and out-of-step culturally. Clive Jr.’s phrase echoes mainstream norms in both the postwar and the present which map deviance from progress and development onto geography: if a place does not appear middle-classless and sub/urban, then it is “undeveloped” and therefore “bad.” For the remainder of this section, I will analyze this concept through the lens of the novels’ counter-narratives.

North Bath seems like it will always be a “bad location,” a trait shared with other rural locations in the U.S. Towards the end of *Nobody’s Fool*, Clive Jr. flees from North Bath after his failed investment deal. After getting off the Interstate outside of Pittsburgh he ends up “somewhere in Western Pennsylvania” but still in the country:

And so Clive Jr. had gotten off at the next exit, headed south along the deserted two-lane blacktops of the western Alleghenies, flying through at two in the morning a series of tiny, dying villages with little more than a dark, run-down gas station/garage/convenience store to offer. America, it occurred to him now, was still full of bad locations. (473)

Clive's use of the term “bad location” to describe both Bath and nameless PA towns points to the economic and cultural devaluation visited upon rurality across the country. Reinforcing this devaluation is the fact that Clive cannot place where he is, only that he is



“somewhere” in Pennsylvania, relatively close to Pittsburgh. Like Bath, these PA towns are known only in relation to the sub/urban space closest to them, and by extension, valued insofar as they can become satellites to the middle-classless sub/urban. Such towns are at worst the cast-offs and detritus of mainstream progress (hence, the description of “dying villages”), and at best places that outside interests could be convinced to invest in and profit from, as Clive tries to do.

The scene described above captures a thread that runs through all eight novels: WWPC rurality is perceived as lying *outside* the geographic and cultural mainstream. WWPC rural subjects at times internalize this devalued cultural position, but on some occasions rise to critique the mainstream that reinforces such devaluation. The internalization occurs when WWPC rural subjects accept a binary that posits a WWPC rural “here” set against a middle-classless sub/urban “there,” where the “here” is marked by a lack of economic opportunity and upward mobility and is culturally devalued. This binary underpins the desire for escape expressed by the characters in these novels, the hope that prosperity will follow if one left “here.” Physical mobility away from these WWPC rural places is seen as equal to upward mobility in class terms as well, making geographic location inextricable from one’s class position.

One way that these novels express this here/there binary is through the relationship of WWPC rural spaces to urban centers. All of the locations in the novels (except for Greenville in *Bastard Out of Carolina*) are fictional entities, although some of them are based on actual places: North Bath in *Nobody’s Fool*, for example, may be modeled on Ballston Spa, NY (McGuire notes that according to Russo “There are similarities”), and *In Country’s* Hopewell, KY may be modeled on Mason’s hometown a place where,

according to Lyons and Oliver, “many of her stories are set” (449). While the small towns are fictional locales, they are all situated in relation to actual urban centers that serve as points of orientation for the reader. The use of real urban places may be a practicality: the name “Ballston Spa” would have little resonance for most readers, but the I-87 corridor connecting NYC, Albany and Montreal does. These common geographical references thus help situate the reader in relation to otherwise unknown rural spaces, rendering the fictional worlds more accessible.

Perhaps another reason for the use of actual urban centers to orient these fictional locales is to underscore the feelings of alienation experienced by WWCP subjects. The settings of these novels are all “somewhere,” be it upstate NY, New Hampshire, Maine, South Carolina, Kentucky, Idaho or Iowa. Their characters are viscerally aware that the places they inhabit are negligible, that the real centers of money, power and culture are not “here” but “there.” The sub/urban centers in the novels all have the solidity and weight of actual urban places: NYC/Albany/ Montreal (*Nobody's Fool*); Boston (*Affliction*; *Empire Falls*; *Housekeeping*); smaller New England cities like Concord (*Affliction*) or Portland (*Empire*); Des Moines (*A Thousand Acres*; *What's Eating*) or other Midwestern cities like Chicago (*What's Eating*) or St. Paul and Minneapolis (*A Thousand*); Denver or Seattle (*Housekeeping*); Lexington (*In Country*); Atlanta (*Bastard*). In all of these cases, “there” is a recognizable and real place, it is *not* rural, it is everything that the respective WWCP rural locations could not be. The novels thus express the social and cultural authority and power of sub/urbanity by portraying and naming actual urban centers, in contrast to the nameless rural places existing in the fictional margins. However, in looking closely at these rural “worlds,” we can start to see

them as populated by subjects who voice a WWPC rural counter-narrative that runs through these novels.

### III. Evolution of Progress and Development

Even as each novel is set in a unique locale that is tied in part to a particular region, common themes run through them which bear on their shared WWPC rural locations and the dominant view towards these places in the U.S. One such common concern that reaches across region and time in these novels is the perceived lack of economic opportunity and therefore lack of upward mobility for subjects in their WWPC rural communities, as there is little opportunity to improve one's socioeconomic position in both postwar and post-1980s settings.

Thus it is significant that envisioning a better life elsewhere is tied to respectable geographic locations. In *Bastard*, Bone's initial desire to escape is most obviously tied to her abusive stepfather, but her shame also stems from her white trash positioning within her Southern community and leads her to fantasize about a "highway that went north" (Allison, *Bastard* 259). Likewise, in *Housekeeping*, Lucille's escape from Sylvie and Ruth is an attempt at a more stable family situation, but it is also tied to her desire for postwar mainstream respectability in Boston, "Because it isn't Fingerbone..." (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 132). The desire to escape WWPC rural locations is also found in the novels most firmly set in the present and is expressed as a general need to escape places like North Bath, as voiced by Sully: "Half the town's been meaning to leave. They don't, though, most of them" (Russo, *Nobody's* 38), or Lawford, NH, as focalized through Wade: "Like almost everyone else in northern New England, [Wade] talked now and then about getting the hell out of this godforsaken place..." (Banks 83). Other novels, like *GG*

and *In Country*, tie this escape to more concrete locales. Gilbert's desire to leave Endora can most easily be tied to his family situation, but it is also a situation that is intertwined with the town; upward mobility for him means moving to places like “Ames or Des Moines and the really ambitious made it over to Omaha” (Hedges 6). For Sam in *In Country*, success is tied to the more exotic: “She would like to move somewhere far away — Miami or San Francisco maybe. She wants to live anywhere but Hopewell” (7). It does not matter where Sam goes, as long as it is *not* Hopewell. Like her mother, albeit in different ways, Sam sees “Hopewell” as a place where mainstream success, whether as a mall or a subdivision, is unrealizable. In order to realize the relative freedom envisioned within the mainstream, Sam must leave Hopewell.

These characters know that to find opportunity necessitates physically moving outside of their immediate locales. While this movement away from a rural “here” is also tied to the desire to escape their devalued sociocultural location, it is this very positioning that becomes the vantage point from which the mainstream norms are critiqued. In order to wage this critique, the characters must exceed their internalized feelings of devaluation, and in the process exhibit the agency with which to forge such a critique. Thus, these characters are aware of their position within the U.S., are capable of questioning themselves, their communities and the mainstream through a process of personal growth with which the reader is also invited to identify. Ultimately, the very WWPC rural spaces that are devalued and/or forgotten become the source of a critique of mainstream norms and of those who abide by these norms since at least the postwar period. In these critiques, “progress” and “development” are not seen as the natural trajectories that have captured the national imagination but as arbitrary conceptions that reinforce particular

interests to the exclusion of others.

As we have seen in previous chapters, mainstream progress is defined in part through dominant discourses that portray WWPC rurality as either idealized or devalued locations that modern progress has left behind. This dominant discourse is exposed and critiqued in the novels. Speaking to the use of regressed rurality for mainstream entertainment, Gilbert mocks mainstream tourism when he imagines a family business that would include his obese mother and a stuffed replica of his hanging father: “In that brief hour, I saw a family business that would rival any other. I pictured this struggling town experiencing a financial rebirth; people from all over driving to see us. Here was an idea that would allow us to work together, celebrate our past, and share it with the world” (128). A critique of the mainstream desire to develop rural locations emerges through the example of the town of Empire Falls whose changing fortunes as a mill town reflect the changing definitions of development for rural spaces: from resource and production (pre-WWII), to bottom line profit margins that closed the mill (postwar) and, finally, mainstream “development” of these towns in a more gentrified present. Rolfe in *Affliction* accentuates this mainstream re-writing of WWPC rurality by tying his brother's murderous rampage to the secretive real estate dealings that turned Lawford into a ski resort and a “thriving economic zone” (353), developments in which Rolfe refuses to participate by refusing to sell his empty family house. Rolfe frames this refusal as a question, leading the reader to also question the supposedly progressive move of selling a decrepit old house to condo developers: “Now and then I drive out and sit in my car and look at the wreck of a house and wonder why not let it go, why not let LaRiviere buy it and tear down the house and build the condominiums he wants there?” (352). Rolfe’s

unanswered question invites the reader to reflect on the fraught nature of mainstream progress and development in the post-1980s: the “decrepit old house” (i.e. WWPC rurality) would benefit in some ways from outside development, but this development would also yoke Lawford to outside interests, further compromising its community.

In addition to the effect of progress and development in the present, we are also shown a revisionary critique of this rhetoric in the postwar, as we saw already in Bone’s rejection of the consumer’s republic in *Bastard*. A similar type of critique, if not necessarily a rejection, can be seen in *A Thousand Acres*, where Ginny’s memories establish the difference of this farm family from the postwar mainstream. We can see this through clothing, for example, as Ginny comments on her mother’s out-of-date dresses as compared to the “postwar ‘New Look’” (224), and remembers her sister Caroline’s style-consciousness fueled by the general circulation *Glamour* and a desire for fashion that is largely “unavailable in Zebulon County” (64). We see an extension of such critique through the representation of empty fields, for example, suggesting the predatory mainstream practices beginning in (and in some ways predating) the postwar period, just as the decaying mill town of *Empire Falls* is a constant reminder of destructive changes and of what once was. In both novels, the absent presence of this past can be read within the actions of the characters, the buildings and the landscape in the present. A similar attempt to capture this absent presence can be found within the closing pages of *Housekeeping*, where Ruth imagines Lucille having ascended to a more mainstream Boston, yet still unable to shake off her origins: “No one watching this woman...could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie” (218-219). It

is possible to “develop” into middle-classlessness, but it is impossible to completely overwrite those communities who do not, or will not, conform, even as these communities may choose or be forced to make a new life elsewhere. This haunting presence within the upwardly mobile will be discussed in more detail in regards to a few of the novels in the last section of this chapter.

Sympathy with those places and people who are elided by changing notions of progress and development is also at the core of *GG*. Although Gilbert is originally cynical of his town, his family and his future, it becomes apparent that he is not rejecting rurality outright, but instead rejects its role in U.S. society. As we saw above in regards to Ginny in *A Thousand Acres*, Gilbert feels a kind of death within those things that symbolize mainstream progress. In Gilbert’s case, it is not a critique that arises from an experience of the urban, as with Ginny, but a critique directed at the supermarket that is phasing out Lamson Grocery, the local grocery store and his place of employment. Gilbert is aware that this new supermarket represents an evolved step towards the mainstream: “Food Land is equipped with special cash registers that have conveyor belts, the kind of belt you see in Des Moines, the kind you never thought would make it to Endora” (Hedges 16). By having this “new,” urban technology, Endora becomes part of the modern age. As we have seen, such a material step forward can also be translated into cultural terms, where a moving conveyor belt comes to represent a sense of personal evolution. However, Gilbert criticizes the notion that “modern” improvements are by necessity a step forward in one's humanity, as he compares Food Land to Lamson Grocery: “But if you need the trappings of technology to think you're getting a good bargain, then I guess you better mosey your brainless body down to Food Land” (16). By

adhering to the offerings of mainstream progress, one is ironically sacrificing a piece of humanity, despite the appearance of consumer/individual power and choice that Gilbert experiences on his first visit to the new store (269). It is during this trip that Gilbert runs into Mr. Lamson, who is also at Food Land for the first time:

He pushes his empty cart down Aisle Ten. I watch him look from side to side, floating along slowly, studying product after product. His simple flannel shirt, his noble brown shoes move away from me, reducing Mr. Lamson in size but not in stature. (270)

In this scene we see a defeated Mr. Lamson, symbolic of an older rural way of life, finally understanding his own demise. However, Lamson's presence may also speak to his resistance to Food Land itself: his empty cart speaks to his not buying into this mainstream enterprise, and his “stature” continues despite his decreasing significance within such a mainstream institution. This symbol conveys a strength of spirit that will not be overwritten by the mainstream development of rural spaces, something Gilbert communicates through his very observation.

Gilbert’s experience speaks to the opportunities offered by and the costs associated with progress and development. *In Country* also exemplifies the conflict between the opportunities offered by aspects of mainstream progress and the negative consequences occurring once WCPC rural spaces are overwritten by such development<sup>65</sup>. When Irene visits Sam and Emmett in Hopewell, we see one example of how such changes have affected the farming landscape. After Irene shows Sam and Emmett a pastoral field that

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<sup>65</sup>Cynthia Howell also points this out in her dissertation (see particularly 173-174).



looks like pictures of “England,” Sam takes notice of the rest of the landscape: “All the houses were near the road, and the barns were leaning, and the silhouetted farm equipment was standing silent and still, looking like outwitted dinosaurs caught dead in their tracks by some asteroids. None of the other farms looked like England” (163). What the landscape reflects is a new reality in which family farms, like the dinosaurs, have been rendered obsolete and extinct by powerful outside forces. However, we are also made to realize that without such progress, Sam would still be in a farming family like her father's, a prospect she finds repulsive. This is highlighted in the account of Sam's visit to her father's family, when she realizes that if her father had survived Vietnam, he would have returned to his farming life, and Sam would have been enmeshed in poverty, jealous of “modern” conveniences like VCRs and “jiggling a baby on her knee,” a thought that is enough to make Sam indirectly sick (195). Instead of being stuck in a situation she does not want, she is offered an avenue of escape through popular culture in music, movies, TV, and also through upward mobility in being able to attend college in Lexington, like her mother. Such progress provides her with choices she would otherwise not have, but none of them allow her the choice to stay “here.”

As we see from the discussion thus far, the rhetoric of mainstream progress and its development of WWPC rurality proved to be both a blessing and a curse, as with greater opportunities came also the physical and cultural disintegration of rural communities. As we have started to see, the novels do not accept these norms unequivocally, and it is at this point that I would like to bring out this critique further through an analysis of familiar tropes such as roads and upwardly mobile characters. The resulting counter-narrative questions the belief that mainstream progress and

development are part of a natural evolution towards civility and points to the destructive consequences of this conception of “progress.”

i. Index of culture — Roads

Roads figure more or less prominently in all of the novels examined here. In the novels roads are present as an inescapable feature of these rural locales, but they also foreground the “off road” spaces of WWPC rурality from which the novels’ critique of mainstream norms of progress and development are generated. Thus roads, and particularly interstates, represent the separateness of mainstream society and culture from WWPC rурality: Gilbert in *GG* (128) and Ginny in *A Thousand* (3) both align roads with outsiders passing through, and Rolfe in *Affliction* explains Lawford in part through Route 29, a road “replaced a generation ago by the interstate ten miles east” (9). The interstate also represents escape for many of the characters, as we saw in relation to Bone in *Bastard* and the reference in *Housekeeping* to traveling from Seattle to Idaho in relation to the “fateful journey” of Ruth’s mother to commit suicide. In some of the novels, the road more explicitly serves to further social critique as we see through Sam’s character in *In Country*. Sam initially associates the Interstate with escape towards freedom (7), but then comes to regard it differently: “America the beautiful. It is beautiful indeed, Sam thinks now on the road. [...]. The farms are pretty, the interstates are pleasant. Even the strip mines are hidden behind a ridge on the parkway. It is a good country” (231). Behind the pretty scenery lies an unsaid that contradicts the description of America as a “good country”: the farm crisis and the strip mines are hidden by the bucolic scenery and kept at a remove from the travelers on the Interstate, but this does not change the fact that such things exist. Thus, the reader is invited to share in this view of

the unsaid along with Sam and potentially question the extent to which a country can be “good” if such things are allowed to happen in its periphery.

*Nobody's Fool* is a particularly suggestive example of using the highway as a trope through which to view the supposed enlightenment that occurs with mainstream progress and development. The novel opens by guiding the reader through the road network approaching North Bath. Bath's Main Street is described by its relationship to other roads: “old Route 27A” and I-87 (3). Throughout the novel, the narrator associates the prosperity and demise of Bath with the evolution of roads, beginning with the “dirt roads” that drew out-of-towners towards its once famous mineral springs in the 1800s (7), to the tourist industry through the 1950s, fueled in part by Bath's proximity to Route 27A, a road travelers used to go north. However, the interstate's more direct route replaced the usefulness of Route 27A and, in turn, Bath itself. As the narrator explains, “The completion of the interstate, which allowed New York and Albany direct access to Schuyler Springs, Lake George, Lake Placid and Montreal did the deed, effectively isolating Bath” (111). With the introduction of the Interstate, Bath's separation from the middle-classless sub/urban is complete.

Russo brings the reader into this WWPC rural location through the eyes of the people traveling on the Interstate: “City people on their way north, getting off the interstate in search of food and fuel,” dreaming of some imagined small-town ideal (3). The reality of Bath, however, clashes with such expectations as we see when the “city people” consider stopping off at Bath on their return trip: “But then they remembered how the exit had been tricky, how North Bath hadn't been all that close to the highway...Such towns were pretty, green graves, they knew, and so the impulse to take a

second look died unarticulated and the cars flew by the North Bath exit without slowing down” (4). In this formulation, progress is tied to the interstate and the “city people” who are able to forget about places like Bath. As such, Bath and its WWPC rural location become part of what remains “unarticulated,” unsaid.

However, progress and those people who most directly align with its realization, as seen here in the “city people” traveling the interstate, are not unequivocally embraced within Russo’s novel. The mainstream, represented as “snotty New Yorkers,” may have brought potential economic opportunities but with them come cultural devaluation, “insults” and condescension (112): the residents of North Bath are viewed, in the words of one outsider, as “behaving” and “looking” funny compared to the rest of the country (445-446). While these condescending attitudes assume the superiority of the urban to the WWPC rural locations “left behind” the road of progress, the comparison of old Route 27A to the interstate suggests that this superiority is only an illusion. To make this point, the narrator compares the relatively harmless “head-on collisions” of Route 27A to the fatal and impersonal accidents on the interstate. The head-on collisions, while solved through drunken fighting, still involved personal engagement with other members of the rural community. In contrast on the interstate, the emblem of progress, “Drivers simply fell asleep on its straight, smooth surface” separated from on-coming traffic by a “fifty-yard” median, in an accident on the interstate “The drivers didn’t pick fights over whose fault it was. They were taken to the hospital as a formality, to be pronounced dead” (111). The interstate becomes a place of anonymity and indifference: the drivers are removed from themselves to the point of sleepy unawareness and removed from the consequences of such actions by a median. By implication, a successful life within this land of

modernity requires indifference to others, and as we see in the novel through Sully's estranged son Peter, results in condescension towards anybody perceived as having failed to attain such a life.

In *Nobody's Fool*, the imagery of roads illustrates the tension between WWPC rurality and the mainstream. However, this tension is illustrated in many of these novels in other ways as well. As we see in Peter and Sully's relationship, this tension continues within the upwardly mobile who have physically moved away from their WWPC rural origins, but who can never truly escape them. Further, while those upwardly mobile characters may have taken a personal "road" of progress towards the mainstream, they are not necessarily better people for it. In some of these novels, upward mobility may be a product of the opportunity afforded by the mainstream, most notably through college education, but it is also something that requires personal detachment from and devaluation of the WWPC rural places from which they have come and thus comes with a high price.

#### **IV. College education — here versus there**

Many of these novels use college education as a way to interrogate the relationship between a WWPC rural "here" and a mainstream "there." Some make passing references to college education as a necessary escape route from WWPC rurality, as we see in *GG* and *In Country*, while others describe in more detail the personal conflict of those caught between a rural "here" and a mainstream "there." The shame in and/or rejection of WWPC rurality that result from such a conflict becomes part and parcel of success in mainstream society, a success that is always conflicted for these characters, if it is gained at all.

The internal conflict experienced by the upwardly mobile character in these novels challenges the dominant view that moving into middle-classless sub/urbanity is an evolutionary process undertaken by those who naturally belong. Instead, this critique portrays upward mobility as an arbitrary game that the morally deficient choose to play, and their attainment of mainstream success is a reflection of character weakness. Thus, the portrayal of upward mobility in some of these novels helps articulate a WWPC rural counter-narrative: instead of depicting the rejection of WWPC rurality by the upwardly mobile as a reasonable reaction, the novels use it as evidence of a deficiency in characters whom the mainstream considers the most capable products to emerge out of WWPC rural locations. In what follows I focus on *Nobody's Fool*, *Affliction*, and *A Thousand Acres* in order to demonstrate this point with particular emphasis on two elements: what I am terming “upward detachment,” or the emotional separation of the upwardly mobile from their origins, and “upward mobility and nostalgia,” where the adoption of mainstream norms manifests in a dismissive nostalgia towards WWPC rural locations.

#### i. Upward Detachment

For the upwardly mobile characters in these novels, detachment and a thinly veiled disdain for their WWPC rural origins become part of mainstream success. As we see in *Affliction* and *Nobody's Fool*, those characters who are the most disdainful are associated with both upward mobility and higher education.

College as a vehicle for upward mobility away from WWPC rurality affects both the rural residents who stay and those who leave for more mainstream locations. The narrator of *Nobody's Fool* points to North Bath's rural “here” as a culturally removed other to the mainstream society outside its borders; the downstate tourists and developers as well as

the college educated distance themselves from this WWPC rural location. The separation between the college-educated mainstream and the locals is particularly obvious in the summer tourist season, when a “whole new staff” of people, described as “mostly college students imported from the Albany area,” is hired to deal with downstate tourists (112). The arrival of these transient student workers is a “sign for the locals to slink off into their seasonal exile” (112). The narrator's use of words like “import” and “exile” give particular weight to this geographic — and classed — divide: the mainstream world is a “there” to Bath's “here,” separated by an invisible yet palpable border that makes it impossible for the locals to co-exist in the same space with the students and tourists during tourist season.

This separation between the mainstream and WWPC rurality plays a part in the conflict between Sully and his upwardly mobile son Peter. Although their conflict is rooted in a much deeper discontent, it is also colored by the mainstream association of progress with college education. Sully's and Peter's different experiences of college highlight this conflict: where Sully briefly attended the local community college as required by the terms of his worker's compensation (21), Peter went away to attain his PhD and a (failed) tenure bid at West Virginia University. For Sully, college was government mandated and seemingly incompatible with his everyday life (27-28); Peter's PhD pursuit is directly tied to the upwardly mobile aspirations of his mother (300). Again, Peter's relative success as a PhD-holding college professor is understood in geographic terms, through the “out-of-state license” of his car (60). Peter's success is by extension tied to his physical mobility outside of Bath, exemplified by his relocation to another state. However, Peter's relative success is shown in the novel to be a failure by

mainstream standards, for his relocation is to another relatively marginal region (West Virginia), and he is denied tenure at the university.

The complicated hierarchy of social standing becomes apparent when Sully is hired by a downstate “university professor” to fix a house in Bath (259). Sully's devalued position is made clear through the professor's observations in his telephone conversation with Sully, equating Sully to the “gruff, frontier independence of the American blue-collar worker” (259). The pomposity of these remarks accentuates the cultural divide between the two, a divide that is also figured spatially in this scene, since the professor is calling from his NYC residence (259). Sully tries to maintain a more equal footing to the professor by referring to his own connection to college, claiming that he was “dropping out of [community] college” to do work for the professor and mentioning that his son was a “university professor” (259). While the former statement receives no remark from the professor, the latter is met with “Incredulity” (259), presumably at the possibility that a WWPC rural man could have such a tie to the university community. When Sully tells the professor that his son was “denied tenure” in “West Virginia,” the professor’s remark “Where does one go from there?” (259) is revealing. While Peter's social standing is higher than his rural origins (he did go elsewhere, in both a geographic and classed sense) and can be a source of pride for his estranged father, it is a negligible standing to those, like a NYC university professor, who truly belong in the mainstream. Again, it is noteworthy that the professor uses geography to express this social devaluation: “where” does one go from “there.”

Even if Peter fails by more mainstream standards, there is no question that his upward mobility has set him further apart from his town and familial origins. Peter’s detachment



from his background is most poignantly illustrated through his relationship with his mother, Vera, who in pushing him towards upward mobility had effectively pushed him away from her:

For Peter, in becoming a son to be proud of — an educator like her father, a college professor at home in the very environment that had intimidated Vera — had learned to lose his interest in and affection for her, coolly dismissing the books she recommended to him, smiling his ironic smile at her political views as if to suggest that she was incapable of any opinion or observation that wasn't entirely typical or predictable (150).

Ironically, and naturally when viewed from the perspective of dominant discourse, Peter rejects the very person who enabled his upward mobility. Instead of accepting his mother as a complex person in her own right, Peter “had learned” to dismiss her as unintelligent, childlike and naïve, someone only capable of holding “typical or predictable” views. However, by suggesting that Peter’s was a “learned” response, the text here raises questions about Peter’s judgment, indicating that it might be reflective not of Vera’s abilities but of Peter’s internalizations of mainstream conceptions.

This detachment is a natural outcome of Peter's upward mobility: the same disdain that the downstaters hold for Bath becomes part of his education. However, we are shown that such disdain and detachment from WWPC rural origins, while the price of personal progress and mobility, is also a character flaw. As Sully observes his son, his insights not only demonstrate the agency that mainstream discourse has denied WWPC rural subjects, but also offer a clear judgment: “Sully studied his son, aware that his momentary pride in Peter's accomplishments had leaked away into serious misgivings

about his character. It was Peter who seemed to be enjoying the recollection of his mother's suffering" (291). Far from being a fully formed, self-aware person, Peter tends to misrecognize his judgment of others as an objective reality. Ironically, it is Sully who fills in these gaps for the reader, as it his perspective that is used to question Peter's actions towards his mother.

The association of upward mobility with a flawed character is much more pronounced in *Affliction*. As already mentioned, the story of Wade is, in part, that of Rolfe's own life. This fact complicates the narrative perspective, for within the narrative of the upwardly mobile Rolfe "here" shifts to "there," the mainstream becomes intertwined with WWPC rural in a way that intensifies, not mitigates, the difference between these two locations. Rolfe's experience itself becomes an indictment of his adopted upward mobility and progress, and by extension the mainstream's perception of WWPC rural subjects like his brother Wade. Unlike Peter in *Nobody's Fool*, Rolfe is aware of his personal failings as an upwardly mobile export, and these failings are attributed in part to his supposedly enlightened, middle-classless sub/urban present.

Regarding his own station in life, Rolfe ponders why it is that he, and not Wade and most of the town of Lawford, became upwardly mobile, able to attend college and become a white collar professional. Rolfe recognizes that his literal and figurative movement away from his working-class rural origins epitomizes progress within the U.S., yet his feeling of unease also points to how this "progress" is far from natural: "It makes me feel permanently and universally displaced, as much here as up in the village of Lawford...We struggle to change our place in society, and all we manage to do is displace ourselves. It should be a simple matter: it is what this country was invented to do..."

(202). In college, as in his current life as a white collar professional in suburban Boston, Rolfe has experienced feelings of “inadequacy”: in college, he couldn’t “talk or dress or eat in the acceptable way, did not know how to write or read or speak in class, did not even know how to smile...” (202-203). This “inadequacy” points to the disjunction between Rolfe’s WWPC rural experience and the norms of academia, but also exposes the devaluation of rurality by the middle-classless.

Thus, in addition to his traumatic childhood, Rolfe’s “affliction” also stems from the dissonance created between his WWPC rural background and his upward mobility. As a result, Rolfe detaches from himself, his family and his origins. This is most obviously shown when Rolfe returns upon his mother's death. Rolfe describes a typical violent outburst from his drunk father and an ensuing altercation between Wade, Wade’s girlfriend, Margie, and his father: “From across the room, I watched them, the woman and the two men, as if they were characters in a play, and the play were half over and I had just entered the theater” (230-231). This physical distance exemplifies the emotional distance that Rolfe places between himself and these “two men” (Wade and his father). This feeling of detachment helps explain his reaction to the “scene” played out in front of him: “They smiled at each other, shyly and almost with relief. Then the three of them looked out toward me and linked hands, and, I swear it, they bowed low. That is how I saw it. What else could I do? I applauded” (231). The applause is the action that solidifies the distance between Rolfe and this particular location.

Given his childhood abuse, it is understandable that Rolfe would want to maintain distance from his family. However, Rolfe's detachment from his family mirrors the mainstream’s detachment from WWPC rural places like Lawford, the effects of which

are illustrated in the Epilogue. Throughout the novel, Rolfe illustrates the location of Lawford amidst the interweaving of events from the past with those of the present, creating a connection between Wade's — and by extension Lawford's — devalued rural position and the brutal actions committed by Wade. In a direct address to an implied reader, Rolfe illustrates that Wade's actions reflect the anger and bitterness of those subjects existing in such devalued locations, re-enacting a story familiar to the mainstream reader who has “read the same kind of story numerous times in your own newspaper: a man in a small town evidently went berserk and murdered a few people thought to be close to him, murdered them apparently without motive or warning” (353). Rolfe suggests that while the implied reader may be familiar with such stories, they overlook the fact that such actions are attributable in part to outside factors. In this case, Rolfe goes further and implicates the detachment of the mainstream as fueling such violence: “It is easier by far to understand diplomatic maneuvers in Jordan, natural calamities in the third world and the economics of addictive drugs than an isolated explosion of homicidal rage in a small American town” (354). In Rolfe's observation, the mainstream reader is better informed of — or, at least, more receptive to — those tragedies occurring halfway around the world. When it comes to WWCP rursity, however, the mainstream reader is more likely to attribute actions such as Wade's to an “isolated” incident outside the purview of the mainstream reader. Rolfe's story makes it very difficult to extricate mainstream America from Wade's actions and from the dissolution of Lawford more generally speaking.

The same detachment that colors Rolfe's relation to both his mainstream and Lawford life is extended to the implied reader. Commenting on this narrative detachment, Fred

Pfeil has argued that Banks chose a Brechtian device necessary for navigating working-class characters otherwise disdained and/or misplaced by the mainstream reader (“Beating” 78). But Pfeil is also critical of Banks' use of Rolfe, a character he finds he cannot “believe in or care about...as an individual character whenever he is roped into the plot” (80). In my reading, creating in Rolfe a detached character with whom the reader cannot easily identify is absolutely crucial for the novel’s social critique to be effective. As a mainstream subject, a more sympathetic Rolfe could have been an obstacle in focusing the reader on the working-class realities the novel depicts, as happens, according to Pfeil, in Mason's fiction (75-76). Rolfe's detachment, while similar to Peter's in *Nobody's Fool*, is quite different in that its effect in the novel is to strengthen a critique of the mainstream's approach to progress and development. Fittingly, it is through Rolfe's detachment that we can begin to see the effects of the mainstream’s own disengagement with WWPC rural locations.

#### ii. Upward Mobility and Nostalgia

In addition to detaching from their communities, some upwardly mobile characters may detach in more personal and internal ways, for example by distancing themselves from their past. Such detachment entails emptying oneself of memories of one's origins and the life lived out “there,” an approach that is very different from the critical nostalgia of some of the WWPC rural characters discussed earlier. One of the most compelling examples of how the upwardly mobile utilize nostalgia in line with the mainstream can be found in *A Thousand Acres*.

The differences between Ginny's nostalgia and her younger sister Caroline’s nostalgia illustrate the latter's devolved state. As already discussed, Ginny's memories lend

themselves to a “critical nostalgia” in which the personal is used to interrogate a larger social and cultural context (McDermott, “Memory”); in contrast, Caroline's nostalgic detachment empties the farm of all meaning, echoing the dominant view and resulting in social consequences for the family farm. On more individual terms, Caroline’s nostalgic detachment reflects the deficiency of her character for she is unable to see the complexities of her WWPC rural origins, complexities that are brought to light through Ginny’s critical nostalgia.

Ginny's complex reading helps underscore the tension between simple appearances and the complex processes within them. This tension is most obviously laid bare by Ginny in regards to the complexity behind the simple appearances of her family; thus, she is able to move beyond the “labels” she reduced her family to — “Labeling them, in fact, prevented knowing them” — and to see all the positive and negative character traits that make up each one of them (305-307). It is also Ginny’s desire to move beyond appearances that allows her to look beyond Caroline’s appearances, providing a framework for making a powerful critique on mainstream success. A Des Moines lawyer (10), Caroline represents the physical, cultural and economic upward mobility so championed by the mainstream. Ginny makes clear, however, that Caroline's lifelong success is not due so much to her innate talent as to an ability to keep appearances. In a noteworthy memory relayed by Ginny, we see a high school Caroline desiring to act in school plays, something she wanted to keep secret from her father (241). Although mediocre in the rehearsals, it was her ability to *perform* that made Caroline a star: “But the audience inspired her. She knew exactly how to sense us without ever looking at us...” (242). Caroline's success was predicated on putting on appearances to please others,

a strategy that served her well on the debate team and in school (242-243). Caroline's success is not an indicator of some innate talent that allows her to rise above rural regression but rather rooted in her manipulation of appearances to suit the expectations of the powerful.

Further, Caroline is driven by a need to be successful, and manipulating those around her becomes the means to that end as demonstrated, for example, by her actions on the high school stage. Ginny sees these actions as rooted in the childhood behavior that also underlies Caroline's actions in the present: "Here was Caroline, sitting on the couch, her drindl skirt fanned out around her, her hands folded in her lap, her lace-trimmed ankle socks and black Mary Janes stuck out in front of her, her eyes darting from one face to another, calculating, always calculating..." (306). Not only is Caroline manipulative, shallow, and only interested in surfaces, she is described here by Ginny as a perpetual child, an ironic observation given that in terms of the dominant discourse it is Caroline who has outgrown her regressed farming origins. A critique of mainstream norms thus emerges through this characterization of Caroline, for her manipulation, shallowness and immaturity prove to be the very traits that ensure her success within the mainstream.

Ginny's dim view of her sister may be attributed to jealousy, as she alludes to at the end of her description of Caroline as a little girl: "She squirms upward and plants a kiss on his cheek, knowing we are watching, certain we are envious" (306). Even if this is a biased interpretation of the sister who had gotten away, it is noteworthy that this observation is rooted in the wide gulf that Ginny perceives between herself and Caroline by the end of the novel: "I don't know that an independent observer would have suspected we were related...but the difference now ran deeper than our clothes, to body

type and stance, to skin and hair, to social class and whether we expected to be seen or not. She dressed to look good, and I dressed for obscurity” (358). This gulf appears to be the logical conclusion to one who must mimic the mainstream in order to be successful at upward mobility.

Thus, in keeping these appearances, Caroline transplants herself from her roots. In contrast to her two older sisters who stayed on the farm, Caroline removes herself from any true connection to her sisters — according to Ginny, she never kept contact “unless she needed something” (139) — and, more symbolically, from the farm itself. In a way, her sisters themselves pushed Caroline towards the mainstream, as seen in their encouragement of her college education. Her sisters' actions may have been an attempt to protect Caroline from their father's sexual abuse but, as seen in Rose's jealousy of Caroline's success in having “got away” (99), we can also see a kind of projection of their own dreams of upward mobility. Caroline's lifelong training towards success was also a push against her roots so that she became completely detached from her family, except insofar as she seemingly wanted to help them improve themselves, as symbolized through her relationship with her father which, according to Ginny, “was a strange alteration between loyalty and scheming” (117). After her education and success, Caroline can only relate to her father through attempting to improve him, seeing him through a particularly mainstream perspective: “The fact was, she'd been away from him for almost ten years, long enough so that, to her, his problems seemed only his, their solutions seemed pretty obvious, and the consequences of 'managing' him in a new way seemed easily borne” (118). Caroline's attempt to change her father is informed by the mainstream perspective in which she is being educated: it seeks to shape his life so it



conforms to mainstream norms. Caroline's "loyalty and scheming," then, are symptoms of detachment and ambivalence, for to attempt to change her father in this way is to be disloyal to their shared roots.

Caroline's detachment from her background is foregrounded in Larry's lawsuit to reclaim his farm from Rose and Ginny, a gift bestowed upon them at the beginning of the narrative but which Caroline had initially rejected because, as Ginny maintains, "she didn't want to live on the farm" (20): "Every item of her appearance, her very familiarity with the courtroom, where I felt out of place and off balance...seemed to me to exude the odor of disdain, and the wish to take from us what we had that she wanted, but clearly didn't need" (318). What, then motivates Caroline to fight for a farm with which she no longer has a connection? The novel's critique of mainstream notions of upward mobility arises out of the suggestion that Caroline's interest is nothing but an expression of superficial nostalgia for her roots in the family farm and has destructive consequences for those actually on the farm.

As the novel demonstrates, while the mainstream lures the "best" and "brightest" out of places like the Cook farm with the promise of upward mobility and a presumably more successful existence, once such subjects enter the mainstream there is further pressure on them to distance themselves from their rural origins through either idealization or devaluation. As Caroline learns to separate herself physically and emotionally from her roots, she simultaneously internalizes the mainstream view of rurality as a regressed pastoral space and not as a place of relevance in the present. Caroline's profession further ties her personal quest to the larger institutions that were responsible for taking over the family farm: the lawyers attempting to legitimate the grounds of ownership, the banker

who makes money off the debt-laden practices of bigger-is-better farming (325) and eventually foreclosures (368). The fact that Caroline becomes affiliated more with these institutions of power instead of with her WWCP rural origins is reflected in her father's delusional state during the hearing, where he believes her to be dead (320). Thus, any relation she has to her father or the farm has become abstract, something relevant only in memory. This disconnection foretells the approach of the very institutions that decide the fate of the family farm.

Although Ginny leaves the farm, her mobility away from it does not result in detachment. In this she differs from Caroline, as is particularly underscored after the Cook farm is foreclosed, when Ginny and Caroline meet at the old house to divide the family belongings. Ginny insists on finding meaning behind all the things left on the farm, a legacy she believes is not shared by Caroline: "So why do you want these things? Pictures of strangers, dishes and cups and saucers that you don't remember? It's like you're just taking home somebody else's farm childhood. You don't know what it means!" (362). Where Ginny sees people and personality within the objects, Caroline sees only herself, via her nostalgia. Where Caroline mistakes this attachment for legitimacy, Ginny insists on the truth of lived experience embodied by these objects. Caroline's inability to see past appearances allows her only a surface understanding of the objects and, as a result, the people who lived through these objects. Although part of a particular family dispute, Caroline's approach to the foreclosure has a wider resonance when considered in relation to the farmers pushed out "that spring, and for years to come" (368). While the mainstream outsider, as Caroline has become, may see empty fields, it is through Ginny that we recognize that these locales are not just undeveloped, blank slates to be written

upon by outsiders, but spaces that were once inhabited and now bear the marks of those displaced by death, force or choice.

Despite Ginny's invitation to the reader to see the dominant and marginalized unsaid of the empty farmland at the end of the book, she has very little power beyond her observations. The people with power — the institutions like banks and courts of law — are the ones who ultimately decided the fate of the family farm and could do so because they had no connection to this way of life. Caroline's choice to not see the belongings/people of her past is a personal affront; but as Ginny discusses the careers of one of her nieces, a business major interested in “vertical food conglomerates” (369), we begin to gain a sense of how such personal detachment can play out on a much broader scale.

The WWPC rural counter-narrative that emerges across these novels centers on a critique of the dominant norms of progress and development that have structured the U.S. since at least the postwar period, and it is articulated from the very places that are dismissed by these norms. In all of these novels, the fictional representation of WWPC rurality in the postwar and present becomes an occasion for revising the narrative of WWPC rurality in a past era, and interrogating the devaluation of these spaces in the present. In order to accomplish this feat, the novels hold in tension the predominant stereotype of regressed WWPC rurality, the effect of such conceptions on rural subjects, and the legitimate voices arising within these places. In the next chapter, I will investigate how this counter-narrative is figured in the films based on these novels.

#### **Chapter 4: The Role of WWPC Rurality in Popular Film**

The novels discussed in Chapter Three present a critique of the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality in America that continues to be shaped in part by middle-classless sub/urban norms of progress and development. The issue at the core of this present chapter is whether such a critique can be sustained in the “popular” films adapted from these novels. As part of a larger discursive topology that includes journalistic reportage, literature, and other written forms, the filmic representations of WWPC rurality can be seen as informed by and contributing to a larger dominant discourse on rurality. However, if we consider dominant representations in American film as, following Gilberto Perez, merely part of a “convention” — an “agreement to be secured” — as opposed to a “rule to be followed” or a “code” (23), it is possible to read a WWPC rural counter-narrative amongst the very film adaptations (and the audiences to which they are directed) that initially appear to adopt a dominant tone in their portrayals of WWPC rurality.

This chapter examines the ways in which film adaptations of novels about WWPC rurality foreground and/or elide aspects of the social critique found in the novels on which they are based. In the first section entitled “Contextual Literature,” I outline a framework through which to consider WWPC rurality and the use of memory to assert counter-narrative in popular adaptations, a discussion that unfolds in the following subsections: “Key Observations from Adaptation Studies,” “WWPC Rurality in American Cinema,” “The Past in Popular Cinema” and “Memory Devices.” In the second section entitled “Analysis of WWPC Rurality in Adaptation,” I then demonstrate the potential for WWPC rural counter-narratives to exist across my filmic corpus, discussed across

the following themes: “Cinematic Imaginary of WWPC Rurality,” “WWPC Rurality and Critique of Progress,” “WWPC Rurality and the Cinematic Spectator,” “WWPC Rural Perspectives in Film” and “WWPC Rurality and the Past/Present.” My discussion of adaptations based on the novels examined in the previous chapter pursues two goals: that of bringing out the similarities and differences between the literary works and the films on which they are based, and that of situating these films in the context of their social and cultural reception.

### **I. Contextual Literature**

My particular focus on WWPC rural subjects in adaptation relies on preexisting scholarship within the fields of film studies and history, and a brief outline of some key observations will be set out in the following areas: adaptation studies, filmic representations of WWPC rurality, and the potential of filmic representations of the past to assert a WWPC rural counter-narrative. These considerations will elucidate both the limitations and possibilities for WWPC rural counter-narratives to emerge in a filmic discourse that can be seen as, at times, furthering the dominant discourse on rurality discussed thus far.

#### i. Key Observations from Adaptation Studies

One of the key points foregrounded in adaptation studies and which is of particular relevance to my analysis of the adaptations discussed here are the relationships between film, novel, and the social and cultural contexts of both. As George Bluestone elucidates, the main concern in studies of film adaptation is the relationship between a literary work and its adaptation: “An art whose limits depend on a moving image, mass audience, and industrial production is bound to differ from an art whose limits depend on language, a

limited audience and individual creation” (63-64). Thus, in addition to an adaptation’s relationship to its literary counterpart, it is also necessary to consider a filmic adaptation in relation to cinematic conventions and genres as well as the reception of such works in a given social context. For scholars of adaptation like Linda Hutcheon, this intricate web draws attention to an adaptation as an aesthetic object in and of itself, as a discrete “product,” but also as this object is part of a perpetual “process” that is informed by — and potentially gives new meaning to — the sources from which these works are drawn: “Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double- or multilaminated works that they can be theorized *as adaptations*” (6). This consideration of adaptation as “double- or multilaminated” places it in a perpetual relationship with its source. As a result, and following Hutcheon, the films examined here are not considered as “derivative” products of literary works but instead as part of a “palimpsestic” relationship with the content of their literary sources (9).

This view of adaptation as both product and process helps us consider the WWPC rural content of the films as simultaneously informed by but also furthering a critique of a dominant discourse on WWPC rurality<sup>66</sup>. By focusing on the tension between the filmic product, the adapted novel, and the larger social and cultural contexts informing both, it is possible to highlight the interplay of the dominant discourse and a counter-narrative to

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<sup>66</sup>Having said this, I do not mean to suggest that film is more susceptible to the dominant discourse on rurality than any of the other discursive forms discussed throughout this dissertation. Adaptations, however, provide a more direct way to compare the different ways in which discursive forms express this dominant discourse and those narratives that run counter to it.

it. This tension illustrates what Julie Sanders considers necessary to adaptation studies generally: an analysis of the intricate web between the “process, ideology, and methodology” (20) of a given film adaptation. As already stated, I am considering adaptations as part of a “process” that includes a relationship between film, novel and larger social context, a focus that foregrounds both the dominant and marginalized unsaid of a particular filmic “product.” In my analysis here, I am employing Sanders’ term “methodology” to refer to the cinematic “conventions” that inform representations of WWPC rurality in film (a task I undertake in the next section) and to be returned to shortly, representations of the past in American film. As my analysis of the films demonstrates, these conventions will also be considered in light of similarities and differences from the novels. This consideration of cinematic convention also includes the “ideological” underpinnings that inform filmic representations of WWPC rurality and the limitations these pose for recognizing the counter-narratives that exist therein. My analysis of selected reviews illustrates that while a WWPC rural counter-narrative may indeed be present across the films, the dominant discourse on rurality potentially forecloses such a possibility for the spectator. However, I cannot overstate that these films still hold the WWPC rural counter-narratives found in the novels on which they are based. Thus, in my analysis of these adaptations, I will be focusing on the ways in which the counter-narrative presented in the novels is extended and, at times, intensified through the cinematic medium.

#### ii. WWPC Rurality in American Cinema

As with other discourses discussed throughout this dissertation, the cinematic medium can also reflect a dominant discourse that portrays WWPC rural subjects as past-in-

present entities by turns idealized and/or devalued based upon a particular context. In this respect, films and film studies can be seen as affected by the same forces that, as I have argued in Chapter Three, result in literary works and literary criticism that represent rurality as a limit case for the “cultured, urban, therefore, civilized human” (Conlogue 6).

The same can be said about the more specific category of popular films — both Hollywood and American Independent productions — that describe the adapted works analyzed in this chapter. The term “popular” as employed here refers to those filmic products that are associated with widespread dissemination, or what Frederic Jameson refers to as “mass culture,” not necessarily associated with “populism” (a distinction to be discussed later), and not aligned with “folk art”: “the commodity production of contemporary or industrial mass culture has nothing whatsoever to do, and nothing in common, with older forms of popular or folk art” (*Signatures* 15). In more general usage the term “popular,” as Dimitris Eleftheriotis points out in his discussion of European cinema, can refer to the “commercial” (69), but it can also be used to describe products that are “non-European in essence because of their ‘baseness’ (even if they are produced in Europe), or come from outside Europe (in the case of cinema this usually means Hollywood)” (68). In this present chapter, the term “popular cinema” or “popular film” refers to films produced by the major production and distribution companies that define a commercially-based “Hollywood,” but it is not meant to describe something as low-class or “base” (although, as we will see shortly, some film scholars do indeed employ this term disparagingly). Following Eleftherotis, the term popular film (or cinema) as I am using it here “refers both to socioeconomic structures of production, circulation and consumption of films and to ways in which audiences relate to the texts produced,



circulated and consumed within these structures” (73). The eight adaptations that comprise my corpus are clearly “popular” in this sense as all were meant for wide distribution and (we can assume) profit. All the adaptations discussed here are affiliated with what Timothy Corrigan calls the “Big Six” production and distribution companies of the Hollywood studio system (7), in particular, Paramount, Columbia, Disney (Touchstone) and Warner Bros.; with “mini-majors” like Lionsgate (8); or with the cable subscription channels HBO and Showtime<sup>67</sup>. The “popularity” of these films in a more evaluative sense — why these films were or were not liked by critics — is something to be discussed at a later point of this chapter through an analysis of selected reviews.

Because these adaptations can be considered “popular” films, we need to contend with the ways in which rural imagery is seen to function in popular film. Indeed, as pointed out in critical works like the collection *Representing the Rural*, rural space in U.S. *popular* film is seen as a stagnant holdover that exists only to buoy conservative interests in the present, creating a “rural cinema” that is the counterpoint to modern, urban interests. Thus, according to the editors of *Representing*, a rural cinema is an:

expression of ongoing conflicts within a rapidly changing society or culture and the need to maintain a connection to a pure cultural or national identity, lost through urban assimilation and the dissipation or abandonment of traditions and rituals that in the rural context had kept this identity alive. (Fowler and Helfield

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<sup>67</sup>Although Corrigan is defining the “Big Six” production companies in the 2000s, his observations are relevant to all the adaptations discussed here (released between 1987 and 2005), in part because his analysis pertains to a studio system that has “continually evolved since the 1920s” and remains dominant (7).

3)

Fowler and Helfield clearly align with the dominant discourse on rurality, equating the representation of rural locations (a “rural context”) with the past and a desire to return to chauvinistic impulses that have supposedly been transcended through urbanization<sup>68</sup>.

Such formulations leave little room for the potential counter-narratives that may arise from expressions of a rural sense of place: instead, filmic representations of rurality are seen as reflecting only what an urban “contemporary consciousness” can make use (Fowler and Helfield 3). In such formulations, rurality becomes a retrograde location without any viability in the present. For historians like Tom Brass, rurality is so firmly tied to regressiveness that it is seen as counterproductive to the social progress that could naturally extend from the filmic medium:

[the “technical prowess” of film gives] the impression of a medium with an innate bias towards modernity and political progressiveness. Such a view conflates the modernity of form with that of content, and consequently fails to comprehend the extent to which film, by its very nature, is able to enhance the claims to reality of a content which in material terms is non-existent/unreal. It is for this reason that cinema might be described as the medium not just of popular culture but of populism in general and of the agrarian myth in particular (Brass 273)

For Brass, rural “content” is “non-existent/unreal,” valuable insofar as it expresses

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<sup>68</sup> Scott MacDonald also reflects this sentiment in his book *The Garden in the Machine*, where the art film is used to demonstrate a counterexample to the nostalgic, filmic rural found in more popular forms.

populist sentiment. Following Brass' argument, the very presence of agrarian imagery in popular film empties the progressive filmic medium of its greater progressive purpose for an implied urban present.

The assumption that filmic representations of rurality are reserved for nostalgia and tradition also pervades criticism of the rural content of specific U.S. films. For example, criticism of 1980s farm crisis films like *Country* (Dir. Richard Pearce, 1984), *The River* (Dir. Mark Rydell, 1984), and *Places in the Heart* (Dir. Robert Benton, 1984) portray rurality as an inherently regressive location with no potential for progressive critique. Similar to what we see in Brass' discussion, such reviews equate these popular films with a populist sentiment that is perceived as conflicting with a modern, urban America. If we look at Duncan Webster's discussion of the role of populism in the 1980s U.S., it is perhaps easy to see why such films are equated solely with a conservative perspective: they take as their focus the "traditions, myths and symbols clustered around the image of the independent farmer" (2) who simultaneously fights the centers of influence (in Webster's case, centers of political influence and power – 9-10). Further, for Duncan, some critics see such films as a "nostalgia for a lost, less complex America" of which populism (or the appearance thereof) is more generally accused (16). Indeed, it is rare when scholars like Webster note that the farm crisis films just mentioned have a "basis in the present" of which they were produced and exhibit the agency of rural subjects in a "tradition of farmers taking direct action" (72)<sup>69</sup>. By contrast, reviews of these films generally reflect the sentiment of William Adams who sees rural imagery only as a

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<sup>69</sup>See also David Whillock's article "The American Farmer as Hero."

nostalgia that refuses to “squarely confront the anxieties of contemporary life” (224)<sup>70</sup>. Unlike Webster, Adams ultimately reduces the rural content of the farm crisis films to populist sentiment alone, to an irrelevant and empty image used to shore up conservative interests. It is in this vein that we can also read Ann Hulbert’s assertion that, at least for the *New Republic* reader for whom she is writing, popular rural imagery is no more than pointless “hick chic” with little relevance to the U.S. of 1985 (n.p.)<sup>71</sup>. In reducing these films to populist sentiment, either implicitly or explicitly, both of these reviews ignore the “sense of loss” (Webster 4) prevalent in all three farm crisis films that, while in some ways shared with populist sentiment, can also be seen as an impetus for a radical change of conditions in the present by those people most impacted. Similarly, some of the adaptations discussed in this chapter could be (and are by some critics) reduced to the regressive tendencies that are associated with populism, but the critique of middle-class sub/urban norms of progress and development provides a counter-narrative that is certainly not. Thus, the “popular” films focused on here, while sharing in populist sentiment, are not considered to be “populist” films.

In some ways, critics like Adams and Hulbert may be responding to what collections like *The Columbia Companion to American History on Film* and *Representing the Rural* suggest is a long tradition in Hollywood: the use of rurality and the small town to reinforce populist rhetoric and conservative interests in the face of shifting social and

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<sup>70</sup> For more recent discussions that also portray rurality in this light, see Billmeyer and the “1980s” entry in Rollins, *Columbia Companion*.

<sup>71</sup> For a more in-depth critique of her article, see Webster’s chapter, “Country Images.”

cultural structures. This concern with the nostalgic associations of rural imagery in film is generally outlined in the chapter “The Machine in the Garden” from the *Colombia Companion*, and critics have also studied the pervasiveness of such imagery in particular eras (chapters on the 1930s, 1960s and 1980s are a few examples in Rollins, *Colombia Companion*) and regions (see “The Midwest” and “The South” from the same collection), and one chapter in *Representing the Rural* focuses exclusively on the conservative function of nostalgic rural imagery in the postwar (Fowler and Helfield chapter 20). However, such views also ignore the cinematic portrayal of WWCP rursity as a depraved other, a portrayal that is informed in part by the norms of progress and development centered on the middle-class and sub/urban. One such filmic trope, the “hillbilly,” has been noted by some theorists as a “negative counterexample” (A. Harkins) prevalent across various genres, perhaps most notably horror (for a couple of discussions, see Annalee Newitz in Wray and Newitz, and the chapter entitled “Getting Even” in Clover). These theorists demonstrate that across genre, the hillbilly is commonly portrayed as retrograde, existing “on the rough edge of the economy, wherever that happens to land him” (J.W. Williamson ix), a being apart from our modern sensibility. Thus, while the scholars previously discussed consider rural imagery in popular film as merely shoring up nostalgia and conservatism, it is also clear that popular cinema has also reinforced the larger view towards, to echo Williamson, “country culture” as “dumb” in comparison to the urban, representing rural subjects through filmic imagery that oscillates between a “merely dismissible peripheral” and a “*Deliverance*-type threat” (260-261).

As we will see in my analysis of the film adaptations, these dueling representations of

WWCPC rural imagery — as WWCPC rural imagery is seen as empty nostalgia or as its images are seen to merely represent an inferior place and people — influence critical reception. However, we will also see that a minority of reviewers note the progressive possibility of the films and thus illustrate the existence of WWCPC rural counter-narrative for the spectator. As with the novels discussed in Chapter Three, the film adaptations bring out this counter-narrative in light of the past (the postwar) and the present.

### iii. The Past in Popular Cinema

Like representations of WWCPC rurality, the past in popular film can also be seen as limited in its ability to provide a counter-narrative to dominant discourse. Scholars like historians Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, for example, criticize representations of the past in U.S. popular films as reinforcing a conservative, national narrative in the face of changing social and cultural structures. For these historians, Hollywood's approach to the past is largely comprised of “trite, simplified representations” that tend to “close off rather than open up historical debates” (10)<sup>72</sup>. However, we can assuage such critique if we consider film (including popular film) as a tool of historical revisionism and counter-narrative, and that the spectator has the potential to recognize the relevance of such a fictional interrogation for the past and present U.S.

Of specific interest here is the notion that films can interrogate the social and cultural place of those who have been traditionally excluded and/or misrepresented in both the

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<sup>72</sup>For other works that also reflect this sentiment, see chapters 5 and 6 in Grainge, *Memory and Popular Film*.

past and present and, thus, act as revisionist historical documents. Scholars of history and film have indeed mined filmic “documents” for such revisionist perspectives. For example, in the collection *Hollywood and the American Historical Film*, Robert Rosenstone considers the popular film *Glory* a “powerful work of history” due in part to the “invented incidents and characters” that help question the racial inequality amongst soldiers in the Civil War and in contemporary America alike (in J.E. Smith 186). In the same collection, Vera Dika focuses on the more abstract elements of “historical” film (and television) by studying the intersection of “nostalgia” and “regret” in, among others, Douglas Sirk, Fassbinder and the TV show *Mad Men*: “these works...employ critical strategies that expose a life we may not want to live but in many ways must confront — a kind of regret for the past and present” (in J.E. Smith 211). For historian Tony Barta, films can exist as historical “documents” due in part to the parallel that exists between the framing of revisionist historical documents traditionally conceived and the filmic medium itself: “As with all selection in history, the larger or alternatively constructed histories are by their nature out of frame” (10-11). Barta’s analogy foregrounds the idea that film can be a powerful tool in revisiting the dominant views of the past in part because it can highlight those things left “out of frame” in history. Film, as with other historical documents, has the potential to revise a larger collective past and its relation to the present in light of these omissions.

The potential of film to contribute to historical revisionism, especially in regards to marginalized communities, becomes apparent when we consider what historian Robert Rosenstone calls the “new history film” which is more concerned with “understand[ing] the legacy of the past” than with profit, and emerges from “communities that see

themselves in desperate need of historical connections” (4-5). Although Rosenstone's examples speak to more oppressed subjects like those of postcolonial countries, his observations hold resonance for the films discussed here. Putting to the side the fact that the adaptations are mostly affiliated with the Hollywood studio system and are thus profit motivated, their content speaks to a larger need to understand the interrelationship between the past and present of WWCP rural locations. This latter point places these adaptations in the category of “new history film” further described by Rosenstone: “The past they create is not the same as the past provided by traditional history, but it certainly should be called history — if by that word we mean a serious encounter with the lingering meaning of past events” (5). The film adaptations analyzed in this chapter contest the historical *meanings* attributed to WWCP rural subjects in the postwar period and, in addition, interrogate the resonance of these meanings in the post-1980s.

In addition to providing a revisionist text, the new history film can be seen as contributing to what Marita Sturken calls “cultural memory”: “Cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (1). As with earlier chapters of this dissertation, these films conduct a “cultural negotiation” of the location of WWCP rurality in American society, and in so doing challenge notions of “nation and 'Americanness” (13) that continue to define WWCP rural subjects as limit cases to “our” modern and enlightened present. The new history film can then also be seen as rewriting a dominant national identity, contributing to a “national cinema” as defined by Susan Hayward: “This writing of a national cinema is one that refuses to historicize the nation as subject/object in and of itself but makes it a subject and object of knowledge” (101). The critique brought forth by new history films, particularly those



concerned with representing marginalized subjects, questions the naturalized dominance of a national identity, and does so by contesting and potentially revising dominant cultural memory and national narrative.

It is perhaps necessary for the new history film to establish the “historical connections” of marginalized communities through representations of the past that strategically place particular characters and communities in their larger social and historical contexts. As noted by historians and film theorists alike, the progressive possibilities of this juxtaposition also implicate society and culture outside fictional representation. Through the notion of “transference,” historian Dominick LaCapra has theorized that the traumatic in fiction and art may help the spectator/reader question the larger norms underpinning traumatic occurrences in history (see his works, “Is Everyone?”; *Writing History*), a point that can be similarly employed in considering the unique relationship of film and spectator<sup>73</sup>. Film theorists Adam Lowenstein and Allison Landsberg discuss the possibilities of social transformation for a spectator who can briefly embody the filmic representations of trauma and marginalized subjects. For Lowenstein, representations of the traumatic have the potential to create an almost visceral reaction through a spectator’s affect and revulsion, turning a filmic representation (in his case, that associated with the horror genre) into a “shocking representation” that potentially leads the spectator to question the larger social contexts of

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<sup>73</sup>For example, since 2001, the film journal *Screen* has had at least three sustained instances that discuss the impact of filmic representations of trauma on historical and social understandings (“Special Debate”; “Trauma Debates II”; “Trauma Dossier”).

which s/he is part. Lowenstein refers to this questioning as an “allegorical moment,” a “shocking collision of film, spectator and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined” (2). We can see a similar process in Allison Landsberg's discussion of “prosthetic memory” where the intersection of affect and representations of trauma can be related to larger historical discourses: “the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live” (2). In this way, prosthetic memory is similar to the allegorical moment; both require spectator affect as an impetus for greater historical and national interrogations that possibly result in greater inclusivity on a larger scale.

The importance of considering “shocking representations” and “prosthetic memory” in light of the new history film’s concern with marginalized subjects is evident. A vicarious experience of (in this case) WWCP rurality lends this subject position a presence potentially denied in dominant discourse and, thus, lends more weight to the counter-narrative that potentially emerges from such locations. Although Lowenstein and Landsberg are focused on filmic representations of the traumatic, their discussions have implications for memory in film more generally considered.

#### iv. Memory Devices

The flashback is one device that is useful in considering filmic representations of memory as tools in historical revision and social critique. Similarly to Lowenstein’s “allegorical moment,” Maureen Turim’s theorization of the privileged position of the flashback in film accentuates the intersection of history and the individual: “The flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of

temporal reference. A juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in the juncture: memory and history” (Turim 1). For Turim, the flashback is most commonly indicated by filmic conventions such as dissolves, voice-overs and titles (1-2), but it can also connote representations of memory in a more general sense: “The flashback concerns a representation of the past that intervenes within the present flow of the film narrative” (1-2). Thus, even in those films that have no other “direct references to history” (12), the “privileged moment” that joins memory and history in the more traditional flashback may also include those less obvious instances that merely refer to some past narrative action.

Although this point will be more thoroughly applied to my corpus in the next section, it is worth briefly noting that the flashback in both its traditional and subtle forms emerges in the film adaptations discussed later in this chapter. In keeping with their novelistic counterparts, the films analyzed here interrelate the postwar and post-1980s of their stories and, in the process, lend themselves to a WWCP rural counter-narrative aimed at both the past and the present. For example, following the novels, the film adaptations of *Housekeeping* (Dir. Bill Forsyth, 1987), *Empire Falls* (Dir. Fred Schepisi, 2005), and *Affliction* (Dir. Paul Schrader, 1988) make explicit the relation between a town's specific history and the life stories of its residents. Conversely, in the filmic version of *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (*GG*) (Dir. Lasse Hallström, 1993), the impact of past events on the present locale of the town and its residents is only suggested and, as a result, only implicitly asserts the “juncture” between the memory of subjects in a particular location and “history” as dominantly conceived.

The representations of the past in these films invite the spectator to participate in the

“juncture” between character memory and historical discourse and in this way, the above discussion on the spectator and representations of trauma also applies to flashbacks more generally conceived. To recall Allison Landsberg, trauma in films offer the spectator the opportunity to “take on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event” s/he may not otherwise have (2). As we see in Turim's analysis, it is also possible for flashbacks to enact a relationship between the spectator and representations of the past that are not necessarily traumatic or strictly tied to individual characters. Flashbacks represent both “personal archives of the past” and “images of history, the shared and recorded past”; as such, flashbacks can be used to question a larger sociohistorical context (we can include cultural memory in this context) through the very fictional record shown on-screen (2). The “subjective memory” on-screen becomes the province of the fictional character as well as the “viewer of the film identifying with fictional character's [sic] positioned in a fictive social reality” (2). As with the above discussion on trauma, the film spectator can experience a prosthetic memory, potentially bringing it to bear on the mainstream (the middle-classless and sub/urban) social, cultural, and historical contexts on- and off-screen.

In regards to adaptations, the flashback in film can be seen as heightening literary representations of memory and thus more forcefully presenting a counter-narrative to the dominant cultural and historical record. Turim theorizes that the flashback is a primarily filmic form that more acutely disrupts narrative action than its literary counterpart (that film, in fact, influenced literature in this regard) (4-5; 7-8) and as a result, creates a “didactic” temporal dissonance within narrative time itself (12). Thus, in comparison to a novel, the content of the flashback is privileged more forcefully in relation to the present

action of a narrative. To bring a concrete example to bear upon this discussion, the filmic version of *Empire Falls* visually depicts flashbacks as originating from Miles Roby (Ed Harris): Miles' flashbacks are responsible for disrupting the present action of the story, and the content within them becomes the more powerful in creating this dissonance. By contrast, the italicized chapters used to represent such flashbacks in the novel, while intercut with the narrative present, are physically removed by chapter demarcations and thus seem to run in parallel with the present narrative action instead of immediately disrupting it.

At this point, I will apply the above framework to my specific filmic corpus, including an analysis of memory in film to present a WWCP rural counter-narrative. The adaptations discussed here can serve as examples of "new history film" in that they question the role of WWCP rurality in dominant filmic discourse and, relatedly, its role in the cultural memory and national narrative in both past and present U.S. Their filmic representations of memory (including but not limited to the traumatic) help foreground the counter-narrative also present in the novels on which they are based.

## **V. Analysis of WWCP Rurality in Adaptation**

The novels discussed in Chapter Three portray a WWCP rural counter-narrative to mainstream norms of progress and development in both the postwar and present. In order to evaluate the ways in which this counter-narrative is continued in film adaptations, we need to recognize that there will be inherent differences in the ways in which literature and film represent WWCP rurality and the counter-narratives that emerge from that subject position. For example, as discussed in regards to the novels in Chapter Three,

different narrative devices were used to focalize the postwar and present mainstream through WWPC rural locations. These devices spanned the intradiegetic-homodiegetic (the “I,” or first person narration as in *Housekeeping* and *Bastard out of Carolina*) to the omniscient, extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator in Russo's *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls*. Across these modes of narration, the reader can see the tension that exists between a WWPC rural “here” and a mainstream “there” in both the postwar past and its relation to the present action of the WWPC rural locations. Where the novels rely upon narrative description to convey the unequal relationship between a mainstream “there” and a rural “here” (descriptions and dialogue that are, at times, borrowed in the adaptations), the films convey the distinction between the mainstream and the rural through visual and audio enhancement (for example, voice-overs and different point-of-view shots). For example, the spectator can reaffirm in a glimpse the power difference between the owner of a BMW and a pickup truck as we see in *Affliction* or the social location of an entire community through its boarded up buildings as we see in *Empire Falls* and *Nobody's Fool* (Dir. Robert Benton, 1994), and/or images of a community’s farm land as we see in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* and *A Thousand Acres* (Dir. Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1997). These visuals are impacted by the type of character whose perspective is taken by the camera — the mainstream, the WWPC rural subject or, over the course of a film, both — and are also impacted by the use of flashback in conveying these images. As already mentioned, flashbacks provide a “didactic” interruption of the temporal sequence presented on-screen (Turim 12) and, as a result, can provide a powerful commentary on the interrelationship between the postwar, present and the role of WWPC rural locations in both time periods.

In this way, memory in film can serve to foreground the agency of WWPC rural subjects. The representations of the memory of WWPC rural subjects in these adaptations suggest that rurality, like the rest of “modern” society, is also involved in a perpetual process of change. Further, as touched upon with Lowenstein above, such representations of the past provide more than a “shocking collision” of past and present but also implicate the spectator’s “bodily space” in relation to the depictions on-screen (2). At times in the adaptations, such “collisions” of past and present occur through the memories of WWPC rural characters and, however abstractly, join the spectator to the interior spaces of the characters. The memory of WWPC rural characters then also becomes a perspective through which the spectator can align, potentially leading to what Landsberg considers a prosthetic memory that can be used to question the social and cultural reality that surrounds her/him.

With this in mind, I am considering filmic “products” in relation to a larger social context, including an analysis of selected reviews that primarily display a dominant discourse on WWPC rurality, and the relationship to the literary counter-narratives discussed in Chapter Three and with which these adaptations are in a perpetual “process.” I am using the following themes to structure my critical reading of these films as indicated by the section titles: i. “Cinematic Imaginary of WWPC Rurality”; ii. “WWPC Rurality and Critique of Progress”; iii. “WWPC Rurality and the Cinematic Spectator”; iv. “WWPC Rural Perspectives in Film”; and v. “WWPC Rurality and the Past/Present.” Similar to my analysis of the novels in Chapter Three, I will divide my discussion across themes, although I will not discuss every adaptation equally in every sub-section. Further, aside from the sub-section entitled “WWPC Rurality and Critique

of Progress,” my analysis will be organized under different themes than that of the last chapter, even though there are clear points of intersection between the discussion in both chapters.

#### i. Cinematic Imaginary of WWCP Rurality

As mentioned above rurality, including both countryside and small town, is a highly recognizable trope in popular U.S. cinema. According to Eugene Levy, “narratives about small towns have been uniquely *American* films” (264) because the dominant representations of small town America embodies many American values that have informed national life and its cinema alike. For my purposes, part of the uniquely American approach to rurality in film includes the dominant discourse that portrays WWCP rurality as a limit case for progress and development. However, this imagery can be used as powerful platform to contest such dominant notions; stereotypical images are used to draw the spectator in towards WWCP rural content even as these stereotypes and the dominant discourse that give rise to them are then critiqued and potentially turned back on the spectator her/himself.

One instance of stereotypical imagery portrayed in these films can be seen through images of rural landscape. As with the novels, landscape in the adaptations helps situate the spectator in a WWCP rural locale and provides a platform on which to view the relationship between WWCP rural locations and the mainstream within the narrative. In the novels a particular WWCP scene is set, for example, in Russo’s sustained discussion of the history underlying the façade of small town decay. As also demonstrated in *Housekeeping*, the narrator expresses the link between Fingerbone’s landscape and its insignificance to American society at large (Robinson, *Housekeeping*



62), foregrounding the landscape as a place through which to evaluate the relationship between WWCP rural locations and their larger mainstream societies. We can see something similar in *Affliction* when Rolfe describes the surrounding landscape of Lawford as a “geography of need” reflective of the personal deprivation of the townspeople (Banks 83). In contrast, the adaptations often represent this landscape with little commentary, and as we will see in reviews of the films, this lack of description potentially contains the rural landscapes in their devalued place in the dominant discourse on rurality<sup>74</sup>.

The opening images of landscape in these films orient the spectator towards the rural and/or small town locale, except *In Country* (Dir. Norman Jewison, 1989), which opens with an American flag and a military exercise; this opening, however, has implications for the rural location depicted on screen, a point to be returned to later. Some of these opening images may be more sustained than others, but the overall effect remains the same: to situate the spectator within a general mise-en-scene. Particularly in regards to *Affliction* and *Housekeeping*, critics often intertwine the landscape itself with the characters/communities on-screen<sup>75</sup>. For example, Stanley Kauffman (“The Spirits”) describes the landscape in *Housekeeping* as a character in its own right, mentioning that it is “essential to the seen and unseen of the film” and is “dominatingly present” (26)<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup>See Sharon O'dair for a discussion on *A Thousand Acres*.

<sup>75</sup>For *Affliction*, see Kauffman (“Accepted”), Quart, Simon, and Cardullo (“Stones”); For *Housekeeping*, see Levin in Lupack.

<sup>76</sup>This sentiment is also reflected in Rosenbaum.

Reviews like these seem to suggest that rural/small town landscapes are more than merely a backdrop to the action of a story, becoming an important presence in the story itself.

Although not directly mentioned in Kaufman's review of *Housekeeping*, this "presence" brings with it associations that implicate the WWPC rural characters and their devalued social and cultural location. For example, in reviews of *Nobody's Fool*, reviewers who associate the rural locations on-screen with the dominant discourse on rurality read the rural landscape, in this case a "simple" small town winter setting, as a reflection of its regressed community. For Stanley Kauffman ("High Gear"), the landscape of the film reflects both the fictional community and the screenplay itself (all "mosey along"). In another review, the simple landscape lends itself to a "folksy charm" that seems more Canadian than American, thus placing North Bath as a foreign land within America (see "Father's" in the Canadian *MacLean's*).

However, as we can see in a minority of reviewers, the very landscape of this film can be seen as part of a WWPC rural counter-narrative despite the connotations associated with filmic rural imagery. In these reviews on *Nobody's Fool*, the seemingly simple landscape actually belies the complex community living within it. In his *Sight and Sound* review, Ben Thompson states, "It is rare in a modern American film to see a small town setting used as more than just shorthand for nothing much in particular" (50). This deception then holds in tension the stereotyped simplicity associated with small town landscapes and the complexity of the fictional community therein. Andrew Sarris takes this observation further: the deception of the setting becomes an affront to the "hot-shot critics and audiences who have been taken in by the brainlessly hyped up kinetics of the

most contemporary movies” (44). While the landscape may hold regressed connotations for the mainstream, it is also the place where that association is confronted.

Other of the films discussed here, like *Affliction*, are more forward in demonstrating the tension between stereotype and counter-narrative so subtly presented in *Nobody’s Fool*. Evoking still photography, the opening of the film shows a New England town in winter that, more than merely setting a scene, critiques the very framing of this small town as a place existing in the past. While these photos set the stage for the actions that unfold over the course of the film (Kouvaros 45), they also interrogate the dominant discourse on rurality through the slight movement of snow and wind also captured in these framed images. As these photo-sized images expand to cover the entire screen and we are brought in to the present action through Rolfe’s (Willem DaFoe) narration, this dominant discourse is interrogated further: the rural scene originally “pictured” exceeds its place as some kind of distant memory entrenched in the past and is something that continues, for better or worse, in the present.

These two adaptations demonstrate that while rural landscape may be viewed through the lens of a dominant discourse, it can also be used to help formulate a WWPC rural counter-narrative. The use of voice-over helps solidify this connection between landscape and counter-narrative. Similar to the written descriptions of the novels, the voice-over imprints the struggles of both present and past even in subsequent scenes that merely use the landscape for a backdrop<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup>Film theorists have discussed the voice-over as a powerful filmic device because of its separation from the on-screen action (see Silverman chapter 2 for a discussion in regards to feminist film theory).

The voice-overs discussed here are provided by characters whose origins lie in the communities depicted on-screen and who are indeed central to the on-screen narrative, even if they are not always “main” characters (as in the case with *Empire Falls*). In this way, the voice-over can be seen as integral to the formation of these films’ counter-narrative: originating from an insider with knowledge of her/his WWPC rural location, the information conveyed through the voice-over lends weight to the observations surrounding the people and events on-screen. For example, in the beginning of *Housekeeping*, Ruth's (Sara Walker) voice-over directs us to view Fingerbone as a place aspired to even as it is tied to loss in the past and present action of the film. Ruth’s voice-over explains the trajectory leading her grandfather to Fingerbone, first showing him as a child (Adrian Naqvi) living amongst a drab, plains landscape and dreaming of greater places as illustrated in his paintings of mountains; these paintings are then replaced by a postcard of a mountain and lake, which in turn dissolves into Fingerbone’s landscape in the narrative present. The aspirations of Ruth’s grandfather thus become inextricably linked with the landscape itself, creating a sense that Fingerbone is a place to move towards in order to realize these aspirations. As Ruth explains in a later voice-over, however, this landscape is also underscored by loss, literally, as she explains the death of her grandfather in an unrecovered train derailment into the lake. Ruth’s voice-over makes clear that while this forward moving trajectory instills a sense of progression, it is a trajectory always realized in light of this loss. As a result, Fingerbone was and is a place infused with (unfulfilled) aspiration.

As the movement towards Fingerbone is reinvigorated through Ruth’s mother, we can see that the town’s association with progress of a sort does not exist solely in the past.

After learning about the aspirations of Ruth's grandfather, we are next shown Ruth and Lucille's (Andrea Burchill) first home (an apartment amidst cityscape) before their mother Helen (Margot Pinvidic) announces their return to Fingerbone. With little interruption, the spectator must watch their journey away from the city and into the mountains for approximately three minutes. This length of time may create a feeling of stagnation in the spectator but it also creates anticipation, a sense that while we are transported "back" to Fingerbone, we also are looking towards the town for some future narrative development. As with the story of Ruth's grandfather, this newfound anticipation is also entwined with loss, this time as we see Ruth's mother purposefully drive into the lake. Juxtaposed with these images, Ruth's voice-over foregrounds the complexity of a seemingly simple landscape, and similar to her narration in the novel, illuminates the potentially complex sense of place that could be experienced within it.

A similar kind of complexity also occurs in those films that are major Hollywood productions, two of the most obvious being *Empire Falls* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* (Dir. Anjelica Huston, 1996), both of which were conceptualized for the cable subscription movie channels HBO and Showtime, respectively<sup>78</sup>. As with *Housekeeping*, voice-overs lend historical depth and authority to a landscape that could potentially be reduced to its retrograde status in dominant discourse. In *Empire Falls*, we are first led to

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<sup>78</sup>Since HBO's inception, there have been ties to mainstream corporate interests: first Time, Inc. (Gomery), then with Warner Communications by way of a late 1980s merger (see Christensen 597-598). For Showtime, consider the debate surrounding the release of the film by major cable channels like TNT (see W. Berger for one discussion).

the eponymous town through the image of a moving river which is then frozen into a black and white photograph, an image that potentially reduces the story of Empire Falls to a past occurrence returned to only through pictures. Further, in part one (the film was made as a two part series), the narrator (Larry Pine) describes Empire Falls and its history on the fictional Knox River over a series of still photos: its settlement into a textile mill town, its decline and its similarity to other New England mill towns, “no better and no worse than the rest” yet, potentially, relegated to the dust bin of history. However, the voice-over also heightens the fade from still photographs into the town’s present action and finally rests on Miles Roby working at the diner, a trajectory that testifies to the historical depth of this small town as well as the undeniable presence that exceeds the still photos presented at the beginning.

Similarly, the opening narration of an adult Bone (Laura Dern) in *Bastard out of Carolina* reveals the hidden stories of a postwar rural landscape. With help from Bone’s adult narration, the opening scene relays the circumstances surrounding her birth: Bone’s drunken Uncles driving her pregnant teenage mother, the car crash that threw her from the car and that resulted in Bone’s birth. By beginning with the circumstances surrounding her birth, this adult Bone leaves no part of her past unclaimed (she obviously cannot remember events that happened before she was born) while simultaneously giving the impression that all the events in the film are her story. Although we never see the adult Bone, her voice acts as a bookend to the on-screen story; the film does not begin or end without her voice and as such, reminds us that she is the ultimate authority on the events depicted throughout the film and that had left her so powerless as a child.

However, voicing James Baldwin’s quote that also starts the novel (“People pay for what

they do, and still more, for what they have allowed themselves to become. And they pay for it simply: by the lives they lead”) during the opening scene can be interpreted as an admonishment of WWCP rurality in line with the dominant discourse, in this case, as directed at her irresponsible extended family. The dual nature of this opening scene — on one hand attesting to the film as Bone’s story and the counter-narrative of her family while on the other appearing to fall into the dominant discourse on rurality — is representative of a larger obstacle to this film’s WWCP rural counter-narrative, a discussion to which I will return.

In films like *A Thousand Acres* and *GG*, however, a character’s voice-over more directly interrogates the mainstream relationship to the on-screen rural locale and, by extension, the WWCP rural characters living amongst its landscape. The voice-overs of these films originate from main characters who direct a more complicated gaze upon what can be misconstrued as a retrograde location. Similar to the novel, the voice-over that begins the filmic version of *A Thousand Acres* demonstrates Ginny’s (Jessica Lange) self-reflexivity. Ginny’s voice-over is placed over a point-of-view that appears to originate from within a passing car, helping to convey the feeling that Ginny is speaking to a spectator who merely views these images in passing. Thus, the bucolic images of farmland and the scenes of a collective nostalgia tied in part to childhood (i.e. a school bus) are conveyed as images related to Ginny’s longer past/history and of which the spectator has no other access. As with Bone’s narration in *Bastard*, Ginny’s narration is obviously that of an adult (in contrast, we never see Ginny as a child) and also speaks from a position located in the future of the film (note her past tense in “It seemed to me that when I *was* a child, it *was* the center of the universe”). Ginny’s authority over the

events of the story, including the farming landscape with which the film opens, also extends to the seemingly naïve outsider (spectator) to whom Ginny address. Like the novel, it is clear from Ginny's autobiographical stance that she knows more about the events that will unfold than the implied spectator. And, as with the films just discussed, this authority speaks to the unsaid elements that exist beneath the bucolic imagery that opens the film, elements that the spectator can only access through Ginny's story. Similarly, Gilbert's (Johnny Depp) initial voice-over in *GG* attests to his insider knowledge of the WWCPC rural location in question but also reveals the complexity existing beneath its unremarkable appearance. Gilbert's explanation that people passing by are "doing the right thing" mirrors the mainstream disdain for Endora and, similar to the novel, may reinforce the aura of entrapment associated with the opening images of an empty road cutting through marginal farm fields. By expressing disdain early on in regards to this landscape, the spectator can easily align with his viewpoint — a viewpoint that very quickly expands to include Gilbert's sympathy and respect for those around him<sup>79</sup>. In comparison to the novel, the film more immediately invites the spectator to follow Gilbert's trajectory from self-loathing to acceptance, a view that also includes his sense of place in this WWCPC rural location.

In these films, voice-over heightens the interrelationship between landscape and

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<sup>79</sup>It is interesting to read Hedges' reaction to the film in light of this point: "I adore the movie. It's different in tone. The movie is sweeter, not as funny, more human, has less of an edge" (324). I would argue that the film has more of "an edge" in interrogating the spectator, even as it may not reveal the darker side of Gilbert to the same extent.



WWCPC rural characters, demonstrating both the dominant and marginalized unsaid of the dominant discourse on rurality. It is at this point that I would like to focus on the films' representations of characters, particularly their reliance on stereotype, to engage the viewer even as these stereotypes may be simultaneously criticized. Although this can be an effective device, it can also be problematic in that these stereotypes potentially reconfirm the dominant discourses on rurality that dismiss the WWCPC rural locations on-screen.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the novels on which these films are based at times also use stereotypes in order to bring attention to the relationship of WWCPC rurality and the mainstream. For example, in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the stereotypes associated with WWCPC rurality are foregrounded through highly recognizable phrases like "white trash" and in other works, such as those by Russo, Banks and Hedges, easily recognized "country" types are used to exhibit the devaluation of mainstream characters and the internalization of this devaluation in a rural community's sense of place. However, as seen in reviews of the films, the adaptations' use of stereotype to engage the spectator in a critique of the dominant discourse on rurality potentially elides the counter-narrative within.

In this way, the use of stereotypes simply reconfirms a dominant discourse on rurality and thus forecloses the possibility for engaging with counter-narrative. This barrier is demonstrated in reviews that unwittingly use the dominant discourse on rurality to evaluate the quality of the adaptations. In such reviews, the stereotypes employed by these films are seen as accurately depicting WWCPC rurality (i.e. a film may be seen as authentically "capturing" rurality). Likewise, a film that is seen as too stereotypical or not

stereotypical enough can be dismissed out of hand without an interrogation as to why such an approach was used in the film. Compounding this problem is the frequent suggestion by critics that without the talent of particular directors or actors, the WWPC rural content on-screen would be as irrelevant to the “modern” spectator as WWPC rurality is seen to be in reality.

Reviewers who discuss the on-screen stereotypes often tie their evaluation of a film’s quality to authenticity — or, in other words, with how closely the film aligns with the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality. A film like *Empire Falls*, for example, is praised for its ability to “capture” (“Empire Falls”) the New England small town “left behind,” and is described in another review as a portrait of a “backwater bypassed by history” (Press). Vincent Canby sees *Housekeeping* as capturing a timeless past in its 1950s small town (“Forsyth’s”), and as another reviewer maintains, it is a timelessness creating a refuge outside “social experience” for the “overburdened mind” (Rafferty). In other examples, any redeeming qualities of the films are attributed to the ability of actors (like Paul Newman in *Nobody’s Fool*) or directors/screenwriters like Paul Schrader (*Affliction*). Although reviewers praise a film like *Nobody’s Fool* for its ability to generate identification with the stock characters on-screen, it is a quality that is attributed to the film’s ability to manufacture such identification for the “modern” viewer that would not (or should not) care about the WWPC rural content therein<sup>80</sup>. We can see this sentiment arise in critical praise for the film’s most well-known actors, Paul Newman as Sully and Jessica Tandy as Miss Beryl. As a critic from *Time* puts it:

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<sup>80</sup> See Alleva, “No Escape” for an example of this sentiment

Imagine Cool Hand Luke, the Hustler or even Butch Cassidy somehow making it all the way to his sunset years. Then imagine him measuring out those years as an unemployed, virtually unemployable, construction worker in one of those small, featureless upstate New York towns — still a knothed, still a wise guy in revolt against the conventional wisdom, still very recognizably Paul Newman.

That, in essence, is *Nobody's Fool*. (Schickel "Cool Hand" n.p.)

For this reviewer, Newman's character and, in fact, all of *Nobody's Fool* is made credible only through Newman's star power (see also Ansen and Kuflick). In other reviews Tandy is also credited with giving depth to the film (B. Johnson, "Father's"; Cunneen; Travers). Considered the matriarch for "overgrown children," the only thing keeping the misfit town and characters together (Maunder), Tandy is also seen as making this otherwise "featureless upstate" town credible. In fact, for *Rolling Stone*, it is not the "shambling" film but the "miracles" worked by both Newman and Tandy that are noteworthy; according to the reviewer: "Don't try to analyze it. Just sit back and behold" (Travers).

Critics ultimately review *Nobody's Fool* favorably: according to Rozen, it is "observant" with real characters, sentimental but smart ("*Nobody's*"). However, while some reviewers point out the humanity demonstrated within a small town "we might be tempted to drive through too quickly" (Cunneen 31), it is a sentiment too readily attributed to the well-known actors on-screen. *Affliction*, too, is reviewed favorably (Ansen, "What's") but with strings attached. Hence, Lawford is described as a town left behind our "complex society" (Kauffman, "Accepted"); a "forlorn planet" that, by implication, is separate from our own (Hoberman); and suffering from "societal jet lag" (Cardullo, "Stones"), behind the modern time of the spectator. Relatedly, critics like Kent

Jones describe the dichotomy between WWPC rurality and the urban mainstream through stereotypes: Wade (Nick Nolte) as a “good ole boy” typical of rural New England as compared to an “urbanized” Rolfe (Jones, “The Snow”; see also Romney). Such recognizable and believable stereotypes help some reviewers elevate themselves above the on-screen action. For example, as we see in Stanley Kauffman’s review, he physically differentiates himself from the narrative by admitting his small stature in relation to the perceived hulking power of Nolte’s Wade (“Accepted” 24). The perceived contrast between the location of Lawford and the modern spectator underscores those reviews that dismiss Wade as a viable character through which to direct the “modern” viewer (see Winters for one example). As a result, Wade is only given credence when he is tied to “modern-day rage and loneliness, as well as the fleeting possibilities for personal redemption” most readily associated with one of Schrader’s most famous characters, Travis Bickley. Thus, in a *Times*’ review, Wade is seen as producing insight insofar as he reflects a “workaday "Taxi Driver" in the snow” (Maslin, “Suppressed”). As I will discuss later, this immediate attempt to dismiss the WWPC rural characters of *Affliction* — and particularly Wade — is one reason why, as in the novel, it is necessary to use Rolfe’s character as a distancing device from the narrative action.

These reviews subtly reflect the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality, portraying it as a location inherently separate from the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream. This discourse is more blatantly demonstrated in reviews of *GG*. Similarly to the above reviews, the content of the film is considered realistic in its depiction of retrograde rural locations, a perceived realism that some reviewers claim as “a little too studiously grotesque” to work (Rozen, “Picks”). Similar to reviews of the above films, *GG*’s content

may be considered unworthy for film, and other reviewers make a point of noting the brilliance of the director and actors despite the WWPC rural content itself. Hence, for these reviewers, Becky (Juliette Lewis) keeps a “bemused” distance from the “flat” town of Endora even as her energy improves upon it (Maslin, “Johnny”; Rozen, “Picks”), and director Lasse Hallström is credited with the ability to find meaning and beauty in a “town that jumped off life’s carousel long before the Big Dipper came along and made everything hazardous” (Bruzzi 59). Indeed, for these reviewers, it is not the “events” or Gilbert’s sense of place that illustrates the complexity within this rural location, but the film’s “creators” (i.e. Hallström) (Alleva, “Drabness”) and Hedges (the screenplay)<sup>81</sup>.

The favorable reviews of these films are due in part to the perception that stereotypical representations of WWPC rural locations are authentic reflections of such places in reality. The films that do not accomplish this perceived authenticity, either by failing to live up to predominant stereotypes of region (*A Thousand Acres* and *In Country*) or by hyperbolizing these stereotypes (*Bastard Out of Carolina*), are ultimately dismissed out-of-hand. For example, many reviewers felt *A Thousand Acres* too melodramatic and therefore simplistic, a thoroughly bad film but with exceptional performances (Maslin, “King”; Rozen, “Thousand”; Schickel, “Infirmities”). Perhaps the film did not work for these reviewers, however, because of the Hollywood glamour associated with two of its stars, Jessica Lange and Michelle Pfeiffer. While Lange’s presence has long been associated with characters that can be typified as having “country” attributes<sup>82</sup>, a point

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<sup>81</sup> See Ansen (“’Tis”) for a discussion of Hedges.

<sup>82</sup>And continues, as we see in films like *Don’t Come Knocking* (Dir. Wim Wenders, 2005)

Duncan Webster made almost twenty years ago (73), some reviewers feel that Pfeffier's decidedly un-country presence ultimately makes the entire film un-credible. Rozen compares Pfeffier's character to Eva Gabor in *Green Acres*: "exquisite beauty doesn't go with this rural landscape" ("*Thousand*"). An "authentic" Midwest cannot be represented through a perceived urbane quality like glamour, and the presence of such qualities thus contradicts the role rural places play in the dominant discourse<sup>83</sup>.

*In Country*, too, fails to fulfill its stereotype as a Southern, working-class rural film that represents a stagnant container separate from an evolving nation (for a discussion of the role of Southern films, see Rollins, *Columbian* 462-463)<sup>84</sup>, which may be one reason why some reviewers rejected this film. Seen as too juvenile, simplistic and sentimental (Klawan; Ansen, "Up") and/or foregoing true analysis and interrogation in its representations of Vietnam vets (Johnson, "Daughter"; O'Brien, Klawans; and more ambiguously, Scott), this film is considered valuable insofar as it honors the Wall (see Johnson, "Daughter"; O'Brien; Ansen, "Up"). However, reviewers could also be frustrated because the Deep South working-class film is evoked yet never fulfills its traditional role in the dominant discourse. This expectation is demonstrated in reviews that highlight the "nostalgia for southern small town" (Lupack 177-9) and focus on the

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<sup>83</sup> Although some reviewers also take issue with what they see is an incomplete engagement with the book. See Ansen and Brown; Ottenhoff for a couple of examples.

<sup>84</sup> See also French.

authentic Southernness of characters like Mamaw (Peggy Rea, of *Dukes of Hazard*)<sup>85</sup>, and in those reviews that appear frustrated by representations that do not adequately convey the Deep South's collision of "K mart culture" and "backwoods ways" (Ansen, "Up"). Further, it is clear to some reviewers that the WWPC rural characters are in fact agents in their own destinies and as I would argue, actively lead the nation at large towards national healing. For example, where Lupack may note the "nostalgia for southern small town," she also notes the juxtaposition of one working-class small town in Kentucky with a larger history and nation (182). Paradoxically, these WWPC rural characters do not fulfill their stereotyped un-consciousness by instead leading the *spectator* to consciousness, and this is something that might not sit well with those invested in the dominant discourse on rurality.

While reviewers of these latter two films demonstrate the discomfort viewers face when confronted with representations of WWPC rurality that run counter to dominant discourse, *Bastard Out of Carolina* has the opposite problem in its flaunting of stereotype to uncomfortable excess. On one level, the film's excessive use of rural stereotypes, complete with Grandma (Grace Zabriskie) chewing snuff in a rocking chair on the porch, are offensive: the spectator is truly witnessing the location of the stereotypical hillbilly/white trash/redneck. Yet by presenting these stereotypes in this fashion, director Angelica Huston ties the ridiculous nature of the white trash stereotype itself to the

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<sup>85</sup>The description of Ray's character as "obese Mawmaw" (Scott) points to an easily recognizable, rural stock character, in the same line as those reviewers who describe amateur actress Cates (and her character) in *Gilbert Grape* as "horribly overweight" (Giles and Duignan-Cabrera).

dominant unsaid which gives rise to such stereotypes in the first place.

As noted by a minority of reviewers (Shister for example), the stereotypes evoked in this film do not reduce the complexity of the characters but implicate the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality that exists in the 1990s. However, as with the other films discussed here, this use of stereotype may actually elide such a critique. In regards to *Bastard* many reviewers are critical of Huston's hyperboles but ironically employ highly recognizable terms like "redneck," "white trash" and "trailer trash" to make sense of the characters on-screen (for some examples, see James; Showalter; Marin; Rosenblum). The use of such phrases by reviewers could be seen as a recognition of the connection between the 1950s setting of the film and 1990s dominant discourse on WWPC rurality and, in this way, the film appears to fulfill the a similar function as Allison's novel. However, as we see in Marin's review entitled "Rednecks behaving badly," some reviewers are ambiguous on this point. In a reference to one of the scenes of the film, Marin posits that even with the talent of the director and cast of characters, the white trash content of the film cannot be utilized for serious effect: "Huston got the right cast ([Jennifer Jason] Leigh, [Ron] Eldard, Michael Rooker); she never figures out how to make a meal out of crackers and ketchup" (Marin). While nodding at the dominant discourse on white trash, the reviewer ultimately equates the content itself (WWPC rurality) with the empty calories consumed by Bone and her sister to stave off hunger.

The majority of the reviews discussed here demonstrate the larger ideological context surrounding the release of these films, reflecting the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality that existed from the late-1980s (*Housekeeping*) and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*Empire Falls*). This larger social and cultural context is precisely what these films interrogate; it



is also what can shroud the spectator from such an interrogation. However, as exhibited in some of these reviews, the mainstream refusal to interrogate its own unsaid assumptions into the late 20th/early 21<sup>st</sup> century does not preclude a WWPC rural counter-narrative.

#### ii. WWPC Rurality and Critique of Progress

In keeping with the novels, all of the adaptations represent the dichotomy between a mainstream (middle-classless and sub/urban) “there” and a WWPC rural “here” that appears to deviate from mainstream norms. As discussed above, the films are able to draw upon recognizable imagery in which to reinforce this spatial divide, foregrounding the locations of these respective communities. Often, as we are given a particular rural community's location in a larger social context, we are also shown the sense of place of particular characters which includes the impact of and the critique on the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality. Thus, a counter-narrative arises that contradicts the nostalgic and/or retrograde associations of WWPC rurality in filmic discourse, a counter-narrative initially foregrounded by individual characters and extended to include their WWPC rural locations as a whole.

Although the content of the films focus primarily on individual characters, the film’s also situate these characters as co-extensive of their locations. For instance, in *In Country*, we see Sam (Emily Lloyd) as part of a town that fits a distinct Southern stereotype complete with bootleggers and teen pregnancy. Similar to the novel, the film places Sam within the community of Hopewell through exchanges of dialogue that show her familiarity with the people in town. In the film, this relationship is also conveyed in part through long- and medium shots of the town’s landscape that in turn tie many of her

hopes and fears to those of the town of Hopewell generally speaking. For example, her personal dilemmas are intertwined with the background landscape as she drives through town with her Uncle Emmett (Bruce Willis): the long shots that place their car amongst the landscape helps place their situation as part of the local community. This point is further emphasized when the point-of-view from within the car places the town in the background of discussion or directly looks out at the passing rural landscape (empty fields) and the structures that stand upon it (trailers, run-down farmhouses).

As already noted, the dominant discourse on rurality immediately associates such WWPC rural locales with people who appear different from middle-classless sub/urban norms. However, while these characters and communities may at times appear restricted by their WWPC rural location and as a result place all of their hopes in a more prosperous mainstream “there,” there are also moments when the very authority of this mainstream “there” is questioned and is done so through appealing to the spectator’s affect. One way in which the films appeal to affect is through the WWPC rural point-of-view that is adopted during challenges to mainstream power interests. In *Nobody’s Fool*, for example, Sully (Paul Newman) establishes the arbitrariness of a local policeman’s (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) authority through verbal antagonizing that ultimately places the police officer in an inferior position. Sully’s recognition of authority’s arbitrary manifestation can also be applied to his irreverence for those outside interests who “develop” WWPC rural communities and who hold more power over everyone in these locales, including local cops. For example, in one diner scene, Sully leads the community into mocking a representative of mainstream development, the banker Clive, Jr. (Josef Sommer), by eliciting derision from the other diners and, through their point-of-view,

directing the spectator to identify with Sully as he challenges those who may otherwise be considered a greater authority in other contexts.

However, even as the mainstream is briefly challenged, it is also true that within these narratives the WWPC rural locations appear controlled by larger, dominant structures. The truth of these films is that even as the characters may challenge authority (middle-classless sub/urbanity included) in both postwar and present settings, the actual structures that emerge from this authority do not crumble. It is tempting to read this thematic concern — WWPC rurality can find self-respect despite the fact that larger mainstream norms will continue to dominate American society — not as a counter-narrative but as a justification of the very norms that dominate. However, this reading would ignore the fact that the novels also ultimately leave larger middle-classless sub/urban norms in their dominant place. For example, although the mainstream and its dominant discourses are questioned, the gentrification of Lawford in *Affliction* and Empire Falls is still occurring at the books' conclusions, Sam will leave for Lexington (*In Country*), Gilbert's Endora is shrinking (*GG*), and Ruth and Sylvie merely disappear from a dominant structure they cannot change (*Housekeeping*). Yet the critique of the dominant discourses on WWPC rurality and a dominant unsaid that rests upon mainstream norms of progress and development creates a counter-narrative that implicates the larger social contexts outside the fictional borders of the novels; their adaptations follow suit. Even in adaptations like *Nobody's Fool* that soften the counter-narrative of its novel or the most problematic adaptations like *A Thousand Acres* and *Bastard*, this critique is foregrounded for the spectator. In the adapted versions, Ginny can walk away into a world full of hope that is nowhere near the ending of the novel and Bone's family is still judged for their

stereotypical white trash ways, but these actions do not completely overwrite the lessons presented throughout the films. The most important aspect to emerge in these adaptations, then, is that the narratives lend themselves to a questioning of the “progress” and “development” that can be seen as structuring American society and that they do this through the WWPC rural point-of-view elided by these norms.

Unsurprisingly, the most striking defiance of the mainstream and its progress and development is found in those characters who are the most deviant. Thus, in *Bastard*, the Boatwrights direct their opposition at those characters who appear more mainstream, like Derin Altay's character in an early funeral scene, but also at the spectator's perspective just slightly past her shoulder and thus implicating our complicity in her derision of the Boatwrights. However, a critique of the mainstream can also be more implicitly evoked in films like *Housekeeping*. Sylvie and Ruth's critique rests more in a negative counterexample that is most obvious in confrontations with townspeople like the middle-classless appearance of the church ladies. In a scene towards the end of the film, the church ladies are set against the clutter of Sylvie and Ruth's house. However, these ladies and the middle-classless normality with which they are associated are at a disadvantage here; it is not Sylvie who looks ridiculous in this unkempt house, but the ladies themselves. This role reversal helps the spectator receive the shared location of the middle-classless women and Sylvie, particularly as their commonality centers on their personal losses (such as family tragedies detailed respectively by Sylvie and one of the ladies) and their shared position as residents of a town that fails to uphold mainstream norms like upward mobility and postwar domesticity. Although these two different types of people appear at odds with each other, they both reside in the same location, one that

most certainly does not embody a middle-classless sub/urban postwar ideal being overlaid instead with frustrated ambition and loss. Keeping with the novel, Sylvie and Ruth illustrate what the town wishes to ignore about themselves, and their disappearance at the end of the film becomes part of the greater loss underscoring the entire town. As Sylvie and Ruth cross the train bridge, escaping into a dark unknown, we are left behind in Fingerbone to watch them disappear. Similar to the train derailment of generations prior and the suicide of Ruth's mother, their counterexample/critique becomes all the more haunting by their absence from Fingerbone and the spectator alike, a disappearance that immortalizes their rebellion against such norms and thus the potential for its counter-narrative to continue in a future form.

In many of these films doubts are cast upon the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream and its judgments, but the spectator is also more explicitly drawn into criticizing mainstream norms outside the filmic borders. As with the novels, this critique is drawn along definitions of what constitutes "progress" and "development." The focus in both mediums is the personal (usually that of one family situation) but also the ways in which this family situation is part of a larger WWPC rural location. In this way, the family/personal becomes the grounds upon which a WWPC rural counter-narrative is waged.

A particularly fitting example can be found in *Nobody's Fool* when Sully and his young grandson (Alexander Goodwin) drive Sully's truck through North Bath. This scene, while taken from a different context than the novel (Russo, *Nobody's* 172), illustrates the connection between individual characters and their WWPC rural locations. In fact, in the adapted scene, the connection between the personal and the

WWCPC community of North Bath is more accentuated, for the small town landscape is visually juxtaposed with Sully's truck, and by extension, his individual story. In this scene, we are initially (and briefly) outside of Sully's pick-up truck, watching the truck come into view in front of a boarded up building. After establishing that this truck (and Sully's situation) is just one of a depressed community, we are brought inside the truck where we see Sully's connection with his grandson. After Sully lets his grandson steer the truck, we are given their perspective of driving through Bath: out of the dirty windshield lies more remnants of a WWCPC small town, aligning the passing landscape with the grandson's new experience of driving a pick-up truck. The grandson's fear and hope accompanying such an experience also guides ours; although perhaps familiar with the act of driving, we can carry his attitude towards our new experience of the WWCPC rural locale we see out the dirty windshield. Adopting his point-of-view at this moment also lends credence to the grandson's claim that "It's a nice truck," reaffirming Sully and the community of which he is one part.

In this way, the story of one man parallels the story of the town. We see a similar occurrence in *GG*, where Gilbert's story is portrayed in concert (and not in opposition with) the town of Endora. While I will go in more detail about the alliance of Gilbert's story with that of the town's decay and "opportunity," there is one scene that explicitly places Gilbert's family within the Iowan landscape: Bonnie Grape's (Darlene Cates) first public appearance in eight years is to retrieve her differently abled son Arnie (Leonardo DiCaprio) from the town jail. This appearance and accompanying humiliation weigh heavily upon the siblings and their mother. From Bonnie's heroic gesture and a joyous reunion with Arnie to a quiet, shameful ride home, we are finally given a long shot of

their rusting, postwar era car driving through the agricultural countryside. While on one hand the town of Endora created the family's humiliation, the town has also experienced a shameful fall from glory; as implied earlier in the film, the best opportunity for jobs isn't through farm fields but service jobs at the incoming Burger Barn. The juxtaposition of the rusting car and the countryside is a reminder of the hope that existed in the past for both the family and the community but has since decayed to its current state.

In these two films, the stories of individuals help illuminate the unsaid stories of the communities' boarded up buildings or abandoned homesteads shown on-screen.

Something similar happens in the novels to a point. For example, in *GG*, the reader is never told why Albert Grape committed suicide or why the town is in shambles.

However, we can infer that this town has gone the way of many small towns: decreasing family farming since the postwar, transplanted industry, etc. In other novels discussed in Chapter Three, particularly in the novels by Smiley, Banks and Russo, these locations and their interrelationship with the individuals and communities are directly explained to the implied reader. In this way, there can be little mistaking the parallels between the personal, familial, and the WWCP rural locations in question.

However, a filmic focus on the familial may ultimately ignore the interrelationship with their WWCP rural locations. In the adapted versions, reviewers tend to reduce the narrative only to the family, thus eliding the WWCP rural location of which it is part. In *Affliction*, for example, reviews by Maslin ("Suppressed") and Kauffman ("Accepted") tie Wade to a "universal" sorrow and not necessarily related to his particular socioeconomic and geographic location. However, this is not the only reading available to reviewers of the film. As Christopher Orr recognizes, the personal (as represented in

the murder investigation) is in part tied to the larger socioeconomic changes impacting the town; in this case, the dissolution of Wade and the Whitehouse family becomes a “failed protest” against the exclusive development of Lariviere (Holmes Osbourne) and company (41). Even without the narrative lengths of the novel to underscore the tie between the community and the personal, the film still potentially demonstrates the counter-narrative to the mainstream development attempting to overwrite the landscape.

This critique confronts the notion that mainstream progress and development is an evolutionary force that will inevitably overwrite WWPC rural locations and, to varying degrees, is a critique that exists in the WWPC rural counter-narratives found across these films. For example, this critique is present in the narrator's introduction to part two of *Empire Falls*. In his comparison between the flow of a river and the flow of life, the narrator employs various tropes that echo the dominant rhetoric surrounding progress and development: the “insistent” flowing river feels like “the most natural of progresses” but is something that can be turned against, leaving the narrator to ultimately maintain that “resistance is not futile.” Ostensibly, this metaphor speaks to the personal and in particular Miles Roby, but as we've seen, the personal becomes both representative of and intertwined with its larger location. Thus, through this opening voice-over, the narrator foreshadows Miles Roby's active defiance of Francine Whiting as well as the potential for the local defiance of the gentrification occurring in the town at the end of the film. This gentrification is shown in a series of still photographs, and with the accompanying voice-over, we are informed that the restructured mill has become an outlet store and call center and that new condos on the waterfront have been built for new, wealthier in-migrants. Despite this physical rewriting of the town's landscape, we are also shown evidence of



the town's resistance to such "progress" and "development," again through still photos of modest houses (the voice-over informs us that these houses continue to be owned by the residents) and the new restaurant sign "Callahan and Roby" that attests to Miles' own reclamation of self through his small business. These small signs of resistance offer an alternative to the mainstream "progress" and "development" that appears to be overwriting the landscape of the town. In this way, the film captures the ambiguously hopeful note in which the novel also ends: the new outside interests that restructure the town (482) do not take away Miles' and by extension, the town's sense of place in Empire Falls (see Chapter 32).

*Nobody's Fool* also displays a critical attitude towards the outside development of rural locations. As in the novel, this anticipated (and ultimately failed) development is figured as a real estate deal backed by powerful outside investors that suddenly decide to take their money elsewhere. In contrast to the novel where economic devaluation is explicitly tied to a larger cultural devaluation (the investor pulls out of a real estate deal because the residents are seen as "behaving" and "looking" funny compared to the rest of the country — 445-446), the film highlights the impact of ruthless business practices that constitute progress and development in our modern age. In the film, this scene makes clear that the sources of money and power lie outside North Bath (Clive, Jr. receives news of the broken deal through a phone call) and that the investors are aware of the divide between the town and themselves (as seen in the statement "how much *you* good people wanted this thing to happen"). Further, the investor also demonstrates through his blunt rejection that his spatial remove from the town manifests in an emotional detachment and a concern only with profit margins: "But it's [the real estate deal] flat out

not going to work.” This is a particularly salient point within a film set in a depressed small town and made and released during the early-1990s recession that itself can be seen as fueled by removed and heartless business practices. This fictional small town could be any small town across the nation hit by deindustrialization and failed business opportunity. In this way, the spectator is invited to question her/his larger social reality: the outside interests who have the power to make or break fictional economically depressed communities mirror such business practices outside the film’s borders.

In *GG*, the spectator is also invited to view the promise of outside “development” and Endora’s sense of place in light of the development of WWPC rural locations in reality. Early in the film, Gilbert’s voice-over explains the images that contrast Endora and what can be considered as more mainstream development. The difference between these two locations is underscored by the older buildings (including Lasmon Grocery) and the empty streets of Endora as compared to the busy and more sunshine-filled Foodland parking lot out by the “interstate.” This comparison may place Endora as an inferior location relative to the mainstream; however, as sparse as Endora appears, it is also clearly a place with its own community. The events within this community, including those happening to Gilbert, are then brought to bear upon the celebration of the mainstream “development” of WWPC rural locations. For example, the new fast food restaurant Burger Barn comes amidst personal and communal sorrow, mourning and loss. During Mr. Carver's (Kevin Tighe) funeral, we see the prefabricated Burger Barn driven along a country highway and Tucker's (John Reilly) obvious joy upon its arrival, images that are intercut with A. Grape's gravesite. As a result, the “progress” associated with the Burger Barn is inextricably linked to death. In this case, the death of this WWPC rural

location is put in an historical context through Albert Grape's headstone, and is foregrounded in the funeral of a recently deceased member of the community and the eulogy that is at times juxtaposed with Grape's gravesite. The "Amen" that ends this eulogy in effect seals the fate of both the dead and the town.

As with *Nobody's Fool*, the spectator is directed to critically view this fictional "development" in light of the larger socioeconomic situation occurring outside the film's borders: the 1980s farm crisis and its effects on rural America, particularly as imagined in the Midwest. As underscored at the grand opening of the Burger Barn, this new development is not cause for the celebration occurring in the film. Amidst the brightly colored celebration, complete with a high school band (incidentally, an actual high school band from a local community), streamers and Tucker's laudatory remarks, we are again reminded of death, this time through the hearse driven by the mortician Bob (Crispin Glover). This comic moment contradicts what the owner of Burger Barn claims in his speech: "In a time when so many things are falling apart, Endora decides to give Burger Barn a chance. A new breath of life." This sad irony is particularly underscored as Gilbert then discovers that Becky (Juliette Lewis) and her grandmother (Penelope Branning) will soon leave Endora. Gilbert's own loss of hope can't be extricated from the low-wage service industry celebrated for places like Endora, Iowa.

Because the film is less absorbed with Gilbert's anger (it more explicitly opens the novel's more interior narrative of Gilbert to include that of the community) it is easier to bring out the sense of place of Endora and the WWPC rural counter-narrative of which it can be considered part. Something similar occurs in *Affliction*, where more interior moments in the novel are framed at times in a more communal light. As we see early in

the film, Wade is critical of a new neon sign for the diner: “Home Made Cooking.” While Wade notices it is mis-worded and quietly teases the owner about it (in the novel, this recognition becomes instead more evidence of his/Lawford's country inferiority — 112), the owner (Wayne Robson) echoes dominant rhetoric in his accusation that Wade wants to “keep this town from prospering.” Margie’s (Sissy Spacek) skepticism questions the sign and perhaps the very same rhetoric of progress and development espoused by the owner: “But I guess it's better than what was here before... There was nothing here before.” Her playful tone suggests that there clearly was something pre-existing this neon sign: the community of Lawford.

The more communal nature of this scene underscores a counter-narrative to the outside mainstream interests who try to overwrite both the landscape and community of WWPC rural locations. The conversation surrounding a misworded neon sign expresses a critique of what arbitrarily constitutes development, a critique that can then be tied to the real estate grab by Lariviere and the outside investment of Mel Gordon (Steve Adams) at the end of the film. This act, according to Rolfe’s narration, turned Lawford into an “economic zone between Littleton and Catamont,” a ski resort “now advertised across the country” and which led to the disappearance of this WWPC rural location: “The community of Lawford as such no longer exists.” Rolfe's refusal to sell, in addition to Wade's eventual self-destruction tied in part to the real estate dealings, brings us to question the inevitability and composition of such development similar to Margie’s critique regarding the neon sign. These acts of defiance constitute a WWPC rural presence that in turn hangs over the gentrification of Lawford, a point similarly recognized in one review of this film: “despite all that we have seen and now know about

the family that lived in this place, something still remains, something that refuses to give way to the inexorable logic of economic zones and property redevelopment” (Kouvaros 50).

Included in this resistance to gentrification is the notion that these communities are not simply “left behind” modern progress and development but in some way look towards their own future. Echoing the novels, these adaptations portray this sentiment as a conflict between staying in WWPC rural locations and leaving for more mainstream locales. This conflict lays the groundwork for a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that portrays the exodus from WWPC rurality as inevitable in our “modern” age. For example, in *GG*, Bonnie's death frees her children to leave Endora (deviating from the novel Gilbert's sisters, played by Laura Harrington and Mary Kate Schellhardt, leave for Des Moines), but the conflicted nature of such freedom is symbolized by some of the objects inside the burning house at the end of the film. During this scene, one of Arnie's “Happy Birthday” banners erupts in flames, associating the potential for newfound freedom out of Endora with anguish and destruction and not with a metaphoric birth into the mainstream world.

The fact that there exists conflict in the decision to leave Endora speaks to the value of this location. Even in the adapted version of *A Thousand Acres* where the overall value of WWPC rurality is tempered as compared to the novel, there is conflict represented in the family's out-migration. In the novel, Ginny's exodus from the farm is described as dehumanizing, as “[forgetting she] was still alive” (336), rather than evolutionary. This conflict is still evident in the film but because it is tempered, one must look a little harder to find it. One example can be found towards the end of the film, as Ginny drives away

with the farm in her rear view mirror. We can note the difference between her perspective and her sister Caroline's (Jennifer Jason Leigh), whose earlier departure also entailed the fading farm in her rearview mirror. However, where the fading farm appears to Caroline during her father's bitter initial rejection, in Ginny's case, the same image is associated with more intense pain. Ginny's pain, while explicitly associated with her separation from Rose, is also juxtaposed with the passing fields displayed in her rear view mirror and out the side window, and by the end of the film, inextricably links the pain associated with Rose's death with that of leaving the family farm. Thus, as Rose instructs Ginny to sell the farm upon Rose's death, Ginny's cry, "This is so hard" takes on a dual meaning: Rose's death is Ginny's last connection to her origins. Although the film ultimately portrays Ginny as a kind of enlightened being (because of the city?) in comparison to people like her husband Ty (Keith Carradine), the separation is still conveyed as a painful occurrence.

The film thus ultimately tempers the counter-narrative more forcefully demonstrated in the novel. Even as the film portrays Ginny as maintaining a WWPC rural sense of place, it separates Ginny from her origins with more finality and thus appears to take a more simplistic approach to rurality. For example, Ginny's voice-over to post-harvest fields expresses the feeling that Rose continues to be present in her new urban life, a presence that can also be seen as including the WWPC rural location she had left behind. However, unlike the novel, the film makes this transition much less ambiguous. In the final scene of the film, when Ginny brings Rose's children to live with her in the city, the camera directs the spectator to witness their exodus from inside the farmhouse. Instead of taking Ginny's perspective and watching the farm fade into the background as

earlier, the point-of-view is from inside the farm and is subsumed by Ginny's voice-over describing the corporate take-over of the farm, and the exodus of her and the children towards a future to which Ginny states, "I see hope." Ginny's voice-over can be read in two ways: first, as she takes ownership of the trauma of her past, but secondly as this voice-over contains the WWPC rural location of which she was once part. Literally "left behind" Ginny's progress towards the city, we view the car from a distance, a shot that completely divorces Ginny from the abandoned farm we now inhabit.

The ambiguous portrayal of Ginny's relationship to her family farm has led other scholars to debate the film's success in adequately capturing the WWPC rural location depicted in the novel. For example, Sharon O'dair suggests that the film excludes the social and political undercurrents of the novel and allows the viewer to engage only with a "focus on the family, and on contemporary gender relations," thus precluding the "toxic discourse" of the novel that interrogates the impact of corporate farming (270). In contrast, Yvonne Griggs views the melodramatic form of the movie as giving voice to "Ginny's connection to the land her family has farmed for generations" (n.p.), a view that acknowledges the impact on a way of life when this land disappears. These two scholars illustrate that although this popular film may be problematic in its treatment of WWPC rurality, there are also redeeming qualities that bring out the legitimacy and potential counter-narrative of its WWPC rural location.

### iii. WWPC Rurality and the Cinematic Spectator

As implied in the above discussion, these films invite the spectator to vicariously experience the WWPC rural locations depicted on-screen. One way in which the spectator's relationship to the fiction on-screen is evoked is through the images of nation

that emerge across these films, from the more obvious such as American flags to the more implicit. The presence of such images helps maintain the relationship between a WWPC rural counter-narrative and the dominant national narrative.

Both academic and non-academic reviewers highlight the American-ness of these films despite the fact that non-Americans directed many of these films and a couple of the films (most notably, *Housekeeping* and *Affliction*) used Canadian settings for their American stories. Perhaps it is this very international flavor that helps foreground the WWPC rural counter-narratives found in the films, demonstrating what Peter Wollen sees as the ability of outsiders to challenge the “self-obsession and self-congratulation” produced by those closest to dominant national stories (134). Although Wollen is speaking of national cinema as a category and not necessarily individual directors, the idea that outsider views of “America” may in fact challenge its assumptions is of significance here.

For example, film critics praise *Housekeeping*'s ability to bring out the unseen of “America” in its Canadian set and under the international direction of William Forsyth. Perhaps the use of a British Columbia locale to portray a more untamed Pacific Northwest is itself representative of the conflict between the freedom associated with “American vastness” (Cardullo, “Three”, 348) and the reality that, geographically and metaphorically, America is not nearly so unrestricted. In addition to the filmed location, reviewers like Kauffman (“Spirits”) take particular note that *Housekeeping* is an “American” film based on an “American” book, but directed by a Scottish director; for Bert Cardullo, Forsyth “takes an American novel and makes an authentic American film of it” (“Three” 353). Part of this American-ness can be seen in the marginalized unsaid



foregrounded in the film. For Jonathan Rosenbaum, part of this unsaid rests upon aspects of the 1950s that are often ignored (transience and homelessness most readily associated with the 1930s), potentially creating a feeling of “discomfort” in American viewers and as a result “points to the degree to which non-Americans may be privy to certain insights about this country that we are too shielded to see for ourselves” (211). For my purposes here, the counter-narrative presented by Sylvie's transience and the brief shots of homeless subjects challenges our dominant notions of (postwar) America but also the dominant discourses on WWCP rurality that may be associated with Fingerbone's locale.

While reviewers recognize Forsyth's ability to foreground the unseen in American culture, they also tend to posit the town as a metonymy of American culture generally speaking and as a result, overlook Fingerbone's position as a particular WWCP rural location. Forsyth reinforces such an interpretation when he describes the use of a “backwater like Fingerbone” to capture the conflict of a disappearing frontier spirit in American society (quoted in Kauffmann, “Spirits”). This statement suggests that the “backwater” used as the film's setting is not necessarily tied to a WWCP rural counter-narrative but is instead used to explore America more generally. However, the elements that remain from the novel (such as Lucille's desire to escape to Boston (132), the insistence that Fingerbone was not an impressive town) highlight that Fingerbone is unique in its WWCP rural location. Further, it is in this rural location that the spectator is invited to critique larger mainstream norms even if the WWCP rural counter-narrative originates from someone like Sylvie who appears to exist outside the town itself and even if the ending of the film appears to reject Fingerbone in its entirety. In this way,

a Scottish director brings the BC landscape/Pacific Northwest to bear upon the mainstream and can be seen as exhibiting a “toxic discourse” to dominant national narratives.

Reviewers of films like *GG* and *Affliction* also reference the international aspect of these films. For Janet Maslin, it is noteworthy that *GG*'s distinct American landscape and grotesquerie is brought to us by a Swedish director (see the sub-title, “A Swedish director tells an American story” in Maslin, “Johnny”). In the case of *Affliction*, the international aspect of the film highlights the notion that WWPC rural locations are foreign lands within American borders. In *Affliction*, the Quebec landscape is seen as mirroring the brutal New England climate of Lawford: for one reviewer, “Making Canadian landscapes impersonate New Hampshire” gives the impression that the town “seems a real place dying a real death” (Alleva, “No”; see also Winters; Kent Jones, “Snow”). However, it is also important to note that not all films here are internationally directed or shot in international settings, and even if not all reviewers recognize the counter-narratives of these fictional WWPC rural locations, all of the films contest a version of “America” found in dominant national discourse.

One way that all of these films evoke their American-ness and the counter-narrative to its precepts is through the American flag. At times, the flag foregrounds WWPC rural subjects within the very dominant narrative that misrepresents them. The fleeting image of the American flag, such as outside the town hall in *Affliction*, on Pete's (Kevin Anderson) truck in *A Thousand Acres* or outside the postwar resort in *Empire Falls* may merely set a scene for the spectator, but its presence also becomes an accusation. All the promises that inhere within such a symbol are broken within the very locations flying

these flags: Lawford's lack of opportunity and its derision by the mainstream seasonal residents, the disappearing family farm associated with Pete, or the exclusionary focus of the Vineyard resort through which Grace/Empire Falls find only fleeting hope. Further, this lack of opportunity is one tied to both past and present; for example, the flag in *Empire Falls* recalls the red, white and blue titling of the film, a clue to the spectator that this town stands, in some way, as America's story if only because it is a challenge to it.

This point brings me to the opening of *In Country*. Instead of using landscape for its opening scene, the film begins with an extended shot of an American flag, then cuts to a military exercise for Vietnam soldiers, then a flashback scene set in Vietnam before resting on Hopewell High's graduation ceremony. This opening can be seen as holding dual meanings: it evokes the continuing importance of Vietnam for soldiers and the nation alike, but it also conveys the idea that the journey towards national reconciliation will be brought to us through a particular WWPC rural location. The spectator is thus implicated in such a journey: in addition to merely joining one working-class small town in Kentucky to the larger history/nation as one reviewer claims (Lupack 182), Hopewell becomes a place that leads, instead of being placed by, the spectator.

Besides shots of the American flag, there are other ways in which these films integrate WWPC rural locations with the nation at large. The locale of *Empire Falls*, for example, is represented as America's story through references to such American writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Further, the impact of socioeconomic changes on this fictional town mirrors the decades-long disappearance of industry occurring outside the film's borders. In *Nobody's Fool*, the nation and its precepts are sarcastically evoked, as demonstrated in Wirf's (Gene Saks) sarcastic statement regarding

Sully's relative (if still meager) prosperity, a statement which ultimately critiques the meritocratic myth so central to American ideology: "How 'bout that. Intelligence, hard work and good looks finally pay off." Further, the timing of this film (early/mid 1990s) also reflects a larger story occurring in America at the time: deindustrialization and recession. Despite the larger climate of desperation reflected in this film there is also hope and may be one reason why, in addition to its small town setting, *Nobody's Fool* "could hardly be more American" (D. Martin)<sup>86</sup>.

#### iv. WWPC Rural Perspectives in Film

While the American-ness of the films helps place their WWPC rural locations within a national context, the changing points-of-view throughout these films' narratives invite the spectator to experience these locations. The use of different points-of-view — objective/omniscient camera, from the perspective of mainstream characters, and a perspective associated with WWPC rural characters and locations — provides more than a sense of continuity in these narrative films. In addition to the objective/omniscient camera that assigns an outsider-ness to the spectator in relation to the on-screen WWPC rural locations, the shot/reverse shot between mainstream characters and WWPC rural perspectives helps draw out the tension of a WWPC rural sense of place that is at once a source of pride and derision for its inhabitants.

All three of these points-of-view initially evoke a schism between the spectator and the WWPC rural locations on-screen and as a result, reflect the novels on which the films are based. Novels like *A Thousand Acres* and *Nobody's Fool* are obvious in evoking a

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<sup>86</sup>According to Levy, "optimism" is one of the American values found in the small town film (264).

divide between their WWPC rural locations and the implied reader who, if not directly aligned with a middle-classless sub/urban subject position, is at least aligned with an outsider position in relation to the postwar and present WWPC rural locations that are the focus of these stories. Ginny's first person description for the traveler passing by a seemingly bucolic family farm<sup>87</sup> and Russo's heterodiegetic-extradiegetic narrator detailing the dissonance between tourists passing by the seemingly “left behind” town of North Bath immediately highlight such a divide. Both novels speak to the interplay between “here,” “there” and the reader, creating stories that focus on WWPC rural locations as well as the dominant misapprehensions of them in both the postwar and the present. While these two novels may be the most immediately striking in this regard, all of the novels present such conflict between WWPC rurality and the mainstream, something that is continued in the adaptations discussed here.

Before getting to the respective points-of-view that highlight the divide between WWPC rurality and the mainstream, I want to note that in many of these films, *Affliction* being the most obvious example, the spectator's outsider perspective is reflected in those characters who are outsiders (i.e. associated with the middle-classless sub/urban) to the town. For example Rolfe, although having at one time been part of the WWPC rural location of Lawford, is an outside character who leads the spectator to the town and its residents. Rolfe's narration, like that of the novel, lends itself to a feeling of omniscience over the events portrayed on-screen. For some reviewers, this technique “works much better in the naturally omniscient medium of film” (Cardullo, “Stones”

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<sup>87</sup>See Conlogue for an analysis of this opening.

486). Even if this omniscience is still tempered by Rolfe's past/present relationship with Lawford, his relative outsider status is solidified through his narrative voice which transports the viewer into Lawford: first, as Wade and Jill (Brigid Tierney) drive into town and later, as Rolfe himself drives into town. However, while Rolfe brings us into the story it is not to control its events but to bear witness to the self-destruction of Wade and the parallel destruction of Lawford.

This narrative approach clearly impacted reception of this film. Similar to the novel, reviewers felt distanced from the content of the film in both positive ways (for example, J. Hoberman feels *Affliction* is "personal," but without being "solipsistic or overweening" — 58) and in negative ways, especially from Rolfe who, for Alleva, "ends up seeming vaguely weird" ("No" 15; see also Romney). However, this distancing mechanism creates a more objective viewpoint in which to consider the relationship between the WWPC rural characters and the mainstream depicted on-screen. While it is important that spectators identify *through* characters they might otherwise distance themselves, it is also important that this identification does not elide the implications associated with the outsider status that the spectator shares with mainstream characters. Rolfe's narration is necessary towards this end; it lends a feeling of objectivity such that the film "needs to be watched carefully" (Maslin, "Suppressed"), therefore making it harder to dismiss the conflict between WWPC rurality and the mainstream,

Other of the adaptations demonstrate the potential of voice-over to provide a more objective filter of the on-screen content, thus lending an authority to WWPC rural characters who may be otherwise dismissed. Voice-overs in *Bastard*, *Housekeeping* and *Empire Falls* are provided by characters — Bone, Ruth and Otto Meyer (Larry Pine)

respectively — who are, in some way, familiar with the story and WWPC rural locations unfolding on-screen. As already mentioned, Bone's narration clearly comes from a removed, adult perspective and can be seen as reclaiming ownership of her past. In contrast, *Housekeeping's* narration uses Ruth's voice as a child and, as critics note, this interpretation of the novel's narrative voice can be viewed as a positive addition or as problematic insofar as a child's voice could detract from Ruth's authority. Thus, for Erica Spohrer, the use of voice-over to “develop plot and character rather than reveal Ruthie's interior maturation” allows Ruth's on-screen actions a greater force; by contrast, Sheila Ruzycski O'Brien notes, “[Forsyth] undermines the continuous relationship of the two women [Sylvie and Ruth] by using young Ruth's child voice for the voice-over narration, instead of the adult narrative voice of the novel,” implying that Ruth's observations are contained in an inferior position as a child (178). Despite such a critique, however, Ruth's voice still operates as an authority over the events of her past and, ultimately, as the authority who frames these events for the spectator.

This authority is also highlighted in *Empire Falls*, where the spectator is directed by a dead man's voice-over (we find at the end of the film that Meyer was killed by Jon Voss (Lou Taylor Pucci) in the school shooting). This dead man's voice helps document the events leading up to the end of the film and, in concert with the chapter titles for each section of the film, gives these events the semblance of recorded truth. This kind of witnessing can also be extended to include Meyer's synopsis regarding the historical and present exploitation of this particular working-class town and other New England towns in similar situations outside the film's borders.

While these voice-overs lend objectivity to the content on-screen, the alternation

between mainstream and WWPC rural perspectives, at times given through shot/reverse shot, invites the spectator to more directly experience the conflict between the mainstream and WWPC rurality. As already mentioned, one of the most obvious mainstream positions with which the spectator is asked to align is with the on-screen judgments cast upon WWPC rural characters. Thus, in a film like *Bastard*, a spectator participates in the on-screen judgments of “white trash” from the over shoulder shots directed at the Boatwrights; in *GG*, Endora's own judgment of Bonnie's obesity becomes the spectator's through the town's point-of view. Further, in *Affliction*, the shot/reverse shot alternately aligns us with Wade/Lawford and Jill/Mainstream. As a result, the spectator experiences Jill's perspective as she passes judgment upon her father (“I bet you used to be a bad kid” in the first instance or “I want to go home” in the second) as well as Wade's defensive posture under such close scrutiny. In this way, we are distanced from the action yet still experience all sides of the conflict through a shot/reverse shot highlighting the power imbalance that arises due in part to the divide that exists between the mainstream and WWPC rurality.

The spectator is thus invited to share in a limited experience of a WWPC rural subject, in the case of Wade in *Affliction*, with his feelings of inferiority and shame. In addition to *Affliction*, the other films also help the spectator identify through WWPC rural characters as they relate to a locale that is changed by mainstream notions of progress and development. For example, in *A Thousand Acres* the identification through a WWPC rural subject maintains Ginny's ambivalence towards leaving the land even if, ultimately, the spectator is “left behind” in the objective perspective that ultimately separates Ginny from the now corporate farm.



*In Country* also helps identify the interrelationship between the changes in WWCP rural locations and the sense of place of WWCP rural subjects. For example, as Sam, Emmett and Mamaw journey to the Wall, Mamaw gives voice to her particular WWCP rural sense of place in regards to the disappearing family farms but also to her own cultural validity. As the family drives down the interstate, Mamaw laments the low wheat prices and, by extension, the general demise of the family farm highlighted by shots of the empty fields next to the highway. In dialogue that departs from the novel, Mamaw then comments on her son's death: "Sometimes I think Dwayne's almost better off out of this" than, by implication, having to deal with the death of the family farm. But Mamaw's WWCP rural voice does not stop here. As Sam questions if Mamaw would have sent her son to Canada instead of Vietnam, Mamaw retorts with a patriotism indirectly countered by Emmett's presence: "Well, Emmett can talk. He didn't die." We then see her look at Emmett, and look forward: "I'm sorry Emmett. I didn't mean to step on your feelings. I just had to say how I feel." Mamaw's sorrow over her son's death and anger at the stance Emmett represents is further reflected in relation to the landscape. After she says her piece, the spectator takes on Mamaw's point-of-view of the passing landscape, this time at rows of suburban ranch houses. Mamaw's pain regarding her farm and her son, while ignored within this mainstream landscape, is spoken over top of it and as a result foregrounds the marginalized unsaid.

This exact exchange does not happen in the novel as Mamaw never says these things in Emmett's presence. However, by placing all three of these people in the car in the same shot, we are given different levels of reconciliation: two sides of the veteran debate (patriotism versus bitterness) and the mainstream rejection of supposedly simple

WWCPC rural locations (a more mainstream-focused Sam versus Mamaw/Hopewell). Further, this scene (adapted differently from the novel) occurs in a more middle-classless sub/urban locale, giving more equal weight to Mamaw's WWCPC rural perspective: it is her point-of-view of the passing suburban development that leads us to Irene's (Joan Allen) home in suburban Lexington.

Even as these films allow the spectator the space in which to identify with WWCPC rural characters, s/he is also implicated in the actual damage done to WWCPC rural locations and is thus kept at some remove. This implication is particularly apparent in *Bastard* and *Affliction*. In *Bastard*, Glen's violence towards Bone (Jena Malone), particularly the rape scene, is tied to the spectator her/himself. At this point, the spectator has already experienced Glen's subject position through a submissive point-of-view, for example, when Bone's Uncle Earl (Michael Rooker) delivers a particularly vicious beating of Glen in retaliation of previous abuse. Conversely, in the rape scene, the spectator momentarily takes on Glen's point-of-view and thus participates in his violent act. While Glen's previous violent behavior is tied to his feelings of inferiority, it is this culminating action that ultimately links Glen's interpersonal violence to the mainstream devaluation of his subject position as exhibited throughout the film.

Similarly, in *Affliction*, the correlation between violence and devaluation takes on generational tones through the flashbacks that are interspersed with Wade's life in the present. This footage resembles a home video of Wade's and Rolfe's childhood and depicts their father (James Coburn) as a violent man. Yet the objective perspective implied through this footage implicates the spectator as the person holding, and thus

encouraging, the scene that s/he is watching<sup>88</sup>. The spectator's implicit encouragement of the violence of Wade's father can be extended to include the impact of the out-of-frame on Wade's actions in the present. Thus, as the spectator impacts the actions of Wade's father, so s/he also shares in the devaluation of Wade's subject position as seen through his daughter's and Mel Gordon's respective points-of-view. Similar to the violent actions of his father, Wade's eventual madness, which begins with his self-performed tooth extraction, can be seen as a reaction to the role of the implied spectator. The point-of-view is set so that the spectator becomes the mirror to Wade and as he pulls his tooth, we become a reflection of Wade and he a reflection of us. In this way, we cannot escape Wade's downward spiral as it is partly our fault.

#### v. WWPC Rurality and the Past/Present

Even as the spectator can identify with the WWPC rural perspective, the dominant discourse portrays the WWPC rural subject position as part of a past-in-present that is unrelatable to the spectator and can potentially nullify the potential for such identification to continue outside the filmic experience. The temporal depth of these films may confront this potential obstacle, first, as the interrelationship of present and past, especially as shown through the memory of on-screen WWPC characters, belies the stagnant appearance of rurality. Secondly, this temporal interrelationship, while brought to us through individual characters, also implicates a larger historical framework. As discussed above in regards to Rosenstone's category "new history film," the temporal depth of these adaptations represents marginalized subjects as fluid, evolving, and capable of

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<sup>88</sup>Turim points to home video footage as a witnessing (Turim 15).

critiquing the dominant cultural and national narratives of both the past and present.

To recall Turim, the flashback as traditionally conceived is only one way in which films portray the “privileged moment” that arises when “different moments of temporal reference” are juxtaposed (1). Keeping with this general definition of flashback, the different ways in which the films here evoke the past and its influence on the present, from the mise-en-scene itself to character flashback and, to be focused on more extensively, the black and white photograph, all express the intersection between “memory and history” (Turim 1) that is crucial to WWPC rural counter-narrative. Whereas the novels describe the past through homodiegetic-intradiegetic or heterodiegetic-extradiegetic remembrances, these films more literally juxtapose the past and the present. This juxtaposition can be accomplished without necessarily employing “direct references to history” (Turim 12), for example, in direct or indirect descriptions of the history of a community through omniscient or personal narration/remembrance that then hangs over the mise-en-scene and thus indicates the constant tension that exists between the past and the present. However, with flashbacks and photos, this past is directly brought into conversation with the present. For example, the presence of a photograph, whether shown in a character's hand or on a wall, visually juxtaposes the past (albeit stilled) with the present action of the story.

The mise-en-scene invites the spectator to acknowledge the history of these WWPC rural locations, even in those films that do not directly explain the relationship between the past and the present. For example, *Nobody's Fool* never mentions the cause behind the boarded up Main Street of which we catch brief glimpses — but one can be sure it has something to do with a run-down factory filmed at the end of a street comprised of

weathered housing. This looming past may be figured on more personal terms as we see in *GG* where a mailbox that reads “A. Grape” sits in front of the family’s dilapidated farmhouse. From the very beginning we are shown that the past, particularly the absent presence of Albert, hangs over the Grapes’ home. We infer throughout the film that the town is deeply impacted by a loss left unexplained to the spectator: from the empty Main Street in comparison to busy Food Land; to the implied lack of opportunity except the low wage service jobs represented by Burger Barn; and finally, to the opening day of the franchise itself.

Thus, a decaying building does not represent the stagnation or regression of these locations but symbolizes the very process of change: although appearing a bit differently from the urban, these towns reflect a similar restructuring as that of the rest of the country. As a result, the at times decayed appearance of these locales reflects the past within the present and, similar to a flashback, illustrates a perpetual “privileged moment” where individual or communal memory is brought to bear on a larger history. Flashbacks proper help solidify this nuance within the *mise-en-scene*. For example, in *Empire Falls*, Miles’ flashbacks of his mother are brought to bear on the landscape of the town. At various points, these flashbacks are directly contrasted to the town’s present condition, for example, as we see in the contrast between the mill workers leaving a postwar mill and the decaying building in the present. Relatedly, Miles’ memory of Grace’s affair occurs inside the diner in which Francine has a hold on him and is sparked by a newspaper clipping recalling the prosperous days of the mill/Empire Falls. In this way, Miles’ personal flashbacks document both a personal and a larger communal loss that underscores conditions in the present.

The flashback clearly demonstrates the interrelation of past and present, individual memory and communal history within these WWPC rural places. The appearance of photographs, both monochrome and color, also illustrates the continuing impact of the past on the present and the intersection of the individual with larger social contexts and histories, and does so more forcefully than the descriptions of such photos found in the novels. In the films, the photograph represents an individual need to recover some lost connection but also intersects this need with a larger location. Further, the monochrome photo can introduce this connection for a spectator that dismisses WWPC rural communities as “left behind” her/his present context. According to Paul Grainge, the black and white image is easily recognizable as the “aesthetic of the authentic” that is tied to a subjective remembrance of the past (*Monochrome* 70-71). On one hand, these black and white photos may convey some “geographically indeterminate sense of temporal” (71) safely contained in a discrete past, but the authenticity associated with monochrome can also be reflected on to the WWPC rural subjects who are showing us this past in a narrative present.

Even in films like *Bastard* and *Housekeeping* where the black and white photo operates on a very individual level, photographs imply a sense of temporal complexity for their WWPC rural locations. As already noted, these films are narrated from some future position and thus immediately bring the past to bear upon the present. The characters’ use of photographs lends a further temporal layer for the spectator: we are viewing the past, but also the loss of and desire for connection within this past. Following the novels, both films show their child protagonists approach family photos — Ruth approaches the family photographs in her grandmother’s house and Bone studies a photo

of herself with her mother's first husband. Both characters view these photos as a way to regain connection to something lost within their postwar present; as Ruth says, "I returned to the album often until the faces became familiar and comfortable, like family. It was comforting to find Lucille and mother and me there, too. It seemed to suggest we belonged." It is clear that Ruth's sought after connection is tied to the abandonment already experienced in her short life; it is also a reflection of Fingerbone's own sought after connection to the nation, a parallel made evident by Ruth's voice-over to the next shot. In this shot, Ruth looks at a clipping of her grandmother's obituary, explaining that this obituary was also a place for the town to relive its memory of its most "spectacular" event. As we move from family photos to the local newspaper clipping and to a black and white photo of Fingerbone, Ruth's family story becomes intertwined with the town itself. We next move into a flashback of the derailment (an event which pre-dates Ruth's birth and therefore her personal recollection), seemingly evoked from the black and white photo of Fingerbone's scenery. Ruth's voice-over explains the town's investment in the event itself: as she says in surprise, "It was reported in newspapers as far away as Denver and St. Paul!" At this moment, Ruth's search for personal connection mirrors that of her community's sought after recognition in postwar America. Similarly, in *Bastard*, Bone's connection to the promise of a more ideal father figure mirrors the desire for Anney's and Glen's need for respectability in their postwar society. While Bone seeks out connection to a life she almost had, Glen seeks his connection to a respectable life at which he perpetually fails; Glen, however, attempts to maintain this connection through a rage that is usually directed at Bone.

As with their novels, these two adaptations are set completely within the postwar

period but narrated from a future remove. Thus, Bone's adult narration recounts the postwar scene from a present of which the spectator shares but is not filmically shown; Ruth, although speaking from a child's perspective, is clearly recounting the events of her personal story and its intersection with the postwar Fingerbone. Although neither film directly shows the postwar's impact on the present from which this time period is recalled, seeing these postwar events may lead the spectator to question this era from a WWPC rural subject elided or derided in dominant discourse. Further, and particularly with *Bastard*, new light may be shed upon the continuation of such a discourse in present social contexts. In *Bastard*, for example, the WWPC rural characters are directly tied to the "white trash" figure that continues to be seen as a failure in American society and, as we are left to question the on-screen devaluation of the film's characters, so we may potentially question such discourse that continues outside the film's borders.

Although set entirely within the postwar period, these two films show us the intersection of the individual, WWPC rural locations and a dominant historical discourse. This intersection is more evident in the other films (like *In Country*) where the present action is shown in concert with relics of the postwar past. For example, as Sam searches for a connection to her father's Vietnam photos, she is shown simultaneously consuming products familiar to the larger mainstream society in the 1980s. By interspersing Sam's desire for connection amidst such popular cultural artifacts like Twinkies and Bruce Springsteen posters, Sam's desire to connect to her father becomes linked to the nation; even its popular culture is haunted by the unfinished business evoked by the Vietnam War. The juxtaposition of these postwar photos and 1980s cultural artifacts also gives voice to this WWPC rural location, including the continuing



presence of the past for its subjects and, relatedly, their loss of hope in the present. In a different context of the film, Sam evokes the tension between hope and its loss when she suggests in her own youthful optimism that people tattoo a picture of themselves when they are young, so that “when you get older, people can see how you started out”; Tom (John Terry) replies somewhat mournfully: “That could be a lot to live with.” Such photos become a reminder of the hope that cannot be attained in the present, although as we will see shortly, this reminder of a lost hope can also be used to improve upon the present situations of the WWPC rural locations.

On this former point, photos of an elusive, prosperous past (communal and/or individual) indicate the constant tension between past and present and the impact of such a tension on the subjects’ sense of place. In *Affliction*, for example, we are briefly shown black and white photos of Wade's parents in their youth, first when Wade discovers the death of his mother (Joanna Noyes) and, at the end of the film, as Rolfe's voice-over considers the continuing relevance of this house — and Lawford — despite the mainstream pressures that attempt to overwrite it. In *GG*, too, the black and white photo operates as a reminder of a more hopeful past and its dissolution in the present. At the beginning of the film, Gilbert’s voice-over to the black and white photos on the refrigerator, including his mother's youthful photo, explains that Bonnie was “once the prettiest girl in these parts.” We are then shown her present, obese state — Bonnie’s very body is symbolic of the stark contrast between the more glorious past of this family and

their present hopelessness<sup>89</sup>. Again, we can apply the hopelessness of a particular family situation to the larger community: Bonnie's picture (and, as we see later, Albert's own youthful black and white picture on her nightstand) represents a time period of more opportunity and promise than we see in her or the town's current state.

In films like *Nobody's Fool* and *Empire Falls*, black and white photos directly illustrate the prosperous past of towns that have fallen from grace. For example, in *Nobody's Fool*, we briefly see photos of a once prosperous North Bath hanging on the wall of an office. The brevity of these shots (these photos are not commented on by the characters or focused on by the camera) stand in tension with the brief glimpses of the run-down town observed at points throughout the film. Such a tension is brought to the fore from the earliest moments of *Empire Falls*, where the spectator is shown still pictures that are commented on and seemingly written upon by the narrator. However, as the narrator describes these photos and apparently directs the red markings sketched overtop, we see that these pictures do not represent contained and therefore untouchable pasts. Despite the depressed aura surrounding this WWCP rural location and its inhabitants, this act gives the impression of control over both past and present. At other points in the film, the textile workers within the pictures appear to slightly move; this movement illustrates the narrator's words that multinational business interests sold off local businesses, "leaving behind nothing but hollow decaying shells, inhabited by ghosts" and indicating that this past continues to pervade the present. This prevalence

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<sup>89</sup>The novel's description, while pointing out the origins of Bonnie's obesity, more completely captures Gilbert's embarrassment and disgust (11).

may result in the feeling of loss and desperation, but it also lends itself to the notion that nothing is fixed — even one's present and future predicament.

As we see in this last example, and which echoes the novels' use of memory, still photos in these films do not need to be viewed fatalistically but as exhibitions of agency needed to understand the present and imagine a new future. Thus, as we see at one point in *A Thousand Acres*, Caroline shows Rose pictures of their father standing next to a tractor; the pictures, however, are on her laptop. This picture of her father within the laptop screen reinforces a dissonance reflective of Caroline's own separation from the farm (it is her laptop that contains her father's picture) but also exhibits the potential to contain the overarching authority of their father. The authentic nature of the patriarchal farmer is dispelled by a technology that exceeds and in fact can be seen as symbolizing the disappearance of a parochial and isolated way of life; this farm is not the “center of the universe” that Ginny once believed but is only one place among many. This scene foreshadows Rose's and Ginny's respective discovery of agency: Rose eventually asserts herself within the confines of the family farm, even as she ultimately turned it over to a corporate farm, and Ginny can exceed her father's grasp by ambivalently walking away from her WWPC rural location. As the film ends, the hope that Ginny feels is, in part, her freedom from her father's seemingly omniscient patriarchal authority, a freedom that allows her to envision her life differently.

While these films are not all necessarily optimistic in tone, their use of photographs illustrates an emerging tension between past/present/future and the opportunity to assert WWPC rural memory within a larger, silencing history. To various degrees, these monochrome and color photographs illustrate the promise that some of the communities

feel in regards to both their pasts and their future. As I've been discussing in regards to *Empire Falls*, black and white photographs illustrate what has been lost but what can also be gained. We can see an example of this when Miles shares his idea for decorating the walls of his new restaurant with framed photos of the town when “the mills were working, people were working— working people dressed for hard labor and then all decked out for Sunday dinner at the Hotel. Sort of a celebration of the people who built this town instead of those who *think* they did.” Miles rediscovers a more positive dimension of his sense of place, using it to celebrate the past and present of this location. As Miles shares this idea with his daughter Tick (Danielle Panabaker), we can see that this heritage and pride can also be brought into the future.

The color photographs in *In Country* and *GG* further foreground the agency associated with one's familial and communal sense of place. In the former film, we are shown the requisite family photo at Sam's graduation day. At the beginning, we only see the action of taking photographs, but this action lends a feeling of presence to the pictures we finally see towards the end of the film. These pictures, while containing a particular moment in a family history, are then tied to a larger national context as Sam places a picture of herself at the Wall. As spectators, we cannot plead ignorance to these people within the pictures; these are not just faceless working-class Southerners framed in a still photo but have led the spectator into their own emotional journeys in concert with the larger national journey that ends the film. In comparison to the black and white photos of her father, Sam's color photographs encompass her and, by extension, the spectator's journey towards understanding Vietnam and her working-class community of Hopewell alike.

Similarly, the photographs used in *GG* to convey the potential for hope and happiness are implicitly contrasted to those that capture the devalued present of his family. In the courthouse scene discussed above, Endora's citizens gawk at Bonnie, an action that overshadows her small victory (leaving the house to rescue Arnie from jail) and leads to her family's humiliation. In addition to seeing children laughing and derision by the adults, we see an elderly man take Bonnie's picture. It is noteworthy that we take on Bonnie's perspective at this point; not only are we made to absorb this humiliation, but we are also forced to look in reverse shot at those who judge her. In addition to showcasing Bonnie-as-spectacle, the use of the camera highlights the attempt to contain Bonnie's subject position within the borders of a still photo; however, we never see the photo, only the attempt at containing someone in this way.

However, like *Empire Falls*, photos in *GG* (or, at least, the action of taking a photo) also show that these locations can come to terms with themselves in parallel with a protagonist who comes to grip with his sense of place. In *GG*, we see a second photograph taken after Gilbert returns home to Arnie's birthday party. Gilbert returns to his family after his attempt to abandon them the night before, a return that reflects his acceptance of his community (his friends) and his family, and sharing real joy in the moment. This time it is Ellen taking a picture of Gilbert's and Arnie's reconciliation<sup>90</sup>. Like the courthouse scene, we as spectators do not see the resulting photograph but only

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<sup>90</sup>This is in contrast to the novel where much to Gilbert's dismay, Ellen refuses to take his picture. The refusal to take Gilbert's picture keeps him outside the shared family moment at this point of the story, potentially foreclosing the reconciliation depicted more clearly in the film.

the action of taking it. It is important that we never see this frozen family moment: instead of a contained moment of pure happiness focused on the individual, we are forced to consider the context outside the photo's borders. As a result, the spectator experiences the subject position of Gilbert and Arnie and their happiness upon their reconciliation, but we also do not forget the deep pain associated with the previous night's events and that still linger in this scene. While a sign of reconciliation and hope, this unseen photo also holds the pain and suffering of family and community that we have been privy to throughout the film.

These popular adaptations of novels that focus on WWCP rural locations present the tension between WWCP rural locations and a mainstream society that attempts to dismiss them in both the postwar and the present. Echoing the approach of the novels, we are given this tension from the perspectives of WWCP rural characters and communities. We are also shown the ways in which these locations interrelate with the dominant historical narratives with which we are more familiar and are simultaneously given a mirror with which to view our own relationship to those locations conceived of as regressed in dominant discourse both past and present.

Despite the problematic associations with depictions of WWCP rural locations and representations of the past in popular U.S. films, these adaptations still convey the WWCP rural counter-narratives found in the novels. In fact, even as the films potentially elide the counter-narratives, they also at times accentuate these counter-narratives. As such, these adaptations may help us understand our own motivations towards WWCP rural locations in the past and present, while simultaneously allowing

us to see such places as relevant to “modern” society.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion: WWPC Rurality in the Present**

In the previous chapters, I have focused on the topoi that characterize a dominant discourse on WWPC rurality in the U.S. From at least the postwar period, this discourse has evaluated rurality — especially white working-class and working poor rural subjects — by drawing on middle-classless sub/urban norms of progress and development. Concurrently, the chapters have explored challenges to the dominant view of WWPC rurality as a regressed space inhabited by retrograde people through the examination of autobiographical and literary works written by rural subjects themselves, film adaptations of these novels, and scholarship in the rural social sciences.

As the discussion so far has indicated, the dominant discourse on rurality continues into the 2000s and can be as easily found in mass circulated journalism as in the social sciences. By way of conclusion, I want to offer a brief overview of this recent discourse, examine the ways its topoi resonate with the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality established in the previous chapters, and identify the elements of a WWPC rural counter-narrative as it continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the first section of this chapter entitled “Modern Day Limit Cases,” I look at the interrelationship between the dominant discourse on rurality and the sense of place of WWPC rural subjects, drawing on writings by social scientists who discuss the intersection between the perceptions of WWPC rurality in American society, the social issues that arise in such locations, and the counter-narratives that can be found therein. This introductory section thus frames my discussion, in the subsequent sections, of the conversation between dominant discourse and WWPC rural counter-narrative as found in my corpus (writings in journalistic reportage and the social sciences), focusing specifically on the following topoi: the farm



crises post-1980s in the section II. “Farm Crisis: Get big or get out”; the notion of rural areas “left behind” the rest of America in section III. “Regressed Rural Areas Still ‘Left Behind’”; the red state/blue state dichotomy and its manifestation in issues as diverse as voting patterns and the introduction of high-speed Internet in section IV. “Cultural Regression: A Red/Blue Information Super Highway”; and section V. “Rural/Urban Distinction and the Decline of Society.” This last section focuses on the degradation of society due in part to the WWPC rural subject. As I do throughout this dissertation, this chapter seeks to identify some key topoi in the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality, as well as the challenges to this discourse.

### **I. Modern day limit cases**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the dominant discourses on rurality in the present directly echo some of the topoi outlined in Chapter Two. This connection between the postwar and the present, particularly in regards to the role of rurality in sub/urban development and issues of mobility, middle-classless domesticity and the counterculture, was brought out most obviously in the fictional works discussed in this dissertation and, as will be highlighted in the subsequent sections of this chapter, can be found in journalistic reportage post-1980.

A connection between the postwar and the present is at times foregrounded in writings of the social sciences and journalism that portray WWPC rural subjects. Writers directly evoke such terms as the “forgotten majority” to describe the working-class white, disaffected vote in the 2000 election (Rogers and Teixeira); they also re-invoke connections between present military service and Vietnam (see Lacayo and Johnson for a comparison between the first Gulf War soldiers and Vietnam; Zweig, and Carr and

Kefalas for a discussion of working-class rural youth joining the military for lack of other opportunities<sup>91</sup>); or, more disparagingly, some writers emphasize the distinctions between WWPC rursality and the mainstream as found in terms like white trash (or trailer trash, as we saw in reviews of the film *Bastard out of Carolina*), redneck, etc. Although this last point will be discussed further in the last section of this chapter, it is worth noting here that these kinds of writings illustrate that the postwar influence on the present also includes a dominant unsaid centered around notions of progress and development that, in effect, define rurality as a conceptual limit case for modern, middle-classless sub/urban existence. Ironically, such conceptions rely upon imagery dating back at least sixty years in order to make these distinctions.

Perhaps mirroring the widespread reluctance in U.S. society and culture to meaningfully engage with the realities of WWPC rurality, the social sciences continue to overlook the relevance of these realities to post-1980s America. Urban sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas are critical of such blindness, pointing out in their study of rural Iowa that “rural sociology survives as a relatively minor subdiscipline pursued by a small and committed band of scholars. Despite the iconic place the Heartland inhabits in the national psyche, rural policy remains the most obscure of concerns” (14). Despite this general oversight, it is clear that at least rural sociologists in the U.S. (and England)

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<sup>91</sup>Various articles touch upon the question, as Steven Holmes puts it, “Is This Really an All-Volunteer Army?” For more discussions of the “economic draft” (Zweig) in the current Iraq war, see McLaren and Farahmandpur; Krugman; *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Dir. Michael Moore, 2004); for discussions of service demographics in the first Gulf War, see Lee; Lacayo and Johnson.

have been concerned with rurality over the past 30 years. Some of these sociologists touch on very “modern” concerns in their studies of rural locations, from recovering the history of women rural subjects (Little and Austin), to studying sexuality within rural spaces (Valentine in Cloke and Little, *Contested*), examining the experience of rurality through the lens of racial minorities (Snipp) and masculinity in rural spaces (Campbell et al, *Country Boys*), and so on. These rural sociologists realize that rural locations and subjects are a continuing part of the present and partake of the same concerns as the rest of urbanized society.

As Carr and Kefalas detail in their book, the blind eye turned towards rurality deeply impacts the ways in which these locations are dealt with at the regional and national levels (see also Paul Milbourne’s work). An ignorance of rural people and spaces contributes to an incomplete national policy, to the great detriment of rural communities and the rest of the country alike (Carr and Kefalas 139-140). This leads me to the next section of this conclusion: the portrayal of specific rural problems in dominant representations does not necessarily exhibit a revision to the dominant discourse on rurality.

## **II. Farm Crisis: Get big or get out**

One of the most prominent topos to be found in the post-1980s mainstream media relates to agricultural problems and is most commonly referred to as the “farm crisis.” The farm crisis is most often associated with the 1980s, but it has been well-documented that it continues into the 2000s. However, such coverage has primarily represented the crisis as a rural problem that exists outside of — and thus with no bearing on — the rest of the country. In many examples, the focus upon the farm crisis, while stereotypically

highlighting the struggles within rural locations like the Heartland, does not consider the larger social contexts that have led to such a crisis in the first place.

Scholars in agricultural and rural studies challenge this dominant view through an outline of “long-term postwar trends” that have led to the farm crisis of the 1980s (Lobao and Thomas, “Political” 454). As scholar Barry Barnett points out in his analysis of the 1980s farm crisis, many researchers and analysts were “surprised” by the farm crisis that unfolded in the 1980s because they ignored the interrelation of the family farmer with national policy and international factors such as agricultural exporting/importing (378-380). While Barnett points to the failure of agricultural economists and historians, his analysis also reveals a larger trend in U.S. society responsible for the separation of supposedly regressed rural places from what are perceived as “modern” concerns: “Failure to anticipate the crisis was likely due, in part, to a traditional microeconomic orientation and an emphasis on analysis that is largely divorced from political and historical contexts” (380). This failure to place rural (and, in this case, agricultural) interests within larger national concerns resulted in dire consequences for rural America in the 1980s.

Rural studies from the mid-1980s through the present demonstrate the tragic consequences of the 1980s farm crisis for individuals and communities: farm loss within generations of the same family (Barnett 376-377), the isolation of particularly vulnerable farmers from their communities (Wright and Rosenblatt), increased youth suicides in response to the crisis (Van Hook), and grim forecasts pertaining to the death of rural communities in the wake of the farm crisis (Murdoch et al). The mainstream of the 1980s was also well aware of the farm crisis — as a human-interest story, anyways. On one

hand, mainstream articles of the time portrayed the severity of the situation to readers most likely far removed from these rural realities. For example, James Dickenson's 1985 report for the *Washington Post* describes farmers unable to keep up with their debt-laden farms, increasing suicide rates, and boarded up Main Streets in agricultural communities in Iowa (“Finances Sag”). Yet there is very little mention of how this crisis is interrelated with broader national trends until Dickenson's second article on the farm crisis (“Struggling”). However, even as this second article briefly mentions larger policy decisions and their effect on the family farmer, this gets subsumed under the overall anecdotal tone of the individual hard-luck stories that are the focus of the series. Further, instead of maintaining a critical eye towards the larger context that has given rise to this crisis, the article ultimately places the blame on the inaptitude of the farmers and attributes any possible success to their ability to become “better businessmen” (“Struggling”). Instead of showing how these farmers are affected by government policy, they are portrayed as merely persevering through hard times — tragic figures perhaps, but of little relevance to the mainstream reader.

Although the farm crisis deeply impacted rural communities across the country, by the late 1980s some researchers found that the nation was forgetting about the crisis as “evident in the reduced coverage of the crisis in the popular press and in the professional journals of agriculturally oriented disciplines” (Murdoch et al 811). This disappearance in the mainstream media in particular elided the “rural crisis” that was emerging despite the improvement of the farmer's plight throughout the 1980s (811). Eventually, another farm crisis arose in the late 1990s, and in the decade that followed, it was finally recognized as part of larger processes of globalization affecting the entire nation.

By the late 1990s, publications once again picked up the farm crisis topos (see W. Cohen; Nichols). Both academic and mainstream articles compare the most recent farm crisis to the 1980s, as we see in Barnett's more academic treatment (378), as well as in editorials in more mainstream publications that, for example, compare grassroots organizations in the late 1990s to the media spectacle that only marginally helped farmers in the 1980s (Sokol). One important comparison between the 1980s and more recent treatments of the farm crisis is the explicit focus on processes of globalization affecting the country as a whole. Much of this attention connects the agricultural distress of rural America to national and international contexts (see Greider; Gorman; Heffern; Longman et al for some examples). This joining of rural space to national context may be a sign of new approaches towards rurality more generally, but as writers like William Greider have noted, this recognition does not happen uniformly: "The media's usual take on this new farm crisis is a tear-jerk feature story that begins with a worried farm couple poring over bills at the kitchen table, children crying in the background; and it closes with a romantic elegy for Jefferson's doomed yeomanry. Too bad, but that's the price of progress, end of story" (12). However, with the popularity of documentaries like *The Corporation* (Dir. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2004), which touches on the vertical integration of farming and its effect on (mostly third world) farming, and *Food, Inc.* (Dir. Robert Kenner, 2008), which tackles that subject in a specifically U.S. context, it does appear that rural locations are (at least by the 2000s) recognized as part of the larger trend impacting the rest of the country as well.

In at least some sectors of society, there is growing criticism of the larger trend towards corporatization and the effect of globalization on the U.S., but such resistance is

not new to farming communities nor is it the province of sophisticated outsiders. During the 1980s as well as the more recent farm “crises,” rural subjects have resisted the corporate take-over of their own communities. For example, while some studies link the rise of isolationist, radically conservative impulses to the farm crisis of the 1980s, other studies find that quite the opposite was happening, as evident from the desire to reallocate resources to those less fortunate and the insistence on the need for government intervention to save the family farm (Lobao and Thomas). These communities are attempting to preserve a traditional way of life, and in the process they directly interrogate the larger mainstream norms of progress and development that have impacted them and the nation at large.

The actions to preserve such tradition, for example, as seen in actions taken by women to save the family farm, may appear to reinstate traditional gender roles, and may thus be seen as conservative impulses and not as complex and progressive responses to a larger crisis. As discussed in the introduction, scholars like Whillock and Webster point out in regards to the popular imagery of the 1980s farm crisis that the strong woman who uses radical action to secure her traditional role in a patriarchal structure may be a paradox, but if we look at the rural social sciences, this paradox may be read as part of a larger rural vision and plan of action. For example, one study of women's intervention during the 1980s farm crisis found that women were crucial in the creation of coalitions that supported “neopopulist activism”; these coalitions “sought to replace the mainstream ideas of production agriculture with those of neopopulist activism — concern for the land and the local community, mandatory production controls, and respect for the concept of the family farm” (Freidberger 229). These ideas surface in other contexts as well, as we

see in the following statement made by a woman farmer with deep farming roots stretching back to the mid-1800s:

“When we pass McDonald's...and my son Dylan expresses a yearning for a Happy Meal like all the other kids his age, I patiently explain that McDonald's is the largest purchaser of beef, pork and chicken in the U.S., getting that meat from large confinement facilities that are unbelievably cruel to the animals and destructive to the environment, that the widespread consumption of 'fast food' is directly related to the loss of small family farms.” (quoted in Heffern 14)

This statement, from 2002, provides an astute analysis that might be more widely associated with mainstream activism than that of a seemingly simple farmer's wife.

The difference between the preservation of the family farm tradition in the 2000s as compared to the 1980s is in how it is viewed by the mainstream: it is now considered radical because of the mainstream (countercultural?) support for anything anti-corporate. Ironically, this “new” radical action may stick because of the very mainstream support of its actions. As we see in Jason Sokol's 2002 editorial for the *Nation* detailing rural and urban support in helping save the “small family farmer,” grassroots coalitions are successful because of the interrelationship of “farmers, environmentalists and younger activists.”

These examples are not meant to suggest that rural America is somehow ready to overthrow corporate multi-nationals in order to form local subsistence economies; this latter idea sounds too socialist to garner widespread adoption within the U.S. Nor should the farmer be viewed as a great yeoman with necessarily pure, altruistic intentions. As outlined in the article “When Darwin Visits the Family Farm,” some farmers are turning



towards organics and “buy local” in order to capture “niche markets” in addition to or instead of sub-contracting to larger conglomerations and/or cooperatives (Gorman). In this case, the family farmer is not interested in making political statements but in staying above water. These examples merely point out that far from being passive, at least some rural communities are aware of the larger forces impacting them and are taking steps to secure their own future.

### **III. Regressed Rural Areas Still “Left Behind”**

While the farm crises may have directed America's attention to rural America, it was only to a very specific and stereotypical part of it: agriculture. Ironically, this attention to the farm crisis in mainstream publications, generally speaking, elides rural America even as its problems are evoked. While the rural social sciences have tried to bring attention to these problems, the mainstream falls back on familiar, dominant representations in order to discuss them. In addition to the numerous studies already cited in this dissertation, we can see the rural social sciences clearly defining the problems faced by rural locations and to offer some possible solutions. For example, some studies take as their subject the conception of rurality in America and its potential influence on real social issues such as mobility and rural poverty (Fitchen, “Spatial”; Nard et al) and discrimination in regards to housing (see zoning against trailers in Geisler and Mitsuda and the general discrimination against trailer dwellers in Miller and Ecko). As we briefly saw in journalism that focused on farm crises, the post-1980s mainstream media provides more than a few examples that display the ways in which dominant discourses of regressed WWPC rurality are employed as a way to make sense of real social problems.

Stereotypes abound in mainstream understandings of WWPC rural people and

places. Indeed, it is easy to see what Rebecca Thomas Kirkendall relays to the *Newsweek* reader: “in our increasingly urban society, rural Americans have been unable to escape from the hillbilly stigma, which is frequently accompanied by labels like ‘white trash,’ ‘redneck’ and ‘hayseed.’” A statement like this is critical of the prevailing belief in rural space as a spatiotemporally regressed container that exists outside urban society, as a place inherently lacking in both economic and cultural senses. However, within the mainstream media from the 1980s through 2000s, such criticism is rare. For example, rural poverty is made sense of not through changes in the economic make-up of the nation but predominately through the stereotypes already well-known in American society. Hence, while a 1988 *Newsweek* article is meant to illustrate a supposedly invisible rural poverty for the mainstream reader, it simultaneously uses imagery already strongly associated with such locations: “It is a world in which violence — particularly family violence — is commonplace. It is a world of drifters, rusting mobile homes, marginal medical care, cheap liquor and terrible nutrition” (McCormick 21). In contrast to Kirkendall’s accusation, this latter *Newsweek* article demonstrates the more common approach to working-class rurality taken by this publication more historically, for example, as we saw in postwar “news” reports of violent hillbillies (see “Dogpatch Style” and “A Man’s Home...”).

Thus, the poverty of such places is portrayed in both economic and cultural terms and continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Online news sources like *CNN* employ common imagery that highlights the inherent difference between rurality and urbanity (as seen immediately in the title of the online article “Fighting Toothlessness in Appalachia” [2005]), apparent even in those stories that seem to have little relevance to such a distinction (“Last Man

Standing” [2009] about the destruction of a “toxic town” in Oklahoma). This latter article portrays this toxic town’s residents as still being isolated from the rest of the country even as they have been forced outside of their town of origin:

Outside Picher, the mining town's former residents are branded "lead heads" and "chat rats." People wonder whether living in the polluted area made them stupid. Like any downtrodden group, Picher residents once found strength in numbers, in their insulated community. Now they must find their way in a larger world — a world they don't fully understand, one that understands them only as the products of a toxic town. It's no wonder they seek solace in memories (“Last Man”).

The reporter is complicit in this town's devaluation by a “larger world”: this “insulated community” does not “fully understand” the outside world and, through their “memories,” must retreat to their natural place in some nebulous past completely divorced from the modern world which, by implication, the rest of us inhabit.

The sentiment that rurality is outside the “modern” world can also be found in those dominant discourses that acknowledge that, yes, rural locations in fact share the same “modern” social problems as their urban counterparts. Thus, in 2011, the *New York Times* has this newsworthy discovery of rural America: “So it is a bitter mark of modernity that even here, divorce has swept in,” even if the authors ironically state that “geographic distinctions have all but vanished, and now, for the first time, rural Americans are just as likely to be divorced as city dwellers...” (Tavernise and Gebeloff A18). Some of these representations of WWPC rural locations even rely upon postwar terminology and imagery to illustrate their points and, as was noted above regarding the farm crisis, such

representations do affect public policy. One example of the continuing impact of postwar dominant discourse on policy decisions in the post 1980s can be seen in the continuing presence of the rhetoric of the 1960s war on poverty, particularly its attack on what is perceived to be an existent “culture of poverty.” As noted in a 2010 *New York Times* article, the resurgence of the term in the social sciences and its effect on policy is directly tied to its roots in the 1960s, even as it has been not unproblematically updated for the early 2010s (P. Cohen). In a more direct application to poverty in rural locales, rural sociologists Duncan and Tickameyer saw the influence of such rhetoric on the mainstream of the 1980s: “These poor people are seen as outside the mainstream, not sharing society's lifestyles or value — a kind of rural underclass” (“Poverty Research” 244). Nor has much appeared to change by the 2000s, as Paul Milbourne outlines in his analysis of American (and British) rural poverty and as urban sociologists Carr and Kefalas acknowledge in their analysis of rural Iowa in the late 2000s.

The influence of the postwar on the dominant discourse on rurality in the post 1980s can be seen through the use of the same terminology but also through “discovering” actual places that the postwar had supposedly “left behind” 40-50 years earlier. An example of evoking postwar terminology to understand geographic distinctions can be seen in both academic and mainstream examples that employ the term “exurban.” However, the ends to which this term is used is different in each discourse. In rural sociology, for example, exurban is used by some scholars to denote the upper-classes who discriminate against mobile home residents looking for cheaper housing in a shared countryside setting (Geisler and Mitsuda 535). In contrast, the term is employed in more recent, mainstream media to describe the upwardly mobile desire to attain middle-

classless appearances unattainable in more cosmopolitan and expensive metro areas (Mahler). Both usages evoke two sides of this term's unsaid: the former reveals a more critical, marginalized unsaid whereas the latter connotes a dominant unsaid associated with sub/urban progress and development.

Intentionally or not, other articles directly evoke the postwar period's approach to WWPC rurality in discussions of particular locations in the post 1980s. For example, in the *Wall Street Journal*, the "quiet crisis" of a fading rural America is evoked through reference to Eastport, Maine — the same town lamented in the late 1960s *Saturday Review* article discussed at the end of Chapter Two. Like its predecessor who uses the physical location of the town as an emblem of its cultural stagnation — "Even on the map, Eastport looks like a dead-end town" (17) — this later article outlines a foreign land within a mostly prospering country: "There are two Americas now, and they grow further apart each day" (Charlier). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Appalachia is also used to demonstrate these "two Americas," evoking the postwar and particularly the war on poverty, as demonstrated in the 1990 *New York Times* article "In Appalachia, Vast Change but New Troubles" (Applebome). The article joins these pockets of rural poverty to a larger national climate — these problems "differ only in degree" from the rest of the nation — but its differences are enough to lend this "other" America a "third-world" status despite its being in the U.S. The article portrays a grotesque and decrepit caricature of Appalachia through its representation of residents' different physical appearance ("many faces" in one town "recall the depression-era photographs of Walker Evans"), a general cultural regression ("inadequate education, a degraded environment, lack of control over its economy"), and the phenomenon of reverse mobility (the return of those

rural-to-urban migrants unable to find work in the cities) and the desire of residents to “stay home” instead of seeking opportunity elsewhere (Applebome).

These articles demonstrate the influence of the postwar on the present but also that, even in those reports that supposedly reveal something new about rurality in the U.S., WWPC rural locations are still colored by a dominant discourse that places them as ontologically other. Rurality is figured as a foreign space that is within yet separate from the nation, a space inhabited by regressed WWPC rural subjects. Thus, the reader understands the significance of the *Newsweek* article entitled “America's Third World” and its focus on inhabitants who “rarely intersect with the rest of society” (McCormick 21). This dominant conception of WPC rurality as a world apart yet within our borders also underlies the depiction that the “last man standing” in *CNN's* article resides in a town that can't understand even those rural communities that are immediately “outside” of its borders (“Last Man”). But perhaps one of the best demonstrations of the post-1980s dominant discourse on rurality can be found in the 1999 *Rolling Stone* article “I Hate the Suburbs.” For P.J. O'Rourke, the suburbs are a sprawling, disgusting mess, yet they are better than the alternatives: those places that have fallen outside of mainstream security (the inner city) and/or cultural respectability (the rural). Progress and development are thus directly equated to the middle-classless sub/urban mainstream, and the “country” plays its familiar role as the pre-civilized environ America has grown beyond:

There's nothing worse than the city. Except the country, which looks so pretty and relaxing for about five minutes, until you realize there's not a goddamned thing to do and you have to drive forty minutes to the nearest movie theater, which is still showing *Titanic*, and the charming 1830s farmhouse has rats and

Dad's screenplay is going nowhere and Mom's pottery comes out of the kiln looking like shit and the kid falls down a well looking for someplace to play with his radio-controlled car and the neighbors have no teeth. There's nothing worse than the country. Which is why we're in the suburbs. Which we hate. (O'Rourke).

This tongue-in-cheek portrayal of toothless neighbors and untalented in-migrants is then equated with a brand of unconsciousness reserved for unenlightened and isolationist rednecks who, in line with their natural inclinations, fight off mainstream “development.” The author finds that this lack of physical development indicates a lack of cultural aptitude typical of WWPC rursity as embodied, in his example, in “rural Maryland.” Thus, anti-development sentiment in this case reflects its locals “to the extent that the residents of rural Maryland, with their cars up on blocks, Klan chapters and Moon Pies for breakfast, don't discourage it already.” This sentiment helps explain why there exists a “third world” within America's borders in many other contexts as well: “they” don't accept the mainstream development ready to be had by all. Two cultures — “us” versus “them” — are immediately apparent, similar to the 1960s but taken to another level in the 2000s.

Nor is it just the media that evokes this rural, past-in-present to make sense of “us” and “them.” As outlined in David Dubbink's 1980s study entitled “I'll Have My Town Medium-Rural, Please,” urban-to-rural migrants in two rural California communities employed the notion of rurality as a regressed foreign land to simultaneously escape the mainstream and to place the locals at a distance from themselves. Thus, while these newcomers saw themselves as improving upon the undeveloped state that existed before

their arrival, they also did not see themselves on the same level as the locals who, despite these developments, remained left behind. Hence, in the words of one interviewee, the immigrants were “younger, many were drop-outs from the establishment, most were better educated...intellectuals. Before, there were very few intellectual people here. It was more of a redneck crowd” (quoted in Dubbink 12). Note that the cultural attributes of these communities reflect their respective spatial origins (“here” versus “there”) and are aligned with temporal shifts (“before” the newcomers there were rednecks). Although inhabiting the same space, this rural past-in-present is still maintained, the mainstream “intellectuals” versus the “redneck crowd.”

This study sets out to determine the impact of development on rural communities and can be seen as outlining the influence of the dominant discourse on WWPC rursality in America. Thus, even the people in this particular town viewed rural places as spatially, temporally and culturally “left behind” our mainstream norms of progress and development. In other contexts, such communities comprise “America's Third World” that is a perpetual past-in-present precisely because it does not live up to our “modern” standards. This failure is outlined in familiar terms: little economic opportunity and thus a brain drain (not always directly named), a culture of poverty “passed from one generation to another,” and undirected mobility/transience (“many of the rural poor drift like dry leaves across the landscape”) (McCormick 21-22). This author implies that without mainstream progress, the rural poor can only aimlessly wander the earth with little to no agency.

In such formulations, it is not until WWPC rural subjects can be freed from their natural environment that a cultural and economic progression can occur. This freedom



always appears to arise from mainstream intervention, either as WWPC rural locations are developed by outside interests and/or as the best/brightest rural subjects naturally migrate towards the mainstream proper. In both cases, the fate of rural communities is seen to rest on how well a place can reinvent/develop itself towards mainstream standards, a claim often supported by evidence detailing the exodus of youth from rural communities (also known as “brain drain”). Hence, we see a concern in the 1980s with talented youth migrating out of rural locations (Murdoch et al; see also McCormick; Charlier) and which persists into the 2000s (see Roberts and the article “Small Towns”). Some mainstream media see this exodus as a natural trajectory, as we see in a 2006 *Associated Press* report entitled “College grads chase jobs, culture to big cities.” While the article cites lack of opportunity as one reason that youth leave rural areas, it is ultimately the “cultural” draw of the cities that leads the talented away from their rural origins. As this article describes a “Tennessee native”: “she has no plans to leave Washington. She said she would miss the restaurants, museums and convenient public transportation, what she calls "civilization."” (“College grads”). Even in those articles lauding the re-population of rural areas in the 1990s, the cities are the forerunners of economic and cultural modernity. Thus, in an article entitled “Rural Rebound,” the authors continue to place the centrality of the cities for those “people with strong appetites for cultural, social, and educational opportunities” (Johnson and Beale).

In both of these articles, “brain drain” occurs in part as a natural extension of people who exceed their regressed, rural surroundings. In some ways, the study *Hollowing Out the Middle* by the self-admitted urban sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas reflect this larger conception even as their findings may be seen as refuting the larger emphasis

in American society on middle-classless sub/urban progress and development.

Specifically, the anecdotes used to define one Iowa community reflect the stereotype that rural communities are insular and unaware, worlds apart from our mainstream culture.

One such scene describes Kefalas, a woman, walking down an empty street in town:

...a truck, replete with shotgun rack, slowed down. The two passengers, young men in their twenties who appeared to be heading home from work, gawked for ten very long seconds as she walked by. The truck's occupants never took their eyes off her; neither Maria, nor they, uttered a word. *It was almost as though they were trying to figure out what new species had found its way to their town* (Carr and Kefalas 16; emphasis added).

Without dismissing the potentially dangerous situation surrounding a lone woman in a strange place, it is worth noting the wording of this anecdote. The portrayed collision of two different worlds, the mainstream and WWPC rural subject, reinforces the isolation, fear and violence associated with the redneck type. Further, the interpretation given from the “objective” perspective of these researchers reinforces the dominant unsaid of this image: “they” are inherently ignorant, suspicious, etc.

Although the dominant discourse on WWPC rurality may color the research presented, this book makes a much more important point: an outline of the forces that act upon rural locations with little economic opportunity. While these researchers imply there is a natural hierarchy between those who stay and leave, they ultimately point out that there is nothing natural at all about a process which starts at a very young age through the support of a school system that “nurtures” some children out of the community (Carr and Kefalas 17). The very un-naturalness of this process may be seen in the pain that is

associated with leaving: “the majority of young people who are leaving aren't motivated by the possibility of trading in flannel shirts and pickup trucks for Diesel jeans and club scenes. Leaving small-town life requires a plan and a willingness to cut oneself off from a world that is familiar and predictable” (3-4). These authors may make their point within a familiar binary (the insular, simple rural as outside a complex modern world), but they also make clear that one’s choice to stay or leave a WWPC rural location is not necessarily indicative of individual aptitude. For example, the authors discuss the pain associated with leaving as one motivation behind choosing to stay “behind”: “They fear that the outside world will expect them to change too much of who and what they are” (4). If a physical move outside of a town also coincides with upwardly mobility, then these sentiments may very well show an astute awareness of one's location in the U.S. and the personal sacrifices one might have to make upon leaving.

Carr and Kefalas’ recognition that one’s geographic location is not necessarily reflective of individual aptitude may lead to their most radical suggestion: the need to save rural communities not through assimilation into mainstream middle-classless standards, but by supporting WCPC rural locations with a relevant educational system geared towards changing working-class jobs (“Conclusion”). The suggestions of these sociologists appear to differ from more mainstream rhetoric that suggests the necessity of (re)developing rural places into middle-classless sub/urban likeness. In this rhetoric increased economic opportunity, for example, may attract new people or retain residents and therefore stave off the population loss of rural areas<sup>92</sup>. While perhaps new

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<sup>92</sup>See “America the Creative” for a discussion of rural areas needing to reinvent themselves.

“development” is a practical necessity for any community in a capitalist system, it is the undercurrent of these discussions that exhibit the dominant unsaid of the mainstream, namely, that development is always a good thing, a sign of an evolutionary trajectory towards “urban” progress. In these formulations, some residents will be forced to leave their old ways of life (like farming), and it is a foregone conclusion that these otherwise “undeveloped” subjects will be absorbed by mainstream progress and development (see Gertner for one example of such a discussion).

In dominant representations, the seemingly unadulterated economic opportunity that accompanies “modern” progress overwrites the ambivalence felt towards it. Thus, in an article detailing the emergence of foreign auto plants in rural America, local residents are quoted as saying, “You can't stop progress” even in the face of incoming chain stores that effectively closed up the town's small businesses (quoted in Keck). The final sentiment of this article reflects the belief that the introduction of auto factories will bring unequivocal progress: “With growth comes growing pains, but the opportunities, Hines said, far outweigh the setbacks” (Keck). Only mentioned in passing are places like Flint, Michigan whose decaying shell of a city is a testament to what the auto industry may eventually bring to its rural host. Although this short term development may be much needed in rural areas, history bears that predatory practices will eventually take their “development” elsewhere, leaving behind places that are worse for the wear.

The notion that development always means economic and, at times, cultural progress for rural areas was strongly critiqued in the novels and films discussed in Chapters Three and Four. Although fiction, these works depict the effects on rural locations that are at the mercy of outside interests. Such observations, however, cannot be easily found within

mainstream publications that detail only short-term prosperity with little reference to the economic bust that has occurred in rural areas precisely because of previous “development.” For example, while a *Wilson Quarterly* article lauds advances in technology as bringing in outside businesses like processing plants, new manufacturing and prisons<sup>93</sup> (Johnson and Beale), it does not focus on the fact that these same outside interests may very well leave. In fact, one of the Colorado towns the authors focus on is also noted for its decimated opportunities after a 1980s mine closure. Why would things be any different this time around?

Of course, this discussion is not to admonish people who believe in bringing more economic opportunities to areas in need. Rather, I wish to point out that such simplistic beliefs in naturalized trajectories of progress and development only elide a larger problem. Just as the 1960s war on poverty worked to shore up the mainstream without addressing some of its underlying biases (leading, as Alice O’Connor has argued, to the need to merely bring those seen as “left behind” into the seemingly flawless development of mainstream America), the ongoing belief that merely introducing new development will solve the rural “problem” for good is equally misguided. In part, this solution is misguided because it assumes that what constitutes constantly changing markers of progress and development is a natural state to be attained in every corner of the U.S. The recent bust in the U.S. economy that is currently impacting all sectors of society should be enough evidence that our “progress” is a shallow thing indeed.

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<sup>93</sup>Many see the prison system as an economic boon for rural areas; see Ravo for a discussion of upstate NY and Bates for a discussion of West Virginia.

Since at least the 1980s social scientists have pointed out that despite the mainstream preoccupation with the need to develop rural areas, there is plenty of evidence to negate the idea that development necessarily equals progress for rural locations. A review of studies on rural economies states that, for some kind of development, “These studies generally lend support to the belief that industrial location to rural areas can generate employment, population growth, and economic prosperity in the area. They also show, however, that the benefits neither come automatically nor apply to all communities” (Summers and Branch 148). As we see in the work of social scientists like Cynthia Duncan, this observation continues to bear relevance through the 1980s and into the 2000s (see her *Worlds Apart* for one example)<sup>94</sup>.

The fact that development does not necessarily equal progress is best demonstrated in those rural areas that have seen development sweep through, leaving behind empty buildings, abandoned farmland and excessive grief and anger in its wake. As we saw in the above discussion on the farm crises, mainstream development is merely a failed panacea for rural communities, a point Osha Gray Davidson points out in a 1986 article in the *Nation* (“The Rise”). Further, the effects of “development” can be read in a number of sources: in hate groups emerging from destroyed rural areas (see Young; Davidson, *Broken*; and more recently, Kimmel and Ferber in Campbell et al); the meth epidemic in rural areas across the U.S. (Brown and, indirectly, the documentary *American Meth* (Dir.

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<sup>94</sup> Among other sources listed throughout this dissertation, see also the co-authored “Economic Activity” (Tickameyer and Duncan) and Brown and Warner’s “Persistent Low-Income nonmetropolitan Areas in the United States.”

Justin Hunt, 2008)); the feeling of hopelessness in rural youth as detailed in Carr and Kefalas. Additionally, we can also see the effects of progress and development in rural locations across the country: in Appalachian communities studied by Stewart, in Fitchen's upstate NY, in the small Texas and Indiana towns in Fox's dissertation, even the Oklahoma "toxic town" left behind in the *CNN* story discussed above. These communities are not "left behind" in the sense that the nation has continued to spin on past them but are, in fact, ground zero for what a belief in more "progress" and more "development" can do. In this way, these communities are not America's past but rather its future.

#### **IV. Cultural Regression: A Red/Blue Information Super Highway**

The issues of rural America concern millions of people and are therefore of practical importance, but are too often understood through the dominant discourses on rurality. The great concern that appears for the family farmer and rural poverty in the 1980s is then, for the most part, contained by these dominant discourses, as can also be seen in more specific 2000s topoi like the information super highway (Internet access) and the red state/blue state political and cultural divide.

Similar to the portrayal of roads in the postwar period, dominant representations employ the highway metaphor to portray the Internet as necessary to correct the economic and cultural isolation of rural locations. One such scholarly article directly ties the introduction of rudimentary roadways in the 1800s to that of the Internet (Nicholas); another industry article displays its title ("Data's Backroads") amidst pictures of scenic rural landscape (Martinek). However, this metaphor often serves to highlight the difference between the urban and rural as is immediately clear in such titles as "Rural

Routes” (Richard); “In the Sticks, Life on the Slow Line” (Kathy Jones); “Rural Areas Left in Slow Lane of High-Speed Data Highway” (Belson) (see also Wilcox; Hafner and Tanaka). On one hand, such discussions underscore the idea that access to the Internet can be a true democratizer across geographic region: “It has become a basic part of the infrastructure of education and democracy” (“Broadening”), resulting in new opportunities for rural entrepreneurs (“Wiring Rural”) and education alike (Revenaugh). Yet, as we see in a 2011 *New York Times* article titled “For Much of Rural America, Broadband is a Dividing Line,” this discussion continues into the 2000s to define broadband access and the lack thereof as the limit of modernity, using familiar terminology in which to make its point: “the line delineating two Americas has become more broadly drawn” (Severson, A1). Clearly, such a statement refers to the fact that access to high speed Internet has been slower going to the more remote rural spaces. Thus, we see in editorials like “Broadening Broadband” that getting high speed Internet to poor areas — including rural areas — is the “last mile” for increased opportunity across the country (“Broadening”). However, beyond the practical issues associated with the lack of Internet access, the cultural connotations associated with rurality also emerge in these discussions. As this editorial indicates, broadband is the new standard that rural areas need to achieve in order to be considered part of the modern world. In another article, for example, Kentucky, which “rarely ranks in the top tier of states on any measure of 21st-century success,” is considered to be part of modern society because of comparatively wide-spread rural access to broadband (“Wiring Rural”).

Bernard DeVoto's assertion in the 1950s could be applied to representations of the Internet Superhighway as well: “A highway is not only a measure of progress, but a true



index of our culture” (quoted in Gilbert 112). Those places not directly online and, increasingly, lacking a high speed connection are seen as “left behind” the rest of the nation. As with other topoi, the Internet infrastructure in rural locales is seen as representative of a regressed cultural location that the mainstream has already surpassed; in one 2006 *Times* article, for example, dial-up in some rural areas has only caught up to the mainstream’s 1993 (Belson). This so called “digital divide” affects real opportunity by way of education and the economy (Peterson), but the divide is also portrayed as a reflection of the cultural division between WCPC rural spaces and the mainstream. Thus, in a *Businessweek Online* article, a lack of broadband is indicative of the inability to fully participate within the nation, in one example, through finding information on presidential candidates: "Broadband is not just an information source for news and civic matters, but it's also a pathway to participation." (quoted in Hessledahl).

In some cases, the practical consequences that such a divide has for rural subjects is portrayed as part of a larger WCPC rural resistance to change and, therefore, reflects a desire to be “left behind.” In the words of one *Wall Street Journal* reporter, “Telecommunications technology can leap the mountainous barrier that has cloistered Hancock County in rural isolation for decades, and bring residents jobs, better education and richer lives” but, even with the introduction of computers and Internet connection in schools for example, the community has continued to shun the outside opportunity offered them:

Indeed, it's still problematic whether the people of Hancock County are ready to accept the sorts of progress that the outside world is offering. Many families here belong to 100 or so Melungeon clans of Portuguese and American Indian

descent, who tend to be suspicious of change and have a history of self-reliance.

They use wood-burning stoves, can vegetables, raise livestock and barter services such as auto repair for home maintenance. (Bleakley)

Lack of Internet technology, in this case, is seen as an extension of the temporally and culturally regressed rural mentality that already divides them from “us” on other material and cultural levels. In such representations, it will naturally take these areas longer to “catch up,” although by the 2000s, such representations concede that even “rednecks” realize they need high speed connections to function in the modern world (Hessledahl).

On some level, the problem in bridging the rural/urban “digital divide” is rooted in a practical issue: with any new technology, there may be a slow adoption period and a need for education to overcome user hesitancy (see Servon for a discussion). However, in the dominant discourse on rurality, this practicality is explained by the perceived cultural deficiency of rural subjects. The belief that the rural is always behind the urban, including their adoption of technology, spans the advertising world (Bulik) to more academic treatments: “In terms of place based characteristics, rural areas are almost by definition more remote, which often results in a lag in the adoption of innovations” (Whitacre and Mills 249).

The practical barriers that influence the slow adoption of the Internet in rural areas become yet another explanation for the cultural inferiority of rural people. We can see this misconception play out in an article for *Distance Education Report* that discusses the introduction of “rural learners” to broadband access. The researcher's reaction to the Internet savvy of “rural people” exemplifies the cultural explanations largely given for the digital divide: “What struck and surprised me...was how able rural people are to

[catch] onto technology” (quoted in Lorenzetti 1-2). This statement suggests an initial belief that “rural people” would not be as adept as their urban counterparts in picking up technology/broadband; however, this researcher concludes that his subjects very quickly picked up the technology and began using it as the mainstream has tended towards (2). In this article, the digital divide is not tied to rural inferiority, although the standards by which the test subjects are measured are seen as inherently “urban” traits.

It is clear that many of these articles carry within them cultural valuations that distinguish between rurality and urbanity in discussing the practical challenges of introducing technology in rural areas. In this way, the “digital divide” represents another division also focused on in the 1990s/2000s: a perceived “culture war” between rurality and urbanity, represented in part as the color coded binary of red state versus blue state.

According to some commentators, the notion of a red/blue divide had swept the national imagination by the 2000s even as it has been around in some fashion since at least the 1970s (Zeller). In such formulations, the voting patterns of people and regions indicate their personality and culture, a perception that is so powerful as to lead to scientific inquiry into this supposed fact. For example, some works attempt to scientifically explain the existence of divided cultures through a “social psychological framework” underlying “political behavior” (Unger 161). Implicit in Rhoda Unger’s study is the notion that such a “framework” helps align “red” and “blue” with states of mind that are indicative of values, outlooks, tolerance, etc. In studies such as these, there is the implication that, while it is possible to have a “blue” state of mind within red regions and vice versa, there exists an essentialist division between urban/blue/progressive and rural/red/regressive.

Voting patterns are seen as so indicative of these presumably binary personalities that, by 2004, *Time* named “red state/blue state” one of the buzzwords of the year (“The Year”). This “national divide” uses color as a way to explain easily recognizable cultural figures and their habits<sup>95</sup>. In an analysis of the 2000 election, for example, one commentator uses such dominant discourse to associate the “red” vote with the cultural regression of rurality: rural people tend towards bigotry, while urban people are associated with enlightenment. This point is even supported by (unnamed) sociological evidence: “Sociological research confirms that intolerance of nonconforming ideas and behavior is more common among people from small towns than people from urban areas” (Victor, “Election” 6)<sup>96</sup>.

This larger belief in two opposed cultures and their associated voting patterns continues into the next couple of election cycles, for example: in a commentary on Kerry's presidential bid (Purdum; “The Politics”), on the political climate in 2006 (Varian) and into the presidential election in the late 2000s (Abramowitz and Saunders; Whitesides). This colored division most succinctly summed up in Hal Varian's article entitled “Red States, Blue States: New Labels for Long-Running Differences” is further highlighted in political science discourse and even in the words of Obama himself. In an

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<sup>95</sup> Such an approach underpins the discussion of seemingly objective studies that compare the higher fertility rates of red states to that of blue states (Talbot; Scheiber, “Fertile”).

<sup>96</sup>This backwardness could be used in other publications to explain why “white working-class voters” in rural areas were unsupportive of Obama but backed Clinton (see “Obama turns,” although this article only mentions this affinity; and “Commentary,” where working-class rural whites are implied as racist if voting for Clinton and not Obama).

example from the field of political science, voting patterns and exit polls were used to illustrate the division between red and blue state voters: there are “large differences between the social characteristics and political attitudes of red state voters and blue state voters” where, it is suggested, blue state voters are naturally more tolerant (Abramowitz and Saunders 548-549). This easily recognized trope is so powerful as to be drawn upon by a pre-Democratic nominee Obama at a 2008 fundraising event, wherein the most cited part of this speech is the following remark in regards to economically depressed small towns: “It's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations" (quoted in Whitesides). The use of stereotypical imagery to describe these red staters (angry, violent, traditional, bigoted, insular) is coupled with terminology connoting a clear divide: “they” are not like “us” (wealthy Democrats at a fund raiser for Obama's campaign). Obama's use of this rhetorical device illustrates the terms in which even potential presidential candidates recognize the influence of such a “cultural divide” on the American public.

Many commentators directly tie this perceived culture war of the 2000s to the divisions of the 1960s. As already mentioned, the “forgotten majority” reappears (Rogers and Teixeira), and other articles explicitly tie the post-2000 cultural “division” to that of the 1960s (see Teachout 24; Victor, “Election” 5; “The Politics of Values”). However, there are other topoi that re-emerge in this 2000s discussion of the red/blue division that are also associated with the 1960s dominant discourse on WWPC rurality: the notion that WWPC rural subjects lack mental acuity, have different kinds of mobility, and are capable of infecting the rest of the nation. These more recent discussions of the culture

war are not as offensive as those of the postwar focusing on, say, rural-to-urban mobility, yet these topoi are invoked to help explain the red state/blue state divide and its impact on the future of the U.S.

Thus, in these discourses, geography becomes a determinant of one's personal traits: rurality is necessarily regressed and is a threat to *urban* progress. In some of these discussions, the infection brought to the rest of the nation by rural subjects is heightened by mobility, a point that is demonstrated in *Esquire*: as red states gain more voters, their regressed tendencies will seep into the mainstream through their increased voting power. According to this article, because those "blues" unhappy in red areas can easily migrate to a bluer area and vice versa, politicians in red states can pander to the (implicitly) "extreme points of view rather than having to mollify a diverse constituency" (Silver). As a result, people "voting with their feet" (Silver) have created a greater influx to red states and their (fundamental) conservative threat to the rest of the nation.

The dominant representation of unbalanced voting power in favor of red/rural areas and its threat to the nation at large directly echoes a similar concern in the postwar (for examples from postwar journalism, see Kennedy; Orutzner; Amper; Neuberger). The popularity of this topic in the 1990s and 2000s can be seen across different types of writing: in letters to the editor that call for "An Electoral College that Reflects the Voters" (Sortino), mainstream journalism (Dunham et al's "Does Your Vote Matter?") and nonfiction books directed at a general readership (Mann's *Welcome to the Homeland*). Such formulations suggest that the disproportional weight given to rural/red areas based upon the Electoral College will unfairly influence the politicians who represent these retrograde interests. According to some writers, these interests naturally

lie within religious fundamentalism and its tie to “Anglo-American [white] rural cultural values and folkways,” inherently “rural” values that are enough to “poison the democratic political climate of our nation and distract the government from finding solutions to our serious social problems” (Victor, “Forecasting” 22). In this 1996 article, the regression of rurality is enough to destroy American democracy as a whole.

This threat continues to be portrayed into the 2000s. For commentators like Victor, it is clear that a blue state of mind has naturally evolved beyond these red staters: hence, in his 2001 article already discussed, Victor can claim “sociological evidence” that reinforces the natural difference between urban and rural subjects and which will inevitably impact their political choices (“Election” 6). This sentiment can also be found in the more scholarly works where biological evidence becomes a way to further distinguish between an enlightened urban “us” and a devolved “them.” Thus, in an attempt to tie red and blue voting patterns to innate biological functions, one author cites a study that ties the voting patterns of adults to certain traits they exhibited as children: children who were outgoing and “self-reliant” tended towards liberal voting patterns as adults, whereas children who were, among other things, “inhibited” and “rigid” tended towards the conservative (Jost 664-665). In line with less scientific observers like Victor, Jost ties red/blue voting patterns to seemingly inherent personality traits<sup>97</sup>.

As a preface to his findings, Jost maintains that mobility may be one factor behind the large concentration of like-minded voters in the same region, i.e. reflecting the belief that

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<sup>97</sup> The pervasiveness of this trend can be seen even in those works not affiliated with the social science; see the editor’s remarks in the creative non-fiction collection *Living Blue in the Red States* (Starkey).

people “vote with their feet.” It is noteworthy that Jost then explains this regional concentration in light of specific geographies, tying rurality and urbanity to psychological traits that ultimately manifest in particular voting patterns: “for instance, those who are especially high on openness may disproportionately relocate to major coastal or urban centers that are high on stimulation and cultural diversity and that also tend to be very liberal” (665). Jost also uses the power of influence from peers to explain the appearance of such uniform personality and voting patterns in particular geographies. From this, one could assume, moving to a “blue” area will evolve into openness whereas moving into a “red” area will pull into regression. Jost concludes that knowing these innate differences helps explain why people vote the way that they do, as if this is a revelation unknown in dominant discourse: “psychological analysis, in addition to the kinds of demographic and institutional analyses offered by sociologists and political scientists...may be extremely useful for understanding the American political divide” (666).

Jost’s study could be seen as part of the long history that stretches back to at least the eugenicists of the Progressive Era: the desire to psychologically and, relatedly, biologically separate from supposedly regressed rural subjects (Wray; Hartigan). Jost’s “scientific” claim is not new in the 2000s, nor is it surprising that he links these cultural divisions to voting patterns. As the *Economist*’s “The Politics of Values” maintained two years earlier, “the American political system clearly tends to exaggerate cultural divisions. But it does so for a reason” (“The Politics”). The average citizen, scientists, commentators and politicians are well aware of what (they think) these reasons are.

However, many people argue that these political divisions are at best only a conceptual exercise. For the former president of NBC, Reuven Frank, this red/blue



division does not represent a naturally occurring process but has instead offered a flawed shorthand for politicians and media pundits alike. For Frank, it is unfortunate that “Everyone accepts not only that "red states" and "blue states" refer to those that sent Republicans and Democrats, respectively, to the Electoral College in 2004 but also that they represent attitudes, mind-sets and practices far beyond electoral politics.” (R. Frank). As we continue to see in dominant discourse, these conceptual “states” of mind represent one's aptitude and personality in continuity with their voting habits, even as some dominant representations are quick to denounce such false divisions. Clear examples of this critique include Cullen Murphy's tongue-in-cheek analysis of red and blue stereotypes in the *Atlantic Monthly* (C. Murphy), years after another *Atlantic Monthly* discussion of this false division (M. Kelly), and in an article entitled “A rainbow of a map,” a rejoinder to “celebrate diversity” by not dismissing those subjects we perceive to be ignorant and inherently different than our mainstream selves (Zimmerman). Other writers more actively demonstrate in academic discourse that, although the present U.S. appears to be a deeply divided nation on political and cultural terms, it is merely part of a climate of “politics as usual” that is evident throughout U.S. history: bipartisanship and geographically focused political parties are not a new phenomenon, instead changing as the given historical context warrants (Mellow et al 675).

Nor, for some publications throughout the 2000s, are most Americans so deeply divided in their everyday lives that an inherent division would be immediately evident outside these discourses (Zuckerman; Teachout). At the same time, it is clear that voting Republican or Democrat aligns predominately with rural and urban areas respectively. As Terry Teachout observes in the wake of the 2004 election, “most of the states won

decisively by Gore are bunched tightly around the urban and industrial centers of the Northeast and the Great Lakes,” an observation that holds weight even in the county-by-county breakdown (Teachout). This statistical evidence clearly demonstrates that political division and voter preference is aligned, in some way, with geographic location. However, this division continues to be explained through a dominant discourse on rurality that firmly places WWPC rural subjects outside the spatiotemporal and cultural locations that “we,” the mainstream, inhabit. Yet, can such a divide in political preference indicate cultural attributes of people who inhabit particular geographic locations? If we consider that commentators and academics alike are looking for evidence of “real” cultural division within a two party system that leaves little choice for any of its constituents (and, quite arguably, has failed the American public right or left, red or blue)<sup>98</sup>, voting patterns may indicate very little about their respective constituents.

## **V. Rural/Urban Distinction and the Decline of Society**

The attempt to intersect politics with cultural aptitude is pervasive across the American discursive topology in the late 2000s, and illustrates a continuing desire to distinguish between the middle-classless sub/urban and WWPC rurality. A look at *Welcome to the Homeland* by Brian Mann, a non-specialist journalistic book, demonstrates this point. Mann’s attempt to demystify the voting habits of rural subjects

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<sup>98</sup>For evidence of just how disenfranchised Americans feel, one need only turn to statistics of eligible voters. According to some observers, in 2008, one of the most voted in elections in recent years, only approximately 60% of eligible voters participated in an election supposedly predicted for high voter turnout (“Election Day”).

for a more mainstream audience reveals the dominant unsaid that necessarily places rurality on a separate plane than an urban “us”: “Largely ignored by metro culture, tradition-minded Americans created a second, parallel culture. Tens of millions of Americans simply stepped out of the mainstream and watched the rest of the culture go roaring off” (8). Where urbanity equals mobility and progress, rurality equals a stagnant tradition, creating an alien culture that exists in a space and time apart: hence the “second, parallel culture” existing *outside* the mainstream (“stepped out”), left behind as this mainstream goes “roaring off.” This intersection of cultural and spatiotemporal regression is reinforced through Mann’s descriptions of actual rural locales across the U.S.: in northern New York, “you could easily be in the America that existed in the 1950s” (11); in Oklahoma, where your car is moving quickly across prairie highways, “it feels like the van is standing still” (35); in Missouri, a small town amidst “a tangle of forest and bluffs every bit as wild as the country that Lewis and Clark faced when they passed this way two hundred years ago” (123). Rural America, for Mann, physically resembles the “frontier of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century far more than the twenty-first-century urban reality that most Americans experience” (101), something reflected in the stagnancy of the places and people themselves (156).

In addition to making his urban allegiance known, Mann then contrasts this urban “sensitivity” through a backhanded compliment to the upstate NY community in which he feels he is physically though not culturally located:

I have come to see small towns as complex places, vibrant and proud and full of twists. Driving through New York’s Adirondack Mountains, where I live and work, I find people who are as thoughtful and creative as anyone I’ve met in

cities. Not all are like that, of course, but I have been surprised more often than not by the intellectual rigor of rural folk and the vitality of their culture. (3)

On one hand, Mann is pointing to the complexity of rural places and people, but it is a complexity that is tied to *his* ability to discern it (note his use of the word “see,” placing Mann as an active spectator of his rural location). Mann appears to legitimize rurality with his observation that the rural inhabitants he lives with are as “thoughtful and creative as anyone I’ve met in cities.” However, that endorsement is qualified by his surprise upon such a finding. The unsaid assumption is thus that thoughtfulness and creativity are inextricably *urban* traits: “Not all [rural inhabitants] are like that, *of course*,” but, we are left to assume, all *urban* inhabitants are “like that.” Although such “urban” traits may be found in rural places, Mann’s rhetoric has the effect of reinforcing the otherness of rural subjects, note the pronoun: “the vitality of *their* culture.”

In Mann's analysis, a strict cultural divide is immediately posited in geographic terms between those “left behind,” the regressive rural (the “homelanders”), and the urban that is co-extensive of both economic and social progress. Charles Murray’s 2012 *Coming Apart* reinforces the classed associations of these geographic spaces. Thus, where Murray’s focus is on the downfall of U.S. exceptionalism between 1960 and 2010 due to the emergence of a white “new lower class” and their inability to participate in the “founding virtues” of America (see particularly “Part II”), it is also tied to middle-classless and urban markers of progress. Anyone familiar with Murray’s work would expect a Social Darwinist perspective to predominate; for example, instead of an arbitrary system created in the image of the more powerful, our “modern economy is ideally suited to [the] strengths” of the upper-class and thus seems like a natural manifestation of

human development (285). Yet the ease with which Murray can align such evolution with upper-class and urban development echoes the dominant sentiment discussed throughout this dissertation. Thus, he can evoke stereotypes associated with a retrograde rurality to describe the “white new lower class” — “broken-down cars rusting in front yards” inhabited by “rednecks” — even as he then states that these stereotypes may be defied (209) and that the lower-class community of his case study is situated on the outskirts of Philadelphia (211). Yet, it is not that such regressive locations and people don’t exist for Murray — they do, but they may not be as easy to spot to those mainstream outsiders. This explains why, according to Murray, the new lower class is so damaging to American society: “Individually, *they’re* not much of a problem. Collectively, *they* can destroy the kind of civil society that America requires” (209; emphasis added). Unsurprisingly, this civil society is that aligned with the upper-class and urban.

As with the 1960s concern with rural-to-urban migrants, this inferior lower class is seen to become problematic only if we allow it to continue without intervention. Murray also ties such intervention to mobility — that of the urban upper-class and their ability to gentrify those places left behind:

But there will still be thousands of working-class neighborhoods and towns across the nation. A dwindling number of them will be urban. Many more of them will be the working-class suburbs where the urban white working-class has been moving for years. Others will be small towns in rural areas where the deterioration in the founding virtues has been spreading as rapidly as it spread in Fishtown (225).

Note the tie of geography to both classed and cultural regression: the city has pushed out

the lower-class into its sub/urban outreaches and, ultimately, into the rural.

Although not focused on the rural per se, Murray demonstrates that the distinctions we continue to make between the mainstream and those who deviate are rooted in the postwar period. Such themes in both time periods centralize mainstream norms of progress and development, thus the reoccurrence of the notion that middle-classless sub/urban development should drive the cultural imperative to improve upon rural locales.

One area in which this idea manifests in the post 1980s is in discussions of urban-to-rural migration made possible by new technologies. In *Forbes*, the professional urban-to-rural exodus is capable of turning a “hick town” like Fairfield, Iowa into a place representing the “technically savvy sophisticates bent on creating their idea of a postindustrial idyll amid the fields of corn and soybeans” (Kotkin). In this example, the idealized regression associated with rurality is juxtaposed with those retrograde elements that the in-migrants improve upon. As lauded in the *Wilson Quarterly*, such urban-to-rural newcomers are part of “The Rural Rebound” that brings much needed progress to depressed rural communities: “The newcomers, moreover, have few ties to the traditional rural economy or way of life; they are *in* rural America but not *of* it. It is almost inevitable that they will change it” (Johnson and Beale; emphasis added). These changes are centered around physical development (roads; buildings) but also a more civilized, cultured development: “newcomers often demand not just a greater quantity of services but better quality as well” (Johnson and Beale).

Johnson and Beale espouse the mantra that middle-classless sub/urban development is always good, that this outside development of rural areas is better than what was there

before: “The problems and challenges that await a growing rural America are bound to be daunting. But whatever they are they will almost certainly be preferable to the challenges posed by isolation, exodus, and decline” (Johnson and Beale). What these authors do not note is that, ironically, the isolation associated with rurality, fueled by the “exodus” of its inhabitants and its eventual “decline,” is caused in part by previous outside interests that grew disinterested. As we have seen in previous articles such as “Farmers: Get Big or Get Out,” mainstream development is not always better (Heffern) and it does not always save rural communities.

Representations of the mainstream development of economically depressed rural locations thus become more abstract representations of rural/urban distinction and highlight the presumed superiority of the urban even when evidence indicates otherwise. Similar to postwar society, this notion reinforces the larger conception that rural places and people need to “catch up” with modern society and culture and, as a result, justifies the means employed to accomplish such a goal. Thus we come full circle to the anecdote referring to *Deliverance* that began this dissertation and the use of familiar stereotypes in which to justify the location of WWPC rural communities in American society and the mainstream’s dominance over them.

Again, dominant discourses on WWPC rurality employ familiar terms that place WWPC rural others in the losing half of a geographic binary. We have seen references in this dissertation to terms like “hillbilly” and “hick,” in both popular and academic

analyses<sup>99</sup>, but perhaps the most popular portrayals of the low class and dangerous WWPC rural other are associated with terms like “redneck” and “white trash.” The danger associated with the redneck is most visibly shown in horror films, much as it has been since at least the postwar period (see Clover; Williamson; Newitz in Wray and Newitz; Harkins; and Hartigan for a few discussions), and can also be easily recognized in popular literature like John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* (T. Martin). In these representations, the regressive tendency of WWPC rural subjects speaks to the potential threat of “their” lesser intelligence, violent behavior and, generally speaking, their incivility to the mainstream. Well into the 2000s, the phrase “white trash” also connotes the regressed nature and perceived threat of WWPC rurality.

As stated in the Introduction, it is clear that “white trash” takes on a dual connotation that relates to the working-class and rural, something reflected in two articles that discuss white trash “fashion.” In these articles, American culture has become degraded because it embraces the infantile, violent and regressed behaviors, or “fashions,” of “real” white trash. The two articles in question, however, are written over a decade apart: one in 1994 (“White Hot Trash!” by Tad Friend), the other in 2006 (“Welcome to the White Trash Nation” by Helen Popkin). Both articles touch upon the same theme even though they are written for different purposes — the first is for *New York*, a magazine concerned with the events of NYC, the second for *MSNBC*'s online “news.” The sub-titles of each article

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<sup>99</sup>The word “hillbilly”, while seemingly not as widely used as redneck or white trash, is still part of our vernacular. One recent example can be found in popular shows like *Lost*, where the phrase “hillbilly” is used to describe the “others” and their barbarous and primitive actions.



speak to their similar purpose, the “new” discovery of white trash in American culture (respectively, “The nineties finally have their defining figure—and he hates your guts” and “Way beyond trucker hats: la vida lowbrow is the new mainstream”). Both articles lament the low-class behavior that has been absorbed by the mainstream and imply that such behavior, while expected by retrograde WWPC rural subjects, is in part to blame for the degradation of American culture at large.

According to the 2006 article, white trash in America holds none of the derision it so obviously deserves: “white trash still retains the associations of trailer parks, Camaros-up-on-blocks, screaming babies, unemployment, public drunkenness, lack of education or social skills — but not the social stigma” (Popkin). Yet, this author goes on to state the exact derisive undertones that white trash does in fact still hold for the mainstream: the “uncouth and stereotypically hick-like” people on reality shows who are “obnoxious and seemingly unintelligent.” What is disgusting for this author is not that this behavior exists per se — “hick-like” people are, by implication, “obnoxious” and “unintelligent” whose behavior will follow in kind — but that celebrities and popular culture mimic and thus make this behavior acceptable for the mainstream. Nor can we dismiss this writer as an outsider with no knowledge of white trash; as her author's note states, she was “raised with a car up on blocks in the front yard and ‘educated’ in the Florida public school system” (Popkin). As a result, we cannot dismiss her observations as offensive as they are portrayed as emanating from her intimate experience with such a demographic.

Popkin’s observations are uncannily similar to the observations — and more extended psychology — outlined by Friend over a decade earlier. Friend's portrayal of white trash also centers around (1990s) “fashion,” even that of NYC, but also includes the

appearance of “real” white trash as embodied by the relatives of Paula Jones (famous for an alleged sexual encounter with Bill Clinton). The cover of this issue of *New York* informs the reader of the different forms of white trash, its pervasiveness and, therefore, its danger to American society: “Tonya [Harding], Lisa Marie [Presley], John & Lorena [Bobbitt], Roseanne & Tom [Arnold], Paula [Jones] & Gennifer [Flowers] & Bill [Clinton]. They're everywhere. Lock up your Twinkies” (cover of *New York*, August 22, 1994). From figure skating Olympians, Elvis' daughter, extreme marital discord and entertainers to presidential scandals and, yes, even presidents themselves, white trash surrounds everyone. Yet the experience of “white trash” greatly depends upon the subject pursuing it as we see in Friend’s distinction between “self-conscious” hipster scenes or “unself-conscious” forms as exemplified by a trailer park in Staten Island, wrestling, NRA, steaks and monster trucks. This distinction becomes more meaningful when considering Friend’s previous statement suggesting the differences between “white trash,” “New York” and European influence: “The words *New York* don't naturally sidle up to the bar next to the words *white trash*,” but neither is the city a “pure bastion of Euro-influenced cosmopolitanism” (Friend; emphasis in original). In this formulation, New York is closer to the high-class connotations surrounding “Europe” than to white trash, but the fact that New York is American makes it privy to some of its low-class associations. Thus, even within a metropolitan center like New York, it is possible to find the existence of “unself-conscious” white trash juxtaposed with those enlightened enough to adopt the white trash posture in irony.

Friend suggests that while there may exist white trash behavior within a place like NYC, it is also clearly not a “white trash” place. To highlight this point, Friend discusses

Paula Jones' relatives as embodiments of a real white trash environment, representing them as part of a world somewhere between “old-fashioned country morals or modern situational ethics.” Despite the fact that Friend does not consider Jones' relatives white trash by his “behavioral definition” because they refused money for interviews, it is quite clear that they are of a different, uncouth, rural world separate from the urbane New Yorker: smoking, drinking, unemployed, trailer living, bigoted, sexist, racist, etc. — people who look down upon gold diggers but who had never heard of a Gucci bag. On one hand Friend appears to, however briefly, criticize the offensive undertones of the term through historical accounts of its origins, using quotes (perhaps out of context?) from people like Dorothy Allison and John Waters in which to do so. But as he gives this background, it is not to question that “white trash” exists — or where it should exist — but that by 1994, the connotations of the term had become representative of American culture as a whole: “The country is becoming underclass-laden, illiterate, promiscuous, and just plain fat” (Friend). In a sense, the U.S. is becoming so low-class because it is under assault by this very low-class; for Friend, American society has become the kitsch and trailer parks that were once the identifying markers of who and where white trash was located.

Unsurprisingly, Friend uses a familiar image to convey the white trash assault on our modern sensibility and frames it in terms of working-class rural revenge:

Yet the men in overalls have triumphed not because of the puissance of organized labor but because when it comes to behavior, America is wearing Osh Kosh B'Gosh. Like the urbanities in *Deliverance*, we have found ourselves in the grinning clutches of sexually predatory backwoodsmen. White-trash culture

commands us to "squeal like a pig!" And we're oinking. (n.p.)

However, it is not just the sheer power of WWPC rurality that has taken over mainstream America in 1994 but the fact that “we” have let them infect us. As we see in the above quote, WWPC rurality’s metaphoric “overalls” are adopted only because American society is still wearing kids clothes (“Osh Kosh B’Gosh”). The move from contained nether region to mainstream adoption is merely part of a larger childish fantasy: “white trash” tells us nothing about true social structure, but only mires us in escape from the things that really matter in modern America. It could be that when Friend states, “The boom in trash behavior clearly owes less to Marx than to Freud, less to the resolution of class dialectics than to simple indulgence of the id,” he is criticizing a self-indulgent mainstream. However, he is also railing against the WWPC rurality so readily associated with this term: neither white trash nor its subjects have developed beyond the infant stage. In other words, “they” have not matured to adulthood or modernity and by adopting this trashy stance, we too have regressed into infancy: “True trash takes what it needs and claims it's what it deserves. True trash is one long boiling tantrum, primed to explode. True trash is the terrible twos forever. The culture is in a panic to find its collective inner child. Well, here he is.” (Friend). According to Friend, mainstream America has become as unconscious as its most retrograde subjects.

## **VI. Unconsciousness**

Although written in the mid-1990s, Friend’s analysis is still widely adopted in American society as evidenced by the 2006 *MSNBC* article on the same “white trash” theme; his analysis also represents the dominant discourses on WWPC rurality that continue to occur. Like the postwar, “we” just know about “them”: subjects who are seen

as ignorant, racist, regressed and therefore parasitic on the advances of an entire nation. The terms in which we know this subject position may overlap with the postwar (as in regards to referencing actual geographic forms like suburbia), but they may also be unique to our time period (farm crisis; Internet; red state/blue state distinction; cultural forms). Either way, the norms we are referencing to understand the mainstream's centrality and WWPC rural failure revolves around a similar view towards what constitutes social and cultural progress and development.

In many ways, WWPC rural people and places are highly visible — their caricatures are in films, television, commercials and even the news. Still, it is not a paradox to say that rural problems remain invisible to the nation: using empty dominant representations to understand the role of both the mainstream and WWPC rurality will most certainly elide the ways in which our modern national and international concerns intersect with those rural locations supposedly left behind the mainstream<sup>100</sup>. The rural social sciences are particularly adept at illustrating such an observation; throughout this dissertation I've mentioned various works written throughout the 1990s and 2000s on this subject. Unfortunately, some of the concerns earlier in this time period, like issues surrounding rural poverty, continue to echo in 2012. The continuing existence of such social issues confirms the predictions given in 1986 by Osha Davidson: “Although its spread [rural poverty] is receiving little attention from the press and even less from politicians, it will be affecting people's lives there well into the next century” (“Rise” 820).

There are practical ways that a mainstream cultural unconsciousness negatively affects

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<sup>100</sup>See Carr and Kefalas' “Conclusion” for one discussion.

WWCPC rurality across the country, perhaps most obviously seen in policy decisions which contribute to the decaying or outright death of rural areas (for some examples, see Davidson; Milbourne; Duncan; Carr and Kefalas), and this dissertation has only touched upon such real world problems. The more pressing concern here has been what our lack of consciousness says about ourselves: why do we continue to hold on to outdated misconceptions regarding rurality, in particular as relating to working-class and working poor whites? Clearly, the norms of progress and development that have structured America since at least the postwar period will not be fully challenged unless, as a society, we engage in self-critique.

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