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Shifting Rurality: American Gothic, Iowa Nice, Biotech and Political Expectations in Rural America

William D. Nichols (Bath Spa University)

Introduction

This paper explores the tensions and frictions inherent in the cultural and material factors that make up heritage as it relates to landscape in rural America. I centre on the state of Iowa, which, I argue, has a unique and heavily weighted heritage value: as valorised by “officials” or state actors, as well as imagined by urban outsiders or by its inhabitants. By tracing the history of these geographical images, I highlight spaces of awkward entanglement where people’s actions and voices collide, contradict, and disempower one another.

I do this by examining the aesthetic history of the state; as imagined and *imaged* by different actors with varying agencies. A critical character in this paper is the Iowan painter, Grant Wood, whose famous painting, *American Gothic*, holds a unique place in the minds of Americans; both as material for lampooning, and as a visual testament to the values of America’s *heartland*. Wood’s aesthetic approach and his philosophy of Regionalism (a cause taken up by other American painters in the post-depression era) attempts to take the powers of cultural production and ambiguous national heritage away from urban centres, which, Wood has argued, have become increasingly European and therefore, in Wood’s mind, colonised or taken over by the “colonial spirit.” (Wood, 230)

Wood’s Regionalism shares common characteristics with the ambiguous Nationalism sold by Donald Trump in the most recent election. Trump’s idea of a “great America” invokes an image of the past as a means of moving forward. Trump locates this new nation in the forgotten “belt” sections of the country; by placing his plan for greatness, he enlisted a mass of placeless people who were willing to behave in contradictory ways in order to get what they’ve been promised. Contradictory claims like; “draining the swamp” whilst electing a corporate celebrity, being working class

whilst supporting a system which values only executives, and being a globalised farmer while supporting someone who has actively agreed to destroy international trade agreements that keep your business alive. All of these contradictions and more arise at this axis of images and interactions.

Throughout this paper, I argue that evolving forms of rurality, or modes of rural living, have shifted the unique cultural and political weights of Iowa on to largely its rural citizens, creating a friction between heritage and hegemony. As a theoretical impetus for this, I draw on work which examines how heritage is produced by modernity, therefore reproducing the end goals of its project and erasing narratives which run counter to its ethos. (Harrison) I also draw on Anna Tsing's "awkward entanglements," as well as her analysis of friction and how friction can resist hegemony but also (re)produce it. (Tsing, 47) I argue that, in rural Iowa, these tensions have arisen from heritage-narratives which stand in contrast to official heritages, or, heritages which are produced by "academic and expert cultures," as well as reified at the level of policy. (Harvey, 155) The authoritative and authorised bodies who produce official ideas of heritage clash with the communities who have sentimental ties to objects, places, and practices, who Rodney Harrison classifies as practicing "unofficial heritage."

I place these practices of unofficial heritage within the landscape of Iowa; a landscape whose heritage-importance is often produced in direct relation to its fertile soil, its agricultural products, and the people who "work with the land." The ever-evolving project of agriculture means that these ideas of heritage are not solid, but constantly shifting and therefore ripe with contradictory claims which, I argue, are illustrative of various actors and their ability to leverage power over Iowa, Iowans, and rural America at large. David Harvey's analysis of the landscape-heritage dynamic notes Wylie's concept that "landscape is tension". (Harvey, 153) This tension, both friction and entanglement, is where the landscape reveals itself as an increasingly complex "space," which is affected by genetic modification, exponential growth of production, and market globalisation.

I argue that these material shifts have caused a great internal friction in social life. Marx says, "the forces of material production have an ideological existence;" and so the unofficial heritage and sympathetic attachment to the landscape, which has been imagined both by the farmer and the urbanite to different ends, is called into question

through these complex, juridic-material processes. Further, I argue that something is *off* in the pacing of evolving factors, and that the aforementioned political contradictions arise from *uneven development*— in the Marxist sense of the rural-urban divide, but also in a uniquely rural, heritage-against-landscape way.

Friction, Entanglement, and the Rural Image

In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Anna Tsing coins the term “awkward entanglement’ to describe “spaces of friction in which the relationship between local actors and global processes are revealed.” Rodney Harrison uses the concept “to explore these shifts in heritage and their social and material consequences.” (Harrison, 31). Awkward entanglements produce frictions in the sense that contradictory forces emerge and butt heads, enacting a bruxism of powers where certain ideological structures and social values vie for dominance.

We can *feel* awkward entanglements when we think about insulated communities and their “weariness” of strangers. Jo Little theorises this weariness as something like a survival instinct:

At a very simplistic level, distance can insulate rural communities, the sheer remoteness seeming to isolate them from harm. Such an idea clearly relies on the idea that danger comes from outside the rural community – so rural areas are not simply remote, but rather remote from a particular danger. This notion of the dangerous ‘other’ has permeated accounts of cultural constructions of rurality in which social exclusion or marginalisation (and the fear of and resulting from it) has been seen as rooted in a fear or dislike of difference and a wish to protect rural people and communities from those who do not belong.” (Little, 90)

While Little categorises weariness as a basic fear of the other, rural communities often have negative interactions with outsiders for obvious reason. On one hand, bourgeois urbanites escape the city to vacation in the pastoral idyll; on the other, rural spaces are more likely to be rich in natural resources, which are ripe to exploit. In both cases, it seems understandable why rural people would be weary of outsiders. Historically, outsiders have *taken away* from rural environments. A casual example, past material exploitation and vacation spots, is the artist who enters into rural space for

subject material. While artists will often take up long term (or sometimes permanent) residence in the areas they wish to depict, they still, for the most part, meet the category of outsider, not simply as someone from elsewhere, but as an individual who has come to partake in the environment; hence, they have come to take something away. In this case, they take away an image entirely informed by their own romantic or septic idea of a place. which might not be so serious if a painting wasn't an object to be observed by others; therefore, communicating (mis)information about rural spaces.

Richard Yarwood states that, in rural communities, “images are important because they both reflect and affect the ways in which the country side is used by society.” (Yarwood, 19) The artist who produces an image of a rural community from outside that community is bringing in a multitude of possibilities of understanding and use for that place— which already has meaning ascribed to it by those who live there. Images become markers of power which delimit and define identities for the subjects they depict as well as those who view the images.

This was a main point of contention when Grant Wood's *American Gothic* was initially exhibited in Chicago, 1930. As many historians and scholar's like to remind us, *American Gothic* is a work whose infamy arises not simply from its own standing as a defining work of American Regionalism, but is also infamous due to reproductions which both elaborate and obscure the original subject matter and intention of the work. These reproductions parody the image in ways which are telling of the current political issues or social attitudes; often times replacing the subjects and objects of the painting with ridiculous imagery; e.g, the Farmer and his female companion for the first family, the pitchfork for a martini, and so on. (Corn, 253)

But, as Wanda Corn points out in her essay on the painting, these lampoons often have nothing to do with Wood's original intentions in creating the work. Instead they have more to do with an interpretation of the work which, instead of coming from within the culture and geography of Iowa, was imposed upon the painting from an audience and critics who were externally involved. Throughout history, critics have misunderstood the painting in the same way that urbanites— or Americans at large— have misinterpreted rural environments and people. Corn quotes critics of the day as saying, “the couple [are] ‘caricatured so slightly that it is doubly cruel, and though we

know nothing of the artist and his history, we cannot help believing that as a youth he suffered tortures from these people” (Corn, 255).

This quote from Walter Prichard Eaton of the *Boston Herald* showcases the prevailing attitudes that define the divide between city and country. A set of assumptions are made about the subjects of the painting; the first of which being that the artist, as a producer of culture, must somehow be *other-to* and outside of the work he is producing; secondly, that the subjects of the painting are caricatured in a way which is meant to produce them as funny looking; and third, that Wood is on his side as a fellow maker of culture and, like the critic, finds these people to be abhorrent, narrow minded and of another era. Corn quotes two other, more contemporary critics, who reaffirm this view.

Matthew Baigell considered the couple savage, exuding ‘a generalised, barely repressed animosity that borders on venom.’ The painting, Baigell argued, satirised ‘people who would live in a pretentious house with medieval ornamentation, as well as the narrow prejudices associated with life in the Bible Belt.’ In his recent book-length study of the artist, James Dennis characterised Grant Wood as a “cosmopolitan satirist” and *American Gothic* as a ‘satiric interpretation of complacent narrow-mindedness.’ (Corn, 255).

Often, the painting is read as a critique of the absurd religiosity of the people in it. Wood’s compositions were informed by religious paintings from the Gothic era, and the title of the painting reinforces this idea (Cheles). Corn, however, follows a more historical-materialist path in her essay and characterises Wood as someone who is interested in the past. Corn states that Wood’s characters are not representations of the past as present but an homage to those he thought should have lived in the house in the background. Corn states,

In placing the man and woman squarely in front of their house, he borrowed another popular late nineteenth-century convention drawn from the itinerant photographers who posed couples and families in front of their homes. This practice, common in the rural Midwest through World War I, produced untold numbers of photographs, all recording the pride of home as much as a likeness of the inhabitants (Corn, 256).

In Corn's analysis pride plays a major role. Wood's reliance on photographs of a bygone era reflect the nationwide tendency of the 1910's and 20's to collect pieces of *Americana*, or cultural artefacts of recent American history. Where once Americans were ashamed of their poverty and provincialism, after emerging as a major world power post-WWI, rural heritage became a mark of pride for many. The photographs Wood collected were also documents of pride—the pride that American's have in their homes. Another source of pride is the reference to horticulture in the painting—the houseplants behind the woman—as keeping plants alive was very difficult during harsh Midwestern winters (Corn, 256).

Corn's read of Wood as looking back and actively engaging in an aesthetic practice of historical-material referentiality exemplifies unofficial heritage as a practice in America. Harrison defines heritage as “objects, places and practices” (Harrison, 6); “unofficial heritage,” as Harvey calls it, would be heritage that is relevant at a commonplace or everyday level. Wood finds significance in everyday life in a way that anticipates Lefebvre, who stated, “the ‘essence’ of man... is made real through action and in practice, i.e. in *everyday life*.” (Lefebvre, 179) Wood's idea of heritage is highly tied to the working-class reality of rural people: their day in and day out existence. This is why he places such importance on the farmer and his wife in *American Gothic*. To Wood, it made sense to feature the everyday in a traditionally grandiose object (a painting); to the critics it made no sense unless it was a joke.

Heritage as Revolt

In his essay, *Revolt Against the City*, Wood states that, Sweeping changes have come over American culture in the last few years. The Great Depression has taught us many things, and not the least of them is self-reliance. It has thrown down the Tower of Babel erected in the years of a false prosperity; it has sent men and women back to the land; it has caused us to rediscover some of the old frontier virtues. In cutting us off from traditional but more artificial values, it has thrown us back upon certain true and fundamental things which are distinctively ours to use and to exploit” (Wood, 231).

Wood evokes an image of American heritage in order to describe his aesthetic and ideological perspective, which he titles *Regionalism*. *Regionalism* values independence

and autonomy and emphasises those areas of the country which are less-than-urban as fundamentally American— and therefore more authentic. Wood renounces prosperity as something false in favour of the “true” and “fundamental” things which only “working” people would know. Wood says that these things are exploitable and the focus of his work, the rural landscape of farmed land, shows that he places land-use and use-value in high regard in relation to the working and rural people he admires. It also highlights Wood’s view of the rural as one of dominion over the natural world.

While Wood is highly loyal to his idea of the farmer, fetishising the role of farmer as authentic— ‘wholly preoccupied with his struggle against the elements, with the fundamental things of life’— his farmer is also “not articulate” and “has no time for Wertherism or for the subtleties of interpretation.” However, Wood’s farmer marks this as a preferable distinction between himself and city folk; and in Wood’s mind, the farmer is proud of that lack of superfluous knowledge and taste. Wood’s conception of the farmer has endured “ridicule by city folks with European ideas of the farmer as a peasant, or, as our American slang has it, a ‘hick’...” This criticism leveraged by urbanites has, according to Wood, “caused a further withdrawal— a proud and disdainful answer to misunderstanding criticism” (Wood, 233).

Wood’s emphasis on misunderstanding, both on the part of the rural citizen and the urban outsider, isn’t a stagnant concept. Rather it’s something that has, in the time since Wood’s *American Gothic* and *Revolt Against the City*, had to shift along with the material, economic and political capacities of the landscape. Here, I take “landscape” to mean a collision of the personal, romantic, and fetishised relationships that people have with their environment; as well as the banal, everyday and commonplace activities which also hold significance to its inhabitants. Wood’s painted images pushed these categories into collision, producing a distinctly modern friction where heritage was posed together with progress. These conflicting categories define the imagined rural and its capacity to interact with the outsider world. As Michael Woods states,

As such, rural areas are frequently endowed with symbolic importance as signifiers of national identity, or as the counterpoint to modernity. Rural areas are celebrated variously both as wilderness and as a bucolic idyll. Yet, they can also be portrayed as remote, backward, under-developed places, in need of modernisation” (Woods, 1).

However, in Wood's most famous work, *American Gothic*, the *subjects*, their old-time dress, and their little farmhouse are gathered from images of past time; none of the agricultural fields that populated his later work made an appearance. In this way *American Gothic* distinctly turns away from anything modern. This technique is often used with images of rurality; the subjects are aged, the environments lack cars or "modern" buildings, and the complete lack of modern technology in general, generate images of a more simplified sense of rural place. Shirley states, "that editing out signs of modernity can lead to an aesthetic of rural plurality as a form of nationalist identity" (Shirley, 8). Wood's painting isn't Iowa Gothic but *American Gothic*, and hence was an attempt to communicate a national narrative in direct contrast to the coastal models of modernity; it therefore, becomes an image widely used for different purposes which communicate different ideas of America.

The Contemporary Politics of Regionalism

The rhetoric of Donald Trump similarly edits signs and signifiers which relate to modernity, heritage and invokes a "Great America"— an imagined national-cultural heritage of working people. This invocation calls on the "forgotten" white working class of America to restore themselves to a moment of— if not prosperity, then— autonomy and self-reliance, or, as Wood might put it, more "true" and "fundamental" things. The heritage invoked by Trump is a heritage which is constructed through a lens of dissent-amnesia. The struggles of labour unions and activist organisers never happened in Trump's great America. It's an America where Marx never existed and Ayn Rand is pro-worker's rights.

Despite all contradictions, Trump's rhetoric appealed to areas of the country that were largely working class; but more importantly, to areas seemingly forgotten or left behind. In this way, it is a heavily spatialised or "placed" idea— taking advantage of geographical concepts which, as some have theorised, Democrats have failed to do for some time. (Conn) With national trade agreements allowing American companies to open up manufacturing plants overseas and competition from natural gas reducing the need for coal, many portions of the country populated by the white working class have been in dire straits. In order to combat this crisis, Trump focused on the "victims of globalisation" narrative, and, in the first chapter of his presidency, backed out of

international trade agreements like NAFTA— which elicits varying attitudes from these different (all be it similarly non-coastal) parts of the country.

These sections of America are known as the “Belts”; e.g, The Rust Belt, The Coal Belt, The Bible Belt (known not for its industrial character, but for its religious fervour), and the Corn Belt. These Belts have been focus grounds for building national identity at different historical moments. Within the national imaginary, they’re filled with “good, hard working Americans” and are not portrayed as major producers of culture or knowledge. They are also often less diverse than urbanized regions, or portrayed as less diverse. Each Belt conjures up quintessential images of Americana. The Coal Belt conjures up images of coal miners and Appalachian rebelliousness; the Rust Belt conjures images of steel workers and car manufacturers who helped produce some of the defining objects of the modern era; and the Corn Belt, home to farmers and, most importantly, one of the quintessential works of American Regionalism (and, arguably, the most recognisable portrait of America) *American Gothic*. The imaginary of these places exists both within and outside as produced images of heritage. These imagined spaces aren’t simply important to those who live there; but are also important sites to the American identity as a whole, both as a heart (as in “heartland”) and as the anti-modern counterpart, aforementioned by Woods.

The Belts are seen as places where the American Frontier is still happening— where hard and dangerous work is done for the good of American ingenuity and divine provenance. With the closing of the *real* Frontier by the Census Bureau (due to the amount of human inhabitants per square mile) (Dant, 84) at the World Fair in Chicago, Americans were asked to reconsider the Frontier as not the wild west itself, but a critical act of culture-making and nation building. At the closing gates of the old frontier and the opening of the new Frontier lies modernity. As Catherine Gouge puts it,

In celebration of this technological ‘progress,’ the Colombian Exposition in Chicago had more lighting at the time than any city in the country, hence the nickname the ‘White City.’ The concurrent celebrations of the ‘natural’ promise of the American frontier and of the technological drama of electrical lighting were, furthermore, accompanied by a celebration of the ‘horizontal city’ with cityscapes like those in late-nineteenth century London and Paris where most of the buildings were five stories or fewer and all were accessible on foot. Such

a quilting of commemorations is interesting because it appears to map contradictory celebrations: distinctly ‘American’ ecology, distinctly ‘American’ technology, and distinctly un-American, ‘old world’ city planning” (Gouge, n.p).

For Gouge, the New Frontier is tied up in concepts of heritage and concepts of futurity which create radical dissonances. Rodney Harrison, in his Book *Heritage: Critical Approaches* places heritage firmly within the project of modernity (using Lyotard’s terminology) stating that,

This cluster of ideas and their underlying social, political and economic movements both facilitated and underpinned the development of a particular set of relationships with the past, which were necessary prerequisites to the development of contemporary notions of heritage, including an increased emphasis on empiricism and reason as the primary source of knowledge and authority (Smith 2004, 2006), and a way of defining the present in opposition to the past (Lucas 2004, 2005, 2010; Harrison 2011) and rooting the ‘invented traditions’ of new nation-states by creating a history for them (Hobsbawm 1983a, 1983b and Kosselleck 1985) (Harrison, 24).

It is no coincidence that the World Fair, a quintessential moment for American modernity, becomes, also, a quintessential moment of framing for heritage. Through the repurposing of the Frontier landscape, the barely occupied West comes to symbolise much more for the American people; as Dant states,

by the beginning of the twentieth century, [Turner’s] “frontier thesis” had become the dominant explanation for American exceptionalism – the nation’s professed historical uniqueness and qualitative superiority – and it would influence writing and thinking about the American West well into the twenty-first century” (Dant, 84).

Spaces which were rural, wild, or simply not a part of an urban ecosystem, became significant spaces for national identity. The Frontier becomes an ambiguous signifier for any place perceived as elsewhere, nowhere, or out there. In this way, Wood’s invocation of the “frontier values” (Wood, 130) is also about truth and authenticity. America is being made at its edges and its boundaries are always growing; the transferable idea of what “traversing a frontier” might mean leads to the “Frontierization” of all new things, including new advances in science, such as genetically modified organisms.

Biotechnology and the Globe

While contemporary claims of regionalism have promised to disintegrate globalisation—the destructive force which has taken jobs overseas and contributed to the socio-economic stagnation of the white working class—recent trends in American agriculture were entirely shaped by globalisation policies. The GMO revolution, which has shaped the lives of farmers and subsequently kept them fed, arose from increasing the strength of ties between big government and big business. McKay Jenkins, in his book *Food Fight* discusses ideologies which both deregulatory eras of Regan and Bush Sr. espoused, namely that “the burgeoning biotech industry was a perfect merging of business and science that— if left alone— would generate colossal corporate profits for American agricultural conglomerates” (McKay, 64).

Neoliberal markets became the *modus operandi* for American farmers— who differ from agricultural workers in the sense that they’re more akin to small business owners. Narratives of progress were bundled with the GMO crop, which guaranteed higher yield rates, disease resistance, and an air of futurity or evolution. American farmers would have been no stranger to these narratives of promised progress. As previously alluded to, the modernisation of America also called for the modernisation of American agriculture. Dunlap states that, “the modern state became emblematic of progress, which legitimised its power, bureaucratic rationality, and use of “objectivity’ to manage subjects.” He posits this as an invisible power which functions through “constructing mechanisation and industrialisation as the emblem and standard definition of progress to mimic and emulate in all facets of social order—from individual to governmental conduct.” (Dunlap, 93-94) American agriculture had already been industrialised to a certain extent; it seemed modern with its arsenal of harmful chemical pesticides— long before the advent of the Roundup Ready crop.

Lewontin and Levins, in their book, *Biology Under the Influence*, state that, “on the one hand, science is the generic development of human knowledge over the millennia, but

on the other, it is the increasingly commodified specific product of a capitalist knowledge industry.” They go on to state that, “the result is a peculiarly uneven development, with increasing sophistication at the level of the laboratory and research project, along with a growing irrationality of the scientific enterprise as a whole” (Lewontin and Levin, 9). Biotechnology from the very beginning was enmeshed in ethically questionable foundations due to its business-to-government open door policy. Jenkins points to George H.W. Bush’s appointment of Clarence Thomas to the supreme court, pointing to the fact that Thomas was “a former lawyer for Monsanto... [who] later wrote the majority opinion in a landmark case granting companies the right to patent GMO seeds” (McKay, 30).

Biotechnology has had to do a lot of legal and ideological footwork in order to find itself enmeshed within the cultural heritage landscape. Myles W. Jackson covers some of this history in his “Genealogy of a Gene,” stating that “the Founding Fathers of the United States were deeply committed to the notions of the commons and commonwealth” (Jackson,44). He goes on to say that, “they were dedicated to a cultural commons and were tacitly committed to a natural commons that allowed community access to nature.” (Jackson, 44) This idea of a common access to nature and the commonwealth as a means of combatting monopoly, something the Founding Fathers equated with “the tyranny from which they sought to extricate themselves,” (Jackson, 44) was fundamentally restructured by juridical challenges to the Product-of-Nature Doctrine.

While Wood’s idea of rural life was seen as close to nature, or only adhering to fundamental, less “artificial” ways of living, the ideological structure of the farm is changing, not only at a genetic level, but within a juridical, discursive and legislative framework as well. This friction between the perceived “naturalness” of agriculture and the perceived inauthenticity of GMOs would drive much of the debate about food in America for generations. While business was good for farmers, Monsanto (the big bad boogiemans of GMO) garnered a fair amount of negative attention; this rocketed the farmer into a conversation where their ethics and the ethics of Americans in general were called into question—not through typical ethical forums (news outlets, public conversation, commonplace interactions), but through the galvanising of corporate entities with scientific discourse.

The Supreme Court dealt with many challenges to the Product-of-Nature Doctrine which stated that products which were found within the natural world could not be patented as *inventions*. Jackson's book explores the history behind a plethora of cases which eventually lead to the total restructuring of the Product-of-Nature doctrine: the patenting of the human genome and genetic material. Biological material at a microscopic level had to be reduced and de-centred order to become a private and owned entity. Part of the juridical work which led to the patenting of DNA came from reading the human body like computer code. As codes and algorithms were increasingly patented and the human body was increasingly treated as a genetic code, genetic discoveries were able to be patented and owned. Another part of the juridical work was viewing genes as chemical compounds. As Jackson states "the analogy between genes and chemicals seemed a perfect one for the USPTO because... [the] patenting of isolated and purified natural products was well established" (Jackson, 58). Thus, the juridical intimately implemented biotechnology into American life and affected the way that citizens would interact with biological entities.

Juridico-Discursive Agriculture

Bowman v. Monsanto Company in 2013 is one of a handful of court cases where something akin to "traditional environmental knowledges" have come into conflict with the complex nature of patent-oriented GMO agriculture. Bowman, an Indiana farmer, purposefully propagated and saved Monsanto GM soybeans and replanted them for eight seasons. Whether Bowman knew it or not, he was participating in a practice which violated a previous ruling on patent exhaustion— that the natural reproductions of the patented product are still under patent. The *Harvard Law Review*, while exploring this case, states that "under the doctrine of patent exhaustion, 'the initial authorised sale of a patented item terminates all patent rights to that item' and confers on the purchaser 'the right to use [or] sell' the item as he pleases, but not to make identical new items" (*Harvard Law Review*, 378). They also state that this ruling isn't precedent setting, citing a previous case, *Monsanto v. Scruggs*; the only real difference between the two cases is that Bowman bought seeds from a grain elevator instead of an authorised dealer.

Bowman's and Scruggs's ingenuity, which could be regarded as the sort of "self-reliance" praised by Wood, violates Monsanto's patent rights over the seed, and

therefore the contract that the farmers are under. The practice that the rogue farmers are engaging in is a “traditional” way of labouring *with* the land. As Jenkins states, “since time immemorial, farmers developed, saved, and traded seeds from one year to the next, bartering their way to better, more fruitful crops” (Jenkins, 6). This is an idiosyncratic twist, namely, that the deregulation of big business leads to small agricultural operations working under a more strict set of rules. The “big guy vs. the little guy” is a classic American narrative— Americans root for the underdog, but in the courtroom, big agriculture has had the resources to win cases which set precedent in favour of the “big guy.” It would be easy to see the relationship between companies like Monsanto and farmers as one of antagonism; however, this isn’t necessarily the case. While often times anti-GMO literature will cite farmers as one group they fight for, farmers themselves claim to have a good relationship with Monsanto. Iowa farmer Dave Walton states, “sometimes I think the critics mistake Monsanto for the Illuminati, a darkly secret society that has influence over every aspect of our lives and has plans for world domination by killing everyone but the chosen few” (Walton, n.p). Walton provides a perspective often neglected in inflammatory anti-Monsanto sources— a perspective which is also historically neglected or *misunderstood*. Monsanto has filed 145 lawsuits in the last 16 years; given that there are something like 2.2 million farms in America and many use seeds produced by Monsanto, the lawsuits filed are actually few and far between.

This is not to say that Monsanto or these farmers are benevolent forces operating in a globalised world. Farmers who plant GM seeds are operating under a small business model; although, what constitutes a small family farm is changing with incentives to grow more and more commodity crops. Biofuels have played an increasing role in coercing farmers to grow for their causes without analysing any of the risks, be they environmental or economic. This happens, as do other forms of influence in agriculture, through “indirect forms of power” (McCright and Dunlap in Kulcsar *et al*, 351). Kulcsar *et al* further note that there has been little (if any) public debate in Iowa or Kansas over the efficacy of claims made about biofuel— namely, that it is environmentally safe and economically beneficial.

And yet it’s hard to discover a wealth of anti-GMO/anti-Big ag literature that sources the voices of farmers who deal directly with Monsanto. The farmer is at once

and expert and a non-expert; a working class individual being taken advantage of and a scientifically literate petit bourgeois companion of Monsanto. Instead of viewing this contradiction as Wood's original Regionalist claim that "misunderstandings" are just an inherent part of rural identity, I claim that the misunderstandings run both ways— and "indirect forms of power" play a large role in that. When farmers refute anti-GMO claims, they only have to respond to reactionary fears of the outsider, who may not have a well informed understanding of the situation. This leaves farmers to clear the air and behave as experts. While at first this may seem contradictory to the image of the farmer, constructed as the anti-modern, anti-superfluous, anti-hero, I argue that the efficacy of scientific discourse to hold sway on opinion means that a farmer's ability to cite scientific (or at least well informed) information is one of the "fundamental" or authentic things that Grant Wood aligns with "the farmer."

This pressure to be informed, open, and transparent as a producer of agriculture, arises amidst the spread of global paranoia about GMO's and large agricultural corporations. Jenkins states that some of this paranoia arises from the trauma of Mad Cow Disease, which caused people to be "skittish" about the power and hubris of modern agriculture. Theatrical demonstrations popped up all over Europe and quickly focused on agricultural technologies of all kinds. Protesters dumped GM soybeans at the doorstep of the British prime minister. Food activists pressured supermarkets to pull GMOs off their shelves. Prince Charles said GM foods took mankind into "realms that belong to God" (Jenkins, 37).

While anti-GMO sentiment in Europe won over the power and will of industrial agriculture there, Americans anxieties didn't have the same impact at the level of policy. While three-quarters of Americans worry about GMOs in their food, no national policy has gone into effect, despite the efforts and petitions of citizens as well as larger bodies of organic-positive businesses.

The Integrated Farmer

This ecological awareness pits liberal urbanite against the perceived evil of "Big ag" and their dominion over rural people. For example, a law suit was recently lost in Des Moines, where a city municipality sued the outlying rural communities for polluting local water sources; the city attempted to actively engage their rural neighbours in preventing water pollution, albeit in a very aggressive way. Farmers are no longer just

farmers, but are implicated in a series of relationships to land, neighbours, communities and the globe—all of which are heavily politicised. In order to make sense of this shifting landscape and the shifting concept of rurality, the Iowa Corn Growers Association (ICGA) and the Iowa Corn Promotion Board (ICPB) have joined forces to create an advertisement agency called Iowa Corn.

Iowa Corn has taken to creating images of rurality that are distinctly modern. In these videos, farmers demonstrate values such as environmental awareness and a dedication to being informed as rooted in tradition and enmeshed in global trade. These images mostly take the form of Youtube videos that show farmers in the field, farmers at home with their families, and farmers speaking about their concerns and what they're doing to make the world a better place.

In one video, a farmer discusses GMOs, stating that his use of biotechnology allows him to grow a “better, more quality product.” He makes the claim that he doesn't spray any pesticides the consumer should be worried about. He also cites the consumer as being someone who lives in the city and reinforces the dichotomy between country and city. Furthermore, he makes heritage claims that relate to suspected pollution, claiming to keep “groundwater safer,” so it's not “ending up down the river.” On its own this statement isn't a heritage claim, but due to its being paired with an image of children drinking from the hose (a popular American meme cites how old people love to talk about drinking from the hose as a way to signify simpler times), it ties into classic heritage images of Americana and carefree simplicity.

Another video from Iowa Corn shows how farmers are enmeshed in international commodity exchange markets as well as their local and national markets. This video has multiple farmers talking about the work that Iowa Corn does to advertise for farmers, stating that, if it wasn't for the grains council, there would be a “massive oversupply.” Another farmer states, “we have the ability to produce more than we can consume in this country, and we need to export.” Exports and international trade agreements are very important to Iowa farmers because incentives to grow more and more corn have to led to major oversupply, and international trade agreements like NAFTA have been very profitable.

Iowa Corn produces an image of the modern farmer— an individual who is informed and involved in a complex, outside world. This is a farmer who is by necessity

open to outsiders, entirely opposed to a stereotype of insularity, and friendly to businesses and the people who conduct business. One farmer states, “the opportunities that come out of those relationships, where growers get to talk one on one with international buyers, to be in that same marketplace, is so valuable in order to build long-standing relationships with these countries and with these foreign buyers, so that they can see the value and that we do care about them as customers.”

The disconnect between traditional ways of doing business and the international globalist model is that a lot of what could be thought of as “farmerly ways” should be lost. Often, when farmer’s speak of a consumer, they invoke an image of a unified body, a singular subject who can sit down and somehow enjoy their corn; however, the corn grown by Iowa farmers is used to produce feed for animals, corn syrup and ethanol. Iowa’s produced corn is only ever consumed in abstraction after going through processing. The “consumer” mentioned is not a consumer in a traditional sense, but another business that purchases corn to make other products. As their celebrity spokesperson, the Iowa Nice Guy, informs us in one video: less than 1% of Iowa’s corn is edible sweet corn. Whilst doing a novelty video for Iowa Corn where he attempts to eat field corn, this spokesperson makes claims about the radical potentiality of field corn-- saying it’s the plant that “does more.” He goes on to say that “Field corn is far more productive than sweet corn — it goes to feed livestock, make ethanol, plastics medicine or one of thousands of other daily uses... [it is] one of the most useful plants in existence.”

The aforementioned Iowa Nice Guy became an unlikely sensation when he posted a viral rebuttal to an inflammatory article from the *Atlantic*, which stated that Iowa was “a schizophrenic, economically-depressed, and...culturally-challenged” place (Bloom). The Iowa Nice Guy’s rebuttal was a succinct video where he took ambiguous criticisms and negative stereotypes (none of which were mentioned in Bloom’s article) and replied charismatically with faux-anger directed at those who might be scrutinising Iowa during the presidential caucuses.

He presents his presumed audience with perceived negative stereotypes. “You think we’re hillbillies?” “You think farmers are hillbillies?” “You think we’re all just a bunch of knee-jerk reactionaries?” In order to answer these phantom questions, he turns to statistical data about Iowa that paints it in a more urban or suburban light. In

a way he is trying to communicate to the viewer that Iowans are just like *Atlantic* readers; well educated, white, and liberal.

The Iowa Nice Guy closes his argument by stating, “stop worrying about what we know and start worrying about what you don’t know,” attempting to tie up loose ends that have existed between rural and urban since the two categories came into being. The Iowa Nice Guy is engaging in a breed of Regionalism which seeks to be integrated whilst still autonomous.

His Iowa is heavily urban (although what that means for Iowa is something far different from what it means for a New Yorker) and yet is still, spatially, largely rural. He positions himself as a cultural expert who can bridge the gaps between Iowa and the rest of the country, uniting everyone under the banner of social acceptance and economic progress. In one of his later videos for Iowa Corn, he states, “everything in moderation, except for knowledge.”

Rednecks, Queers, Town and Country Music

Nadine Hubbs, in her *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, cites the rise of a knowledge-based upper- or middle-class as one of the main factors of contemporary urban-rural misunderstanding. Citing the work of sociologist Michèle Lamont, she states that the American middle-class of the knowledge industry are particularly isolated in their understanding of the world, due to class segregation. Her question is “how does the distinctive... insular, perspective of middle-class news and entertainment media... affect white working-class people...?” While her question relates to an American perception of Country music, citing the attitudes of music critics who particularly despise country music, it is a pervasive dimension of the rural-urban relationship.

The culture wars—which Hubbs states peaked in 2004, but one could argue are even more intense right now—were filled with archetypal characters of the modern world: “NASCAR Dads” and “Latte Liberals.” These two characters defined the divide between the knowledge-producing class and the working-class. For Hubbs, the “anything but country” attitude of the knowledge-producing class was telling of the extreme disdain that Americans had of working-class Americans. Country music, largely perceived as rural and/or Southern, is listened to by mainly Rednecks. This ambiguous term has denoted many things in its history; be it the red necks of sunburnt labourers,

or the red handkerchiefs worn by union strikers. The contemporary redneck is perceived to be a bigot and a homophobe. They live in places like Iowa and Kansas and “vote against their best interest,” as Hubbs cites Thomas Frank’s, *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* as saying (Hubbs, 32). This perception of the reactionary vote—literally a vote which is a pure reaction—is the prevailing narrative in media coverage of rural Americans’ voting habits.

Commentators and critics draw connections between the music these people listen to and their politics—stating that both are disingenuous and inauthentic. Hubbs would like to assure that this is not the case in either sense. Country music, at its corniest and most pandering, is “authentic” and true to the spirit of the genre. She cites the work of Andrew Gelman, who states that voters are doing the same things they’ve always done: the rich vote Republican and the poor vote Democrat. But, “for various reasons, rich virus poor voter patterning breaks down at the state level, and indeed is already fuzzy at the county level...” (Hubbs, 35) Hubbs’s main point is that perception of homophobia and bigotry weren’t always associated with Country music or the Redneck. They are symptom of more recent developments, reflective, not of Country or Rednecks, but of a neoliberal production of misunderstanding. While it is fair to say that the middle class liberal is equally stereotyped and maligned, this misunderstanding affects rural people more severely due to their exclusion from producing the narrative of Redneck.

Conclusion: Where is Heritage Produced?

In *Revolt Against the City*, we see Wood as an autonomous and independent mind producing a fervently pro-rural or anti-urban manifesto. However, Wood—like farmers, country musicians, agricultural products, or middle-class producers of knowledge— is not an insular individual; he is inextricably linked to the world around him. He is connected to people, places, things, and practices which don’t singularly affect him, his neighbours, or the New York City curators and critics who endorsed him while representing that which he opposed.

One year before Wood would move to Iowa City (a community often referred to as “the People’s Republic of Johnson County” due to its insular liberalism) and start teaching at the University of Iowa, he was included in an exhibition in Kansas City organised by Maynard Walker. Evans cites Walker, a New York City art dealer, as having

a major influence on Wood's later criticisms and ideological musings. Evans, on the exhibition and its published statement in *Art Digest* in 1933, says,

Walker explained the inspiration for his exhibition. "One of the most significant things in the art world today," he declared, "is the increasing importance of real American art ... art which really springs from an American soil and seeks to interpret American life." This new movement hailed from a surprising location—"our long backward Middle West"—and found its greatest expression, Walker maintained, in the work of Wood, Curry, and Benton. Insisting these men promoted "sincere" subject matter in their work, rather than "the bizarre and sensational," the dealer was quick to note that the three artists had severed all ties to Europe. The indigenous expression of these "real Americans," he explained, was poised to eclipse "the shiploads of rubbish ... imported from the School of Paris" (Evans, 3258-3265).

The long backward Middle-West still looms as an ancillary fantasy to the outsider, and yet, this support for the arts comes exactly from the kind of person and place that Wood would later denigrate in his manifesto.

Here we see again how a concept of unofficial heritage operates as a romanticised notion of things that once were. Nadine Hubbs's examination of Country music reveals that there is no such thing as *authentic* Country; this addresses contemporary criticisms of Country music that accuse it of pandering to its audience: the bigoted, homophobic, Red-State, Rednecks. What Hubbs shows is that these values, which become later associated with Country music and the working-class, are not actually long-held attitudes. Hubbs asserts that queer was associated with "working-class"ness, and our current codified conception of queerness and country as antithetical to each other is due to a process of "middle-classing" the queer identity (Hubbs, 2, 148).

Heritage and its linkage to a sense of identity is therefore malleable and unstable—constantly being produced elsewhere and just out of reach. This becomes significant when we consider how images of rurality play a role in defining how precarious or isolated individuals are produced as a problem in the dominant national narrative of liberal media. In this way, we also see how coercive "indirect forces of power" (McCright and Dunlap in Kulcsar *et al*, 351) shape material existence at an uneven rate for rural and working class people. We can begin to understand

(erroneously, as Thomas Frank does in Hubbs) how one can begin to feel that their individual power to enact dominion over their own life can lead to a reactionary stance: clinging to *true* and *fundamental* things. Even Lefebvre, the Marxist champion of everyday life, takes a similar stance on “weird” European art, by claiming that it demotes the authentic realm of the mystical “with the marvellous acting as a halfway stage” to the *everyday*, or, “the realm of the public” (Lefebvre, 138-139).

For Lefebvre the significance of the mysterious cannot be paired with the significance of everyday life which is where his analysis lies. For outsiders looking in on “backwards places,” the everyday is a mysterious endeavour of “Bible Thumping.” Part of what is backwards about them is their perceived religiosity. These spaces are perceived as being “still real” and “still mysterious.” This underlies the critical bed of misunderstanding; where actions and intentions are misrepresented and reproduced by those who are acting and intending elsewhere. And yet, when attempting to generate an “indigenous” movement, Regionalism is still being produced as a fetish of rurality produced externally, and therefore, another misunderstanding.

In an attempt to disentangle himself from a site of critical power relations and loss of autonomy, Grant Wood further becomes both “awkward” and entangled. In an attempt to define what his own heritage might be, Wood further falls into the trap of producing landscapes produced by modernity. His act of resistance modifies and modernises the landscape while relegating the people who live with (as well as on and off of) it to the past. This position of past-people and future-commodities becomes further integrated into the idea of the American countryside when a second wave of agricultural boom emerges. Iowa Corn’s mission to produce the expert-image of farmers— teamed up with the Iowa Nice Guy’s liberal expert-culture persona— integrates rural America almost perfectly into a neoliberal market scheme. And yet, rural America is still Country music; inauthentic, pandering, formulaic.

The heritage landscape is produced elsewhere— even when expressly produced *en plain air* or “on-site” by an internal actor. To put this into perspective with *American Gothic*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coins the term *paranoid gothic*. Evans cites Sedgwick’s concept as relating to “the male hero [who] believes his inner thoughts may be read by an opposing figure whose dominance he alternately fears and desires” (Evans, 1491-1492). Grant’s inclusion of the Gothic summons images not only of “gothic windows” or

a “romantic nineteenth century context,” but of “gloom, terror, haunting, possession, decay, seduction, incest, and hidden perversions” (Biel in Evans, 1486-1487). One can also not forget the Goths, a Germanic barbarian people who were often at conflict with Rome, or, the civilised world at large. Evans goes on, after quoting Sedgwick, to state, “the public dimension of his imagery, then, always exists in tension with its opposing private character. Any notion that these works display a superficial folksiness—or indeed, that the artist does so himself—must be abandoned altogether” (Evans, 1494-1496). Whereas Evans almost likens an after-the-fact diagnosis of paranoia to establishing dialectical autonomy, I argue, as Sedgwick does elsewhere, that a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is overly historicised (Sedgwick, 125), and hence, a position which fails to take into account a spatial dialectic or a world outside of social construction, which, as Cresswell states, allows us to feel “that it is within human power to change it” (Cresswell, 30).

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