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Hope and Repair within the Western Skyline? Americana Music's Rural Heterotopia

Abstract

Set against a representation of much of rural America as an impoverished and socio-economically abandoned space, reaching out in desperation to the populism of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential elections, this paper seeks to probe more critically and carefully the everyday geographies (represented, practiced, lived) of this space. It does this through engaging its artistic expression within a branch of Country Music known as Americana and, more specifically, through the American West articulated in the songs of musician and author Willy Vlautin, expressed by his bands Richmond Fontaine and the Delines. The paper shows both Americana in general and Vlautin's songs in particular to predominantly present a bleak and brutal picture of what is termed 'abandoned rural America', depicting rural to small-city lives destroyed by both 'internal' and 'external' forces. Moreover, this grim condition seems little assuaged through the kinds of residential migration and more everyday mobilities that may be associated with the West's Frontier myth of salvation or today's supposed era of mobilities. However, through a Gibson-Graham inspired reading for difference and sensitised by Neil Campbell's idea of an affective critical regionality, an alternative story of a more positive if fragile rural geography can be identified. Vlautin's songs well express this geography of hope as rooted in recuperative liminal but often deeply emplaced 'pauses' within a gruelling everyday life-course. Indeed, the abandoned rural West can be seen to present heterotopic existential life-rafts to its 'drowning' people, a position rural spaces today can be seen to adopt more generally, expressing, in sum, an affective critical rurality.

Key words: Rural; Americana; Music; Anti-idyll; American West; Heterotopia

Hope and Repair within the Western Skyline? Americana Music's Rural Heterotopia

'There's a Western Skyline that I swear I can see
Where golden light shines down upon everything

...

Under Western Skyline you will be and
You'll be set free'

Western Skyline – Richmond Fontaine (2002)

1. Introduction: interrogating the conservative rural

Donald Trump's 2016 election as US President 'will be remembered', amongst other things, 'as the year the white rural voter roared' (Scala and Johnson 2017: 162). Explanation of this roar might at one level simply dismiss it as the tendency – far from unique to the US – for rural areas to be more politically conservative overall than the urban. However, paying deeper attention, the explanation – arguably also from a more sympathetic disposition – can emphasise a populist, anti-establishment response by rural residents feeling neglected and ignored by urban political elites (e.g. Bleakley 2018; Kurtzleben 2016; Lund 2016). One sees, in short, political consequences of what will be termed an 'abandoned rural America' (also Younge 2017) that, critically, goes much further and often in different directions to Trump-voting alone.

To date, however, abandoned rural America has been unevenly recognised by academia, popular culture and policy. On the one hand, it encompasses widely-acknowledged long-standing impoverished parts of the South, such as the Appalachia and Mississippi Delta examples in Duncan's (1999) *Worlds Apart*, and the legacy of the farm crisis from the 1980s (Fitchen 1991). On the other hand, a 'brain drain' reaching into the Mid-West (Carr and Kafalas 2009) is indicative of the emergence of wider distress stretching to the Pacific, from remote rural through to small-city places. This broad crisis is highlighted in Jennifer Sherman's engaged scholarship (e.g. Sage and Sherman 2014; Sherman 2009, 2014, 2017; Tickamyer *et al.* 2017). It encompasses places where 'economic distress has been building, life expectancy has been declining... and social conditions have been breaking down for decades' (Monnat and Brown 2017: 229), further reflected in social problems of poor health, alcohol and drug dependency, and crime.

The present paper counters the relative neglect – in spite of increased nominal recognition - of these ordinary rural landscapes of despair (Monnat and Brown 2017) through engaging anti-idyllic geographies of abandoned rural America that go beyond but nonetheless recognise its very real sense of crisis. It provides this reading via a branch of Country music

labelled 'Americana'. As already suggested for the rural Trump vote, the paper challenges 'easy' first-level associations between rurality and innate conservative reaction and progressive insignificance. Aspects of rural practices, representations and lives (Halfacree 2006a) can instead be exposed and read as expressed, imagined and lived critiques of mainstream everyday life. Moreover, they have potential to move from being anomalous to a 'polite' mainstream that ultimately return to the fold to instead inputting into a lasting critical, progressive and forward-facing 21st Century rural discursive alternative.

Two further issues merit introducing here in terms of how abandoned rural America is approached in the paper. First, and clearly pertinent for the present journal, is the understanding of 'rural'. Here, in line with scholarship since at least the 1990s (for example, Cloke *et al.* 1994; Halfacree 1993; Jones 1995), rural is seen less in absolute terms as a fixed kind of place but more relationally as expressing contextually significant contrast (rather than simply a binary opposite) to the 'big city'. Thus, for example, both the aforementioned Appalachian and Mississippi Delta regions contain urban centres but even these remain relationally 'rural' to regionally-nearby major cities such as New York or New Orleans, respectively. Second, abandoned rural America not only contains 'urban' sites but also frequently co-exists spatially with a very buoyant rural. For example, within the West - defined as the contiguous states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming - many rural counties illustrate both the relative prosperity that accompany their attractiveness for lifestyle migrants (Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Jobes 2000) and yet contain stark examples of abandoned America. Sherman's (2017) ethnographic research in Paradise Valley, Washington, powerfully illustrates such juxtaposition (also Kondo *et al.* 2012). In this context, the present paper's contribution to research into abandoned rural America is located within efforts to get beyond culturally powerful 'idyllic' ruralities and instead foreground the practices, representations and lives of often co-located ordinary 'rural Others' (Philo 1992).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, the case is made for studying music to interrogate contemporary rural realities. Second, the paper's epistemological perspective is further established through developing the idea of seeking out minor(ity) discourses all too easily drowned out by the vocal major(ity). Third, this approach is developed by engaging it for reading and understanding both the American West and Country music. Fourth, more specific empirical support illustrates further the value of this perspective through interrogation of the songs of Willy Vlautin. From this interrogation, fifth, a critical heterotopic rural spatiality is ultimately identified. Finally, in conclusion, these critical insights are proposed as relevant ingredients for a broader 'affective critical rurality'.

2. The place of music in rural studies

Geographies of music evolved strongly since 1990s' advocacy by scholars such as Kong (1995) and Smith (1997), through edited collections such as Leyshon *et al.* (1998) and

Connell and Gibson (2002), to now being well-established (Andrews *et al.* 2016). They are often placed today within broader sonic geographies (Anderson *et al.* 2005) or studies of the performing arts (Rogers 2012). Present-day attention may reflect belated appreciation of how '[m]usic is an integral part of the human experience' (Johansson and Bell 2009: 1) but geographies of music remain focused on numerous themes. These include music's entanglement and expression in and through: nation, group and individual identities; established or oppositional politics; musical scenes and genres; performance and (re)production; technology; lives of specific artists; emotional and affective atmospheres; and intersections with 'traditional' geographical themes, such as tourism and economics (Anderson *et al.* 2005; Andrews *et al.* 2016; Johansson and Bell 2009).

A recent trend within geographies of music has been towards performative, practiced and experiential or embodied dimensions, away from emphasis on product. Whilst in line with other developments within Human Geography, one should nonetheless be wary of establishing oppositional dualism between practice and product. Agreeing that 'what music and sound **do**' (Anderson *et al.* 2005: 642) is a highly fecund research direction, it should not be forgotten that one key thing music does is to articulate person, position and place – to represent. Indeed, geography and representation remain a central constitutive element for the arts (Rogers 2012). This includes musicians articulating lives lived, places experienced and socio-spatial imaginations. Clearly, it is insufficient just to 'map' music to place (Andrews *et al.* 2016). Instead, music's links to place must be seen in diverse and dynamic terms (Hudson 2006), including how it 'actively produces geographic discourses [that] can be used to understand broader social relations and trends' (Johansson and Bell 2009: 2). Such discourses are always plural and dynamic from the who, when, where, how and why of the representational process, including recognizing places themselves as 'neither discrete nor static' (Andrews *et al.* 2016: 11).

In terms of places represented, geographies of music have focused primarily on the city (Hudson 2006; Yarwood and Charlton 2009), as with the general artistic imaginary (Rogers 2012). Nonetheless, recent decades have seen growth of scholarship engaging more rural places and experiences. The foci of these studies mirror the aforementioned diversity of work within geographies of music overall but notably give attention to place promotion (e.g. Gibson and Davidson 2004; Kneafsey 2002) and the complex mutuality of place and music (e.g. Halfacree 2009; Yarwood and Charlton 2009).

Broader scholarship beyond Geography has noted which kinds of rural are represented within specific types of music. Predominant have been pastoral or idyllic rural expressions, often in distinctly utopian guise. This is epitomised by Young (2010) in the classical–folk–popular crossover: from Vaughan Williams's Classical *Lark Ascending* (1914), drawing from and leading into the Folk tradition, through Fairport Convention's pioneering Folk-Rock *Liege and Lief* (1969), to the 1980s electronic Pop of Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden* (1988). Prominent has been 'the ideal of "getting back to the garden"... Romantic yearning for an intense communion with nature and the desire to reclaim a stolen innocence' (Young 2010:

7). Nowhere is this imaginary stronger than within music orbiting the countercultural 'back-to-the-land' movement (Halfacree 2006b), representing the rural as an 'escape' from modern life; an 'inward exodus' (Young 2010: 45), both spatial and embodied through lifestyle (Halfacree 2009, 2016).

Less idyllic, utopian, green and/or village-based rurals, especially of an everyday prosaic nature, are less commonly expressed within music, except by Folk and Country. However, whilst Folk frequently articulates the rural as dangerous, even murderous (Leech 2010; Young 2010), its frequently fantastical and historical tone rarely challenges an idyllic rural today, notwithstanding exceptions such as *Show of Hands* (Yarwood and Charlton 2009). Country thus represents the musical tradition most consistently presenting a everyday down-to-earth rural. Here, emplacing mostly the White working-class in hyper-real everyday gritty contexts is rooted in and evokes a broader geographical imaginary (Mann 2008). Politically, whilst typically associated with conservative or reactionary positions (Fay 2014), it can also articulate art's challenges to accepted framings and understandings (Campbell 2016). It can 'flirt with space' in order 'to attend to people's living in the world' (Crouch 2010: 125). However, to appreciate better Country music's ability to 'provide... a window into... complex ruralities' (Yarwood and Charlton 2009: 205) one must 'read for difference', introduced next.

3. Reading for difference and recognising suppressed diversity

'The ordinary can become extraordinary not by eclipsing the everyday... but by fully appropriating and activating the possibilities that lie hidden, and typically repressed, within it' (Gardiner 2006: 207).

'Conquer the major language in order to delineate in it as yet unknown minor languages. Use the minor language to **send the major language racing**' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 105).

The introduction suggested both how Trump's rural electoral success can be read at one level as reflecting a more general and well-established rural conservative norm but also how it expresses the less disciplined cries of an abandoned rural America. This second reading, when excavated more explicitly and carefully, has the potential for being interpreted rather more uncomfortably relative to the first reading than it may initially appear; there may be surprises in store from the extraordinary within the ordinary (Halfacree 2007). To tease out this suppressed or perhaps just overlooked additionality, one can adopt a strategy of 'reading for difference'.

Reading for difference was defined by Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Gibson-Graham 2006) but underpinned their whole Gibson-Graham project. Earlier (Gibson-Graham 1996), they had advocated a neo-Gramscian approach to looking at dominant forms of representation to understand 'the current discursive dominance

attributed to capitalist economic systems' (Harris 2009: 60) when in practice such systems are far from being **so** dominant within the economics of everyday life. A means to challenge the totalising and encompassing character of 'any ideologically inscribed totality' (*ibid.*) is through '[r]eading for difference rather than dominance' (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxxi-xxxii). Instead of reiterating and consequently reinforcing, albeit often unintentionally, ubiquitous dominant representations, the aim is to uncover 'what is possible but obscured from view' (*ibid.*: xxxi). Refusing the reductive integrationism of 'masterful knowing' (*ibid.*: 6), one can epistemologically draw out, detail and recognise more fully 'future possibilities [that then] **become more viable by virtue of already being seen to exist**' (*ibid.*: xxxi, emphasis added).

Application of reading for difference need not be restricted to recognising Gibson-Graham's 'diverse economies'. Turning to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987: 105; also Campbell 2016) terminology, there are many situations whereby an already-existing but neglected 'minor language' can become better acknowledged and, not least from being already existing and grounded, subsequently rise to challenge 'major language' dominance (e.g. Harris 2009; Holloway 2010). Within even the most mundane and mainstream features of daily life frequently lurk alternative and even subversive currents. For instance, within counterurban residential migration to more rural areas (Barcus and Halfacree 2017), reading for difference of the motives for seeking a rural life, instead of emphasising often quite bland middle class lifestyle migration, can draw out how, through migration:

'[t]he rural becomes a space from which critical engagement with a dysfunctional world becomes grounded. It is represented as a life-raft in a stormy sea, with associated practices of existential and potentially critical empowerment' (Halfacree 2010: 256).

Gibson-Graham's political project fundamentally sought to promote the transformative potential of the minor language, not least reflecting their participatory engagement with often very deprived communities (Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2013; Roelvink *et al.* 2015). Thus, '[d]iverse economies research... sees its goal as **not only to imagine but perform economic difference**' (St Martin *et al.* 2015: 19, emphasis added). However, it is also vital to recognise less progressive outcomes. Instead of sending the major language racing, a minor language, once exposed, can not only be reabsorbed into the major language but also, as the Situationist's famously put it, recuperated, through being appropriated and redirected to support its former rival (Plant 1992).

More positively, there is the notable promotion of 'life' in the whole process of reading for difference. Whereas the major(ity) typically comes across, as in Gibson-Graham's scholarship, as a frozen TINA ('there is no alternative'²) grand narrative fixed states of being – rural America as conservative - the minor(ity) expresses a dynamic state of potential becoming, connected to 'human experience as it interacts relationally to the world around it' (Berberich *et al.* 2015: 3). Whilst this vitality helps to explain a major language desire to recuperate the minor, if the latter can emerge more fully and creatively - become

extraordinary - it may, indeed, send the major language racing. In short, 'beneath a seemingly bland exterior there can lie obscured, constrained and latent, but also challenging, irrepressible and potentially politically fecund, existential expressions' (Halfacree 2007: 99; also Solnit 2005).

Finally, 'life' within the teasing out of the minor language hints at how this process of reading should not necessarily be regarded as a single, one-stop operation. Instead, reading for difference potentially involves more than a single iteration. The 'original' minor language, in turn, may become named and treated as a new major language within which the presence of a new minor language can subsequently be sought. In other words, reading for difference can be a highly deconstructive process, deferral of any ultimate meaning additionally helping to resist its recuperation.

Bearing this overall highly dynamic and potentially transformative agenda in mind, reading the minor within the major is now introduced in more specific detail for both the 'American West' and 'Country music'. This, in turn, provides deconstructive grounding for subsequent presentation of the rural within Willy Vlautin's songs of the West through two levels of reading for difference.

4. Reading the West and Country differently: emplacing Americana

4.1 Life within the *Western Skyline*

A major language of the American West has attained strong representation not least through Frederick Jackson Turner's (1893) influential 'creation story for America' (Campbell and Kean 2006: 138). This tells of a land seen, notably from the eastern US, on the *Western Skyline* as a primitive Frontier wilderness to be conquered and civilised by assertive men (*sic.*) with values of freedom, independence, competition and self-sufficiency. However, this ideological West 'gunfighter nation' (Slotkin 1992) has had its 'discursive assumptions, textual representations, and cultural stereotypes' (Campbell 2016: 7) thoroughly subjected to critique and consequent relativizing repositioning (Campbell and Kean 2006) over time. Expressive of reading for difference, Campbell (2016: 3) notes efforts to 'interfere' with the myth 'in order to demonstrate alternative ways of thinking and being'. For example, Río Raigadas (2014, 2016; Chaparro Sainz *et al.* 2014), articulates outsiders' perspectives within Nevada fiction (including that of Willy Vlautin) and the highly urban rather than rural everyday articulated within much of it (also Lombardi 2013).

Consolidating these efforts to tease out the diversity of life within the West beyond the major language, Neil Campbell (2016) has developed, in contrast to constructing any rival major language of a new 'masterful' (Gibson-Graham 2006: 6) regionalism, what he terms an 'affective critical regionality'. This conjoins the region with the felt, dynamic, turbulent, responsive and heterogeneous sense of '-ity' instead of the taken-for-granted, static, settled, nostalgic and uniform '-ism'. As Campbell (2018a: 72) summarises it: '[t]o know a

place you are in, its people, its attunements and atmospheres... is never defined as a closed, single circle or vessel'. This re-imagining both challenges directly taken-for-granted, closed readings and recognises the radical disruptive power of the minor. Again in the spirit of Gibson-Graham, an affective critical regionality emphasises a humanism rooted in our 'contingency, precarity, and vulnerability' (Campbell 2016: 4). It attends to and asserts the specificity of local place, not as 'static, nostalgic, or reductive' but as 'interventionist in wider, more distanced or global projects' through a "gentle politics" (Crouch 2010) of empathy, vulnerability, exchange, responsibility, and relationality that refuses the uncontested and absolute vision' (Campbell 2016: 3, 13).

Reading for an affective critical regionality requires looking for expressions of/in the American West (or other spaces) that emphasize its diversity, within which are located grounded challenges to the status quo rooted less in an imaginary and highly settled past than in coming to terms with the everyday diverse experiences of a dynamic and changing present. Such a disposition is also apparent and expressed within some expressions of Country music when this genre is itself read for difference.

4.2 Americana within Country Music

'Somebody told me, when I came to Nashville
"Son, you finally got it made
Old Hank made it here, and we're all sure that you will"
But I don't think Hank done it this way'
Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way? – Waylon Jennings (1975)

Reflecting art's frequent entanglements with all facets of geography (Rogers 2012), both the major language of the West as rugged Frontier and its humanistic minor diverse alternatives are represented strongly through culture. This is the case with Country music. Moreover, Country's major language entanglement here with the West as Frontier has further intersected politically with media stories of Trump's electoral popularity in the rural US. Again, this association is at first sight unsurprising, as the genre is within its own major language widely associated conservative politics³ (Bernstein 2016; Garofalo 2007; Russell 2009; cf. Fay 2014; Willman 2005). Whilst Trump was not embraced as wholeheartedly as previous Republican Presidential candidates – not least because he was 'a billionaire New Yorker whose campaign... alienated women [Country's biggest market]' (Bernstein 2016: np) – articulation of small-town decline, economic hardship and struggles of everyday living in contemporary Country songs resonated both with the conditions of abandoned rural America and its corresponding general resentment towards the established political class (Bleakley 2018; Howard 2016). Consequently, a handful of Country stars explicitly endorsed Trump and played at his inauguration (BBC 2017; Bernstein 2016).

Nonetheless, it requires very little effort to read for difference and identify minor languages within Country music that clearly challenge this political positioning (Fay 2014; Willman 2005). Dissident voices are numerous. The Dixie Chicks's (in)famous opposition to the Iraq

War (2003) exemplified this, as have Kris Kristofferson's and Steve Earle's consistently maverick stands. Certainly, there is 'nothing inherent' (Russell 2009: 92) within Country that requires it to be politically right-wing. However, difference within Country is drawn out in the present paper through framing it within an insurgent offshoot that also demonstrates clear synergies with the previously-introduced affective critical regionality perspective on the American West. Thus, not only is the major language's politics challenged but also its wider geographical imagination. This offshoot is known by such names as Alt.country, Alternative Country, No Depression or Americana (Goodman 1999; Holt 2007; Peterson and Beal 2001; Russell 2009). The latter term, with its explicit citation of place, is adopted here.

Ching and Fox (2008: 3-4) characterised 'nonmainstream country music' (Americana) by 'an assortment of features', summarised by three key elements:

'a rhetoric of taste, ties to country tradition, and the cultivation of a contemporary, discerning community of liberal-minded fans distinct from the audience for mainstream country music'.

The first two elements, taste and tradition, immediately emphasise the difficulty of separating Americana from Country overall. Certainly, there is no clear or stable boundary, prompting a rejection of Americana as a distinctive genre with specific musical characteristics; it again mirrors regionality more than regionalism. Instead, Americana expresses a looser body of music that valorises and foregrounds a critical attitude of authenticity and integrity (Mulvey 2015), themselves both terms very challenging to pin down! Such interpretation reinforces how reading for difference is less about distinguishing sharply bounded categories inscribing absolute difference than about recognising and catalysing minor insurgent languages **within** a far from homogeneous whole.

Returning to Ching and Fox (2008), their first two elements are linked by a trope of 'cultural authenticity' (Kirby 2006). As hard as this concept also is to pin down (Peterson 1997, 2005), it expresses Americana's search to (re)claim Country as the voice of the everyday American working-class located in rural areas, towns or even small cities⁴ (Cooper 2012). This quest is set up in opposition to the supposed posturing, profit-driven and fly-by-night superficial 'Nashville mainstream' (Fay 2014; Peterson and Beal 2001). It is a contrast representative of long-standing recuperative tension within Country between slick mainstream commercialism and 'ragged' minority authenticity (Campbell and Kean 2006). Returned to shortly, this tension is well-expressed, for example, in the film *Crazy Heart* (2009, directed by Scott Cooper) or by Waylon Jennings's 'Are You Sure Hank [Williams] Done It This Way?' (1975).

Within Americana's critical 'authenticity', the affective also shines through strongly. Explicitly emplaced lives form a central element, with seeming love of specific named places, even in desperate situations, frequent. Elsewhere, cartographer Tim Robinson (2012: 30) observed how expressing place names is 'a creative force... [that] allocates value and... directs our care', and this seems an intention here. Nonetheless, emphasising how

Americana 'is not upbeat music' (Peterson and Beal 2001: 239), tales of 'booze, bars, and barflies' (Russell 2009: 134) entangling broken and desperate lives are typically set in 'forgotten, abandoned places' (Russell 2009: 145). Epitomising a 'lost small-town, working-class way of life' (Peterson and Beal 2001: 242), songs express longing for these places to be made 'comfortable' (Russell 2009: 109) once again⁵.

To contextualise this desire for a comfortable emplaced life, Ching and Fox's (2008) third key Americana element merits note, its liberal politics. Unlike mainstream Country, Americana sees less need for a Frontier struggle for assertive individual 'freedom' and more for embattled individuals to be better able to be(come) themselves within a more egalitarian quotidian. Russell (2009: 119) insightfully portrays this as a 'combination of the cultural politics of rock 'n' roll and [reclamation of] the economic populism of folk'. The aim is for 'a world of increased economic egalitarianism and concern, coupled with more personal freedoms and choice' (*ibid.*).

To further locate Americana, three key sources are introduced in Table 1, although the diversity of artists typically noted under the label (*cf.* Burchfield and Ching 2008; Hinton 2003; Peterson and Beal 2001; No Depression 2017) cautions against 'representativeness'. This implicitly reinforces the desire to avoid conclusiveness within reading for difference.

<Table 1 about here>

In summary, Americana appears well-set to express the minor language of an affective critical regionality of the American West as against Nashville Country's financially lucrative (Fay 2014) reiteration of the major language. It can articulate the anti-idyllic, even dystopian, rurality found within this region's share of abandoned rural America, whilst also spotting signs of hope; a minor language of a rural, challenging that of both the Country mainstream and geographical representations more generally. To illustrate these points in greater detail, the paper now explores the minor languages articulated in the worlds of the Americana songs narrated by Willy Vlautin. This exploration is given the plural as, in the earlier spirit of deconstruction, reading for difference involves more than one iteration. Vlautin was selected for this task as he is considered by the present author (also by numerous Americana-friendly journalists, such as Allan Jones, 2016) to be an especially lyrically articulate champion of an affective critical American West regionality (also Campbell 2016, 2018b).

5. Willy Vlautin's American West

5.1 Introducing Vlautin

'Back then, I thought it was romantic to have a tattoo on your neck and start drinking at 10 in the morning...' (Vlautin, quoted in O'Hagan 2016: np)

Born in 1967, musician and novelist Willy Vlautin was raised, together with an older brother, in Reno, Nevada, by a single mother in precarious employment (Clarke 2016; Gibney 2015a). Although Reno was relatively prosperous, with plenty of work (McGrath 2015a), Vlautin grew up around many who had fallen on hard times. He found himself 'attracted... to the harder side of life [and] felt more comfortable... there' (in Clarke 2016: np). Gambling, a central Reno feature, appealed but Vlautin describes his 'best friends' when growing up as 'my records, my books and the movies' (in O'Hagan 2016: np). Further describing himself as 'pretty lost as a kid... melancholic... [with] confidence problems' (*ibid.*), it is unsurprising that this clearly intelligent man did not excel at school. Indeed, before making a career from writing and music, Vlautin held several jobs giving him further insights into the working-class lives he has subsequently portrayed. This included working as a house painter for twelve years (McGrath 2015a). However, to divert from gambling and the dissolute lifestyle associated with it and to connect better with the Garage/Punk music scene, Vlautin relocated to Portland, Oregon (Berhorst 2002), where he eventually co-founded the band Richmond Fontaine in 1994. He is now resident in Scappoose, Oregon, a town of 6,500 people, 40 kilometres north of Portland in the logging country that inspired *The High Country* (2011).

From the outset, Vlautin's songs reflected strongly his life experiences in the American West, reinforcing his suitability for this paper. Acknowledging a debt to John Steinbeck (Barton 2014; McGrath 2015a), drifters featured prominently in 'semi-autobiographical blue collar tales of lives on the edge' (Clarkson 2005: 3). Whilst characters are frequently 'worried and concerned and scared' (in McGrath 2015a: np), they 'tend not to blame others for their plight' (Wierzbicki 2016: np). Nonetheless, Vlautin articulates critical social messages, reflecting themes such as workers' rights, US foreign policy and wars where 'working class guys get killed, and rich people get richer' (in Gibney 2015a: np), and portrays a sense of working people betrayed by the American dream his conservative mother strongly endorsed (Clarke 2016; McGrath 2015a). Also consistent is a liberal humanism, Vlautin observing how '[y]ou meet people every day who are kind and decent' (in McGrath 2015a: np). In summary, Freeman (2014: 2) depicts him as a 'champion of the plight of America's underclass... [with] a fantastic ability to pull the tiniest shred of beauty from the most depressing situation'.

Between 1994 and Richmond Fontaine amicably calling it a day in 2016, the band released ten 'original' albums (Table 2), plus one after formal dissolution. Always more popular in Europe than the US (common for Americana), they staked their identity on portraying 'gnarled Americana' (Freeman 2016: np). Indeed, Vlautin continues this musical strain with a new band. Formed in 2012, the Delines are fronted by singer Amy Boone, an established musician who rejects 'newer more commercial country [that] has this strange fake thing going on' (in Gibney 2015b: np). Their two albums to date (Table 2) remain 'deep rooted in the everyday alienation of working people' (McGrath 2015b: np).

<Table 2 about here>

As noted, Vlautin is also an acclaimed novelist. He has published five novels since 2006, two of which have been turned into feature films. These novels have begun to be widely cited in academic literature (Campbell 2018b)⁶ and articulate the affective critical regionality advocated earlier (e.g. Berberich *et al.* 2015; Campbell 2016; Río Raigadas 2016). However, the present paper focuses on Vlautin's songs, due to space constraints and to complement the attention the novels are receiving.

5.2 Vlautin's Geographies

True to the minor language of Americana in general, geographical setting and detail of place are both vital and foregrounded elements in Vlautin's songs⁷ (Wierzbicki 2016), with precise landmark references frequently explicit. Regionally, the American West stands out especially strongly: from *Thirteen Cities's* southern deserts, to the Oregon and California featured prominently in *Post to Wire*, to *The Fitzgerald's* base in Reno, to the terrifying isolated Oregon woods' logging community of *The High Country*, to the middle-aged returnees of *You Can't Go Back...* Whilst Vlautin himself may not be plausible as the protagonist not knowing where *Dayton, Ohio* is in the eponymous opening of *Safety* (1996), Richmond Fontaine's songs consistently orientate around the *Thirteen Cities*. These were first acknowledged as circumscribing a life in *Four Hours Out* (1999), where a 'never ending haul of movement' between them across 'seven years' resolves little for the protagonist as 'nothing appeared' (Table 3).

<Table 3 about here>

Whilst seven of the thirteen cities have populations in excess of 200,000, others are very small and would provoke few objections to be classed as 'rural'. In addition, apart from Reno, few of the cities themselves feature, except in passing, within Vlautin's songs. This reinforces a sense that the majority of the songs are located in and speak of the rural American West, certainly when the rural is understood in the relational manner suggested earlier, whereby experiences articulated are marked, explicitly or implicitly, as different to those of 'city life'. Put slightly differently, whilst Vlautin's songs make some 'big city' and a few 'deep rural' excursions, they are 'set mostly in the great swarming emptiness of an unlit America' (Jones 2009: np), the in-between places that epitomise abandoned rural America. They articulate an uncertain and frequently dying rural and small-town everyday.

To further summarise Vlautin's geographical focus, consider Winnemucca, Nevada, a settlement of around 7,500 people located at 'the cross-road linking the northern route on US Highway 95 from Oregon and Idaho to Interstate 80' (Winnemucca 2017: np) and prosaically styling itself 'The City of Paved Streets'. For Richmond Fontaine, *Winnemucca* was the title of their 2002 album⁸ but also named as the place being run away from in *Give Me Time* (1997). As Vlautin explains, it was where he used to go when he lived in Reno 'to gamble, and drink, and hide' (in Berhorst 2002: np). The *Winnemucca* album was also influenced by Allison Anders's 1992 film *Gas Food Lodging*, in which a middle-aged waitress struggles to raise two teenage daughters in a trailer park as a single parent. The film⁹ is

sampled on the album's opening track, *Winner's Casino* (2002), which also name-checks Winnemucca and has a final verse that summarises Vlautin's overarching message:

'It doesn't have to be that town
I've just always liked it there
At least if I lose myself
It'll be in a place that felt clear
And all I ask is for a little money and some time
And maybe I'll be sane for a while'.

Elements of this message are now elaborated via four themes present in Vlautin's songs.

6. Dystopia and Beyond: Reading for Difference the *Western Skyline*

6.1 Introduction: Living within *Four Walls*

In spite of its name, Richmond Fontaine's *Four Walls* (2007) speaks less of the security of housing or the home and more of how finding oneself within such a spatial configuration may 'lock us in' - suggesting incarceration - but also how this experience is not all bad. This positive element is because 'nothing can get in', including (war-related) 'stories from overseas' and other tales of loss. With a few basic goods, such as beer, music and, interestingly, an atlas, Vlautin suggests that '[a]ll we need is a window with moonlight coming through the trees' to be relatively comfortable, at least for a while...

This sense of possible existential asylum from various currents of distress, local and global, albeit always provisional and precarious and thus very often highly temporary and transient, is ultimately developed in this section. It draws on Vlautin's four-fold *Four Walls* structure to present, overall, his minor language of an abandoned rural American West relative to the major language of the West, articulated, *inter alia*, by mainstream Country. But, in addition and through a further iteration of reading for difference, this section presents one element of this reading as suggestive of substantive positivity. It is a minor language **within** Vlautin's minor language that expresses a modest hope. This is understood here, via Solnit (2005: 5), as 'another world [that] might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed', an essential positivity for survival in abandoned rural America today.

The four themes are taken from across Vlautin's songs. The first two express his 'black road' (in Clarkson 2005: 7), whereby the individual becomes victim via local / internal / inward-looking and/or global / external / outward-looking forces. In contrast, the two others demonstrate how Vlautin sees his 'characters... [still] in the fight. Regardless of what pressures they are under, they still get up each morning and try and get to a better place' (in Freeman 2014: 6). Yet, how well they emerge from this fight varies, only one strategy – the minor language within the minor language - suggesting potentially benign but qualified resolution. Put differently, only one 'wall' has the 'window' allowing a glimpse of the desired *Western Skyline* although, somewhat ironically but as in *Four Walls*, it is best to stay

within and not actively seek out any elusive utopian Frontier. There is no gold to be found at this rainbow's end. In short, and developed further in the paper's next section, an **internal** reading for difference of Vlautin's songs ultimately sees rejection of the distanced utopianism of the *Western Skyline* (good only for the dying man in the song) and instead embraces a heterotopic *Hope and Repair* that, with effort, may be found within.

6.2 A black road: 1. Inward-looking victimhood

A rural and small-town/-city anti-idyll comes through very strongly in Vlautin's articulation of the broken lives of many of his protagonists. However, the 'black road' they have travelled and mostly continue along can be seen either in localised terms or as more a product of extra-local forces and agents seemingly outside their control. The former is more common but, in either case, the dismal array of wrecked characters is the same: alcoholics, drug abusers, battered wives and children, lonely and isolated individuals, sick people without healthcare, gamblers and debtors, deserted partners, the mentally unstable. All are poor. All are representatives of the landscapes of despair of the abandoned rural West (Monnatt and Brown 2017).

An inward-looking sense of victimhood speaks of over-local, excessively parochial lives, or at least the lives led when the song is set. Place within this theme is an opportunity-free and emotional desert, a prison and somewhere affecting individual despair and self-destruction. Only later will the paper show it also having positive elements within a minor language within Vlautin's overall language.

First, the Thirteen Cities area is depicted as inscribing places with no opportunities (anymore) for economic and emotional fulfilment. This scenario is often given a strong temporal dimension, protagonists returning to their home town, often broke, but finding nothing there any more for them. Thus, the abandoned returnee in *I Got Off the Bus* (2016) is homeless and isolated in a place he no longer recognises and is eventually driven away from again by police. Likewise, in *Black Road* (2005), return by plane to Reno may have been 'on a clear day' but the character is soon broke, drunk and dangerously alone. Even memories of places triggered by return are not always nostalgic and *I Can't Black It Out if I Wake Up and Remember* (2016). No opportunities are commonplace for those who stayed, too, *Wilson Dunlap's* (2007b) narrator despairing over people he knew on a night when 'it feels like nothing's ever going to turn out right'. A repressively parochial 'belted and constricted' (*Evergreen Power Line*, 1997) existence offers little chance of rising above a voyeur of the American dream's 'parked cars and lawns and other people's homes' (*St. Ides, Parked Cars, and Other People's Homes*, 2007a). Even coming into a small (\$1400) inheritance sees the recipient robbed by his step-brother (*Cascade*, 1999).

Second, Vlautin's places can 'obliterat[e the person] by time' (*Settle*, 1996) and they often become either literally trapped and imprisoned within their *Four Walls* or drift as 'ghosts' through life (*A Ghost I Became*, 2007a; *I'm Just A Ghost*, 2014). Growing isolation is frequently reinforced by relationship breakdown and ill health. The former can lead to solo

drinking and sleeping in the car as the protagonist sees no point going home (*Two Alone*, 2009; *A Night in the City*, 2016), nostalgia for times with a lover when both were *Two Friends Lost at Sea* (2016), a mother 'lock[ing] herself in her room' and neglecting her child (*Willamette*, 2004), and the madness of having 'disappeared into heartache' (*Disappeared*, 2005). Domestic imprisonment from ill health is mostly indirect – related to a partner (*McDermitt*, 1997) or observed, as in the aftermath of a supposed suicide attempt (*Concussion*, 1997).

Third, hope-less and imprisoning places affect an atmosphere of despair that is responded to in numerous anti-social and self-destructive ways. These include widespread drink and drug abuse (numerous), sexual promiscuity (*Willamette*, 2004; *The Boyfriends*, 2009) and sometimes madness (*Hallway*, 2004). Such a life-course can be given deep roots (*Maybe We Were Both Born Blue*, 2009) and to some degree become accepted (*I Got My Shadows*, 2014). However, Vlautin's strong sense of morality sometimes emerges sharply, as in disgust shown in the exploitation of unregistered Mexican immigrants (*I Fell into Painting Houses in Phoenix, Arizona*, 2007a) or in the sexual exploitation of a teenage addict (*\$87 and a Guilty Conscience that Gets Worse the Longer I Go*, 2007a). Indeed, whilst Vlautin is clearly not the protagonist in all his songs, he is never far away, reinforcing their strong sense of authenticity.

6.3 A black road: 2. Outward-looking victimhood

Vlautin also conveys a theme of people brought low by more external factors. Yet, unlike much of the rhetoric that helped elect Trump (Bleakley 2018) and is expressed in right-wing political currents within Country music, he does not articulate this as an anti-globalisation (*sic.*) targeting distant spectres of foreign capital, unregistered immigrants or a liberal world order. Instead, through similar scenarios of lack of opportunity, entrapment and despair, Vlautin's focus is on dwelt places lacking key individuals and opportunities and/or (threatened with) being pulled apart. Many of these absences tie into the theme of embracing mobility, examined next, yet can also be seen as being proximately caused by such mobilities (Milbourne and Kitchen 2014).

First, loss of people disrupting an emplaced life can be from work demands. Examples include: the harrowing tale of an absent truck driver who 'never calls home' but engages cheap truck-stop prostitutes whilst his wife 'falls to her knees... drinks vodka, takes Valium and watches TV' (*White Line Fever*, 1996); someone who has 'never been so uncertain or scared or alone' after going to work in the city (*Montgomery Park*, 2003); or the former roofer friends getting caught up in and taken away by the drugs trade (*Lost Son*, 1999).

Second, there are absences of departed loved ones. Prominent are missed lovers, where 'the world unravels without you' (*Wichita Ain't So Far Away*, 2014): a partner who 'lay... back on a lawn chair... watching contrails disappear from the sky' (*Contrails*, 1999); a disappeared prostitute girlfriend (*Hope and Repair*, 1999); or a girlfriend 'lost', with consequent 'isolation... my biggest fear' (*Northline*, 2002). Absence of other loved ones can

also disrupt everyday dwelling: a missing Merchant Marine brother (*Willamette*, 2004); sitting with an Army deserter cousin, both missing his dead brother (*Exit 194B*, 2005); a vanished father (*Polaroid*, 2004); even the abducted (*Trembling Leaves*, 1997) or someone who has embraced neo-Nazism and subsequently disappeared (*The Disappearance of Ray Norton*, 2007a).

Third, dwelt places are not just threatened by loss of key people but also through being pulled apart by 'external' forces. Here, the economic features prominently, albeit often indirectly. The precarity of *The Warehouse Life* (2005) is indicative of a general lack of economic security. Economically-embedded insecurity extends to a teenage narrator's constantly departing brother, for whom a desperate 'spray painting the [apartment] windows black' might keep him there longer by fooling him it is still night (*Under Florescent Lights*, 1997). The economic is also heavily implicated in how the armed services take people away. Whilst they may return, they are usually scarred: Angus King (*The Chainsaw Sea*, 2011) had not 'left his house... since 2003', having left the army in the 1970s 'addicted to speed'.

Fourth, threats to settled place also come from many other directions: potential to be arrested, as in a middle-aged man 'growing weed' to stave-off bankruptcy afraid the full weight of authority is 'going to hit' (*43*, 2009); pull of loved ones elsewhere, such as the partner pining for her son two states and 1000 miles away (*The Longer You Wait*, 2004); and even threat of urban sprawl ending the (rural) West (*The Water Wars*, 2007b).

Overall, whether parochial or more distributed, the strong 'black road' underpinning Vlautin's minor language portrays the abandoned rural to small-city American West as a thoroughly alienated and thereby alienating place: 'broken, blown, lost, and blue' (*Warehouse Life*, 2005). Yet, in spite of such existential bleakness, Vlautin's characters are often far from passive or static. They try to counter the 'black road' and (re)discover a more secure and empowering sense of place. The abandoned rural West is thus not completely a done deal, not completely reducible to a landscape of affective despair; it is instead a landscape of kinetic regionality not of static regionalism. How Vlautin's characters consequently actively attempt to deal with their alienation is thus considered next. This is done, first, by continuing with the minor language that has been challenging the Country mainstream. This sees an embracing of the mobility that has been seen as underpinning much of the, appropriately metaphorical, 'black road' so far introduced. However, attention then switches to a minor language **within** Vlautin's lyrical representations, whereby protagonists come to terms with their victim status not by seeking to flee but through appropriately grounded, albeit fragile, recuperative spaces.

6.4 In the fight: 1. embracing mobility

Rusty James: How was the ocean?

The Motorcycle Boy: I didn't get to the ocean.

Rusty James: No?

The Motorcycle Boy: California got in the way...
(*Rumble Fish* 1983, directed by Francis Ford Coppola)

In a supposed 'era of mobilities' (Barcus and Halfacree 2017) it is perhaps unsurprising that becoming mobile is a key tactic in Vlautin's characters' attempt to fight back. This, of course, also fits the trope of personal mobility central to mainstream US culture generally and to the Frontier myth in particular (Campbell and Kean 2006). Vlautin's characters express this tactic strongly, a dynamic sense of movement frequently contrasting powerfully with the alternative stasis of being trapped, discussed above. This contrast is sometimes apparent within individual songs. In *White Line Fever* (1996), *Under Florescent Lights* (1997) and *Willamette* (2004), highly geographically constrained lives of a wife, teenage boy, and wife and narrator contrast with the high mobility trucker husband, older brother and disappeared older brother, respectively. This promise and experience of mobility haunting Vlautin's geographies of the abandoned rural West additionally indicates a rural geography much more dynamic than on first appearance. These 'rural mobilities' (Milbourne and Kitchen 2014) can be summarised by flight and general mobility.

First, the promise of escape or flight surfaces within the eventful lives of many characters, even if unrealised. It is a theme pervading the whole of *The High Country*, with *The Mechanic's Life* (2011) concluding that '[i]t ain't always wrong to give up and run'. Of course, when he and his lover do run, murder ensues. Although usually less extreme, the experience of flight is almost always presented as at best ambiguous and uncertain within the typically never-conclusive stories Vlautin tells. This positions mobility and migration more as eventful and continuous experiences than as tightly-bounded instrumental acts (Barcus and Halfacree 2017). Consequently, all that is often provided at best is renewed hope: for the runaway who escapes a brutal everyday to be welcomed by his aunt on her ranch (*Laramie, Wyoming*, 2005); in the yearning for friends to be *Always on the Ride* (2004), even whilst noting the negative experiences this has led them into; or, still more ambiguously, for the sister doing a 4am flip after an 'emergency' (*Casino Lights*, 2005); or the plan to flee a now-loveless marriage before a husband returns from the Gulf of Mexico oil rigs (*The Oil Rigs At Night*, 2014). Still more often, initial hope seems soon overwhelmed by sinister outcomes and anticipations: a physically abused woman flees to a placeless 'foreign' life away from all relatives and friends but can only be assuaged by spending 'nights in the bathtub just to calm her nerves' (*Don't Look and it Won't Hurt*, 2005); a *Fifteen Year Old Kid in Nogales, Mexico* (1999) steals money and sells possessions to flee from another broken home but wrecks the car he is driving for an 'old American lady', who is also killed in the accident; or 'redemption failed and unattainable' for a desperate woman making one 'last call' home (*Watsonville Waltz*, 1996).

Flight is, moreover, not always possible, demonstrating how Vlautin appreciates immobility as outcome even when the 'logical' option seems to be to move away (Barcus and Halfacree 2017). *Give Me Time's* (1997) narrator can never get further than 20 miles from Winnemucca before memory of being metaphorically drowned and blinded by the city's 'bright lights' gets the better of him/her and pulls them back. Another frustrated escapee

cannot get beyond the *State Line* (2014) – they ‘still can’t escape that home’ - even though ‘no place do I find home’. Likewise, for the native American with nowhere to call home, ‘every time I try to leave I always end up back at this place’ (*Song for James Welch*, 2007b). These perhaps unexpected turns of event begin to suggest the stronger pull and grounded potential of a more emplaced liminal ‘disappearance’ discussed in the next section.

Besides flight, attempts to survive may seek to adopt more general mobility. In transport, this often involves a bus, where characters are given space-time to reflect on their life. Often this does not end well, though, with resulting anxiety causing self-harm (*Ft. Lewis*, 1996) or, after observing other broken characters, not making it to the destination but getting off the bus in just a T-shirt in a snowstorm (*Five Degrees Below Zero*, 2002)! Even when they do arrive, characters often find, as already noted, ‘nothing to go back to’ (*I Got Off the Bus*, 2016). Indeed, general mobility, whether for work (*Whitey and Me*, 2016), to atone for past behaviour (*Capsized*, 2007a), for love (*Ruby and Lou*, 2009), or seemingly just to drift (*\$87 and a Guilty Conscience...*, 2007a; ‘postcard’ spoken inserts in *Post to Wire*) generally resolves as little as flight.

In summary, Vlautin suggests (also in his books) how little reward may come from embracing the era of mobilities or the supposed ‘mobility and regeneration’ (Río Raigadas 2016: 45) of the Frontier myth. Expressing ‘a never ending haul of movement where nothing appeared except 13 cities in 7 years’ (*Four Hours Out*, 1999) frequently awards the person just a ‘motel life’ (Vlautin 2006). Unlike its childhood appeal, this is not ‘much of a life, and a motel ain’t much of a home’, even if ‘a house ain’t either’ (*Westward Ho*, 2007a). And, returning to more focused migration as a solution to life’s woes, Vlautin also mostly rules this out. For example, the partner of a man for whom the city is ‘killing him’ gives up her job, leaves her friends and uses her savings to relocate to the desert, only for him then to claim ‘the desert was killing him’ and so they move again (*He Told Her the City was Killing Him*, 2014). Elsewhere, initially therapeutic spending of more and more time in the desert, where it is ‘[a]lways sunny and never gray no noise just wind and sage’, ultimately takes the protagonist so ‘farther out and away’ that *A Ghost I Became* (2007a). Except as inspirational palliative for a dying man¹⁰, actively seeking the *Western Skyline* (2002), where ‘you will be and you’ll be set free’, is thus to pursue a dishonest and even dangerous delusion. Vlautin’s characters thereby metaphorically resemble the Coppola’s doomed Motorcycle Boy in *Rumble Fish*, quoted above, who never reaches the ocean because the land gets in the way and who eventually returns home to die. If not to mobility, then, to what can Vlautin’s desperate characters turn? What existential resources can be found in his abandoned rural West?

6.5 In the fight: 2. embracing embeddedness

‘[S]ometimes... if you leave... you end up... worse [than] if you give up’ (*Five Degrees Below Zero*, 2002).

Thus far, whilst Vlautin’s Americana minor story has been shown to paint a distinctively different picture of the American West to that depicted in the romanticised hopeful Frontier major story, it is – frankly – a bleak dystopian representation. As such, it is a narrative one

can easily appreciate being taken up and recuperated by politicians such as Donald Trump for their own ends (Bleakley 2018). However, crucially, this is not the end of Vlautin's narrative. In addition, reading for difference can be applied to his own story of the American West, holding Vlautin's dominant representation to one side and seeking out that which this discourse obscures from view. Doing this, it can be seen that those 'in the flight' not only, and may indeed not even, embrace mobility but can seek instead to construct something from their seeming immobile 'defeat'. This, ultimately, presents more hope for life in the abandoned rural West.

Willy Vlautin himself, early in life, recognised how he found 'redemption... in the music' (Brannan 1996: np), a ubiquitous part of his everyday. Consequently, at this stage it is worth diverting briefly from the main narrative to note the broader positivity of Vlautin's songs (and books). This paper has focused almost exclusively on Vlautin's lyrics for Richmond Fontaine and the Delines but both the music and the performance of the songs merit at least some brief attention. First, the music is often uplifting and aesthetically rewarding, notwithstanding the song lyrics. This always allows retention of a sense of hope and positivity, even for a song as lyrically bleak as *White Line Fever* (1996), as a 2009 performance accessible at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YavJqnA_dBU readily attests (in spite of low recording quality). Fuller analysis of Vlautin's songs that incorporated the music more fully, which the present author is unfortunately unable to undertake, would surely reinforce this point. Second, positivity is reinforced from the author's experience of attending many live concerts by both Richmond Fontaine and the Delines, where both audience and band were consistently friendly and upbeat. Performative positivity is also apparent on live recordings, such as Richmond Fontaine's *Whiskey, Painkillers and Speed* (2001), *Live at the Doug Fir Lounge* (2005) and *Postcard from Portland* (2010). In other words, the actual sound and reception of Vlautin's songs challenges his bleak lyrical narrative of a 'black road' seemingly inescapable by mobility and thereby contextually reinforces a much more positive story within his critical Americana.

Reading for difference **within** the always-being-lived everyday lives narrated in Vlautin's songs reveals how his characters often find existential revitalisation or even just the will to go on in snatched places and times bracketed-out from the main flows of life going on through and around them. They seize usually liminal opportunities to recover – a different sense of recuperation to that used earlier - even if this is sometimes at considerable cost in financial or health terms. Unlike the mobility response, these invigorating disruptions – recuperative time-spaces - frequently re-state local embeddedness and re-assert positive existential values represented by the rejected mobility response as anachronistic and anachronistic 'abandoned geographies'.

As suggested, these recuperative spaces can be very everyday or ordinary and yet still provide their positive break from a bleak norm. They certainly need not be exotic, novel or unfamiliar. Their role is to provide a degree of sheltered stability and certainty within the seemingly unending landscapes of the immediate present. They are pauses in a life-course that allow an affective atmosphere of content, comfort and consolidation - more than anything explicitly fantastic - to emerge, establish and be appreciated. The need,

reiterating, comes from being *Lost in this World* (2007a), a quotidian ‘feel[ing] so through’ (*Through*, 2004). Geographically, this is to deal with a far from static rural West – stasis often generally suggested in rural representations (Milbourne and Kitchen 2014) – that is inexorably part of ‘a lost and spinning world full of unquestionable brutality’ (*Hope and Repair*, 1999).

First, returning to or staying in the (family) home can express a recuperative space, even though previous sub-sections cautioned how unrewarding home town return often is. *You Can Move Back Here* (2009) addresses someone, voice having become ‘shaky and weird’, now living in a big city where ‘subways... run all night[, e]verything costs so much [and you are a]lone with neighbors on every side’. Come home, the song pleads, as ‘you don’t have to be anything here’ and ‘you’ll have the Western sky and me on your side’. Thus, whilst ‘[w]ars will never stop nor destruction and pain’, when a partner returns home on *Flight 31* (2014) ‘I’ll just drown in your arms’.

Reflecting the transience and uncertainty of recuperative spaces, whether coming home works, especially in the longer-term, remains notably uncertain. This was shown earlier, again demonstrating overlaps between supposedly rival languages. It is reiterated in *Moving Back Home #2* (2007a), where bad habits find the narrator still ‘trying to find the sun coming up somewhere’. On the other hand, being forced from home can be wrenching, as when, being driven to a spell of incarceration in *Santiam* (2002) minimum-security prison, a convict desires to ‘memorize every street and club and restaurant’. Even warehouses and street children ‘have some sort of hold’. In sum, on *The Fitzgerald’s* deliberately-concluding more upbeat track (Clarkson 2005), at 3am after a night out, now being home with a partner gives repose: ‘lights... all covered and dim... [with] nothing but a gentle ease here... and you and me and our whole place, we’re okay’ (*Making it Back*, 2005). Better, then, for *The Kid from Belmont Street* (2007a) to ‘stay here’ and not ‘get into a car with people you don’t know’ (later to be dumped on Denver’s infamously seedy Colfax Avenue, Wikipedia 2018; *Kid from Belmont Street Get [sic.] Left on Colfax St. Denver, CO*, 2007b).

Second, it can be just a modest single room that provides the key recuperative space, as *Four Walls* (2007a) explicitly suggested earlier. Such rooms are diverse: kitchen (*Making it Back*, 2005); one-room apartment where the narrator wants his brother to stay with him (*Under Florescent Lights*, 1997); the spatial intimacy of ‘[s]hut the curtains, put a blanket over them, we don’t need to see that today’ (*Out of State*, 2002); in a bedroom drinking gin with a partner after *Calling In* (2014) sick to ‘stay in bed and watch the day fade’; or the motel room sanctuary with her devoted hospital janitor for the possibly-dying battered wife (*The Janitor*, 2005). In short: ‘I can see a room, a place for me and you... We won’t bother anyone and everyone will just let us be’ (*I Can See a Room*, 2011), as ‘[d]arkness ain’t such a hard road if we don’t go down it alone’ (*Calling In*, 2014).

Third, the existential value of togetherness usually implied by the single room is made still more explicit in a number of songs. Typically, this involves naming a string of specific events that, in combination, lay out how *Two Broken Hearts* (2004) ‘together might not be broken’. Events are expressed via memories, as in the latter, *A Letter to the Patron Saint of Nurses* (2009) or *Easy Run’s* (2016) despairing wish for lost domestic bliss, or via dreams of modest

future domesticity, from hope of ‘clothes... intertwined on the floor together’ (*Allison Johnson*, 2004) to the ‘worn out’ pair’s desires in *Post to Wire* (2004). Rewards from sticking together generally also come through in the previously-noted emphasis on home, reiterated by the isolated three brothers living together in a single room and then a van in *Three Brothers Roll into Town* (2016). Once more though, precariousness always haunts empowering togetherness – *in extremis* in the lovers’ snatched moments before tragedy in *The Eagle’s Lodge* (2011).

Fourth, liminal transience is reinforced still more through ‘other spaces’ where existential recuperation is found. Thus, Vlautin suggests how when someone ‘need[s] some time to drop below that line’ (*Winner’s Casino*, 2002) they can go somewhere such as Winnemucca on a ‘[t]hree day vacation... [where w]hile you’re sitting next to me laughing... I’m barely losing’ (*Barely Losing*, 2004). This clearly will not last, even if just financially. Likewise, bars feature prominently as such temporarily rewarding spaces, from the desire of *Let’s Hit One More Place* (2016) to rekindle past togetherness, to ‘trying to calm down’ in ‘bars where it must be dark and the music must be slow’ (*Calm*, 1997). Other recuperative spaces range from a trespassed deserted house (*We Used to Think the Freeway Sounded Like a River*, 2009), with its swimming pool (*El Cortez*, 1999), to late-night walking (*Calm*, 1997) or river swimming (*Gold Dreaming*, 1996), and even to a phone booth *Somewhere Near* (2002), where embracing a frozen partner reasserts how ‘I knew I could feel good’.

7. Heterotopia within the *Western Skyline*

‘Heterotopia are not quite spaces of transition – the chasm they represent can never be closed up – but they are space[s] of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being’ (Hetherington 1997: ix).

Vlautin’s minor language showing the seemingly desiccated and empty rural to small-city West as not simply somewhere to flee but also as presenting a potentially recuperative space can be interrogated via three general metaphorical framings of rural consumption (Halfacree 2010). First, these spaces can provide a ‘bolt-hole’, a ‘relatively distinct space... one can “escape” into’ (Halfacree 2010: 251). Second, they can be a ‘castle’, where escape is constantly threatened, necessitating ‘drawbridge-raising’ defensive responses. In the present paper, living under a familiar Western sky, staying in a room where the world can be shut out, or retreating to a bar or casino in Winnemucca all first suggest escape into a geographical bolt-hole but getaway quickly morphs into a state of being besieged in a castle as threats posed by, *inter alia*, absent friends, fading relationships and becoming broke come to the fore. Nonetheless, interpreting the individual and their often-emotive consumption of the American West need not end here. Instead, the representations, practices and embedded experiences (Halfacree 2006a) together inscribing a space one can ‘be safe for a while’ (*Winner’s Casino*, 2002) is also powerfully suggestive of a positive ‘other space’ or heterotopia.

The concept of heterotopia is especially associated with Michel Foucault (1986, 2005), who defined them as ‘real places... which are something like counter-sites’ (Foucault 1986: 24). Heterotopia is now widely utilised in scholarship (Johnson 2006, 2013), although still relatively little in rural studies (but see Neal and Walters 2007). From the start, as for Foucault, it is essential to distinguish heterotopia from perfect-but-nowhere utopia. To reiterate and, in contrast to utopia, a heterotopia is ‘localized and real’ (Johnson 2006: 78). It is ‘a different space that at the same time mirrors what is around’ (*ibid.*: 76). Always relationally rooted, heterotopia ‘do not exist in themselves’ (Hetherington 1997: 8) but work to undermine core elements of the singular absolutism of what has been termed the major language. A heterotopic ‘alternate ordering’ (*ibid.*: 9) ‘light[s] up... and offer[s] lines of flight’ (Johnson 2006: 87) from that major language. Yet, consequent of this struggle for difference, heterotopia are always unstable and never conclusively realized. Instead, they exist as ‘fundamentally disturbing place[s that cannot] promote... any primary form of resistance or liberation’ (Johnson 2006: 84).

The boat or ship is Foucault’s key heterotopic form, representing ‘a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea’ (Foucault 1966: 27). This embodiment can usefully be metaphorically conjured up for the minor language that was found within the overall rural language articulated through Willy Vlautin’s songs. From bolt-hole, through castle, the American West thus becomes, thirdly, a space for a ‘life-raft’ (Halfacree 2010) on which the wrecked sailor of that region can struggle to survive within it. Yet, and with Géricault’s terrifying *Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819) to mind¹¹, it is a tenuous existence, the sailor inevitably needing to be ‘draw[n]... out... in peculiar ways’ (Johnson 2006: 84) if they are to find fresh water, food and shelter from the sun or to fend off hungry sharks.

The life-rafts of Vlautin’s West, room or bar are thus ‘enclosure[s]... without the comfort of a home’ (*ibid.*: 86), ‘uncertain and ambivalent, never settled’ (Zembylas and Ferreira 2009: 4). They are set within an American West he presents as a ‘black road’ of both inward- and outward-looking victimhood at the best challenging to flee. They must also float across a rural imaginary – notwithstanding its cities - narrated through the rugged Frontier myth partly articulated by mainstream Country music, equally partly appropriated by Trump style politics, and where an abandoned rural is frequently juxtaposed with a buoyant rural of counterurban renewal. Nevertheless, in Vlautin’s songs his heterotopic rural to small-city life-rafts still - cautiously, unstably, often fleetingly - provide spaces that in the present make ‘local acts of resistance possible’ (Zembylas and Ferreira 2009: 4). In short, careful and focused reading of the American West in Willy Vlautin’s songs reveals it to contain ‘crisis heterotopias... in which individuals who are in crisis with respect to society can find a shelter’ (*ibid.*: 5) or ‘compensation’ (Foucault 1996: 27). They are places of ‘hope’ (Berberich *et al.* 2015; Ríó Raigadas 2016; Solnit 2005), albeit fleeting and inconclusive, always on uncertain terms with alternative heterotopias of ‘illusion’ (Foucault 1986: 27).

Interestingly, identifying heterotopic life-raft potential within the abandoned rural West brings it into line with the rural as an existentially affective resource expressed elsewhere, such as when consumed through the aforementioned counterurban lifestyle migration

(Barcus and Halfacree 2017). This in turn, somewhat ironically, places it into a fold(er) of rurals that contains otherwise so-contrasting rural idylls (Bell 2006), which may thus help them, in Gardner's (2006) terms, to shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary. This exemplifies Foucault's (2005: xix) observation of how heterotopias 'are disturbing... secretly undermin[ing] language... mak[ing] it impossible to name this **and** that'. Furthermore, reading the rural more as life-raft than bolt-hole or castle rejects the utopianism that typically underpins and is associated with the latter two readings. In other words, as heterotopic life-raft, the rural – whether for relatively wealthy migrants relocating to rural England or Vlautin's broken residents of the Thirteen Cities region – 'undermines or unsettles' (Johnson 2006: 82) the culturally powerful but widely critiqued utopian idyllic imaginary. An everyday heterotopic 'centrality of affect' (Zembylas and Ferriera 2009: 5), in short, trumps (*sic.*) ever-elusive rarefied utopian representation.

8. Conclusion: for an affective critical rurality

'The strategy of making difference visible does not automatically produce new ways forward but, but it can generate new possibilities and different strategies' (Gibson-Graham 2008: 623).

Anti-idyllic ruralities are now widely acknowledged in the academic literature but remain underdeveloped compared to work on their idyllic counterparts. Neglect is especially the case for more mundane and unspectacular, yet globally widespread and ascendant, rural representations, practices and lives such as those of abandoned rural America. Such neglect helps reinforce their appearance as places seemingly fertile for very little indeed, as leaving-it-at-that association with pro-Trump populism might also seem to indicate. However, utilising the specific illustrative example of Willy Vlautin's Americana songs, this paper has argued that such a perspective is much too narrow. First, the representations, practices and lives narrated by Vlautin are expressive of an affective critical regionality that challenges (Campbell 2016: 3), in the case of the American West, its spoken myth of strong unity, associated discourse emphasizing self-sufficient individualism, and approved ideology of rugged right-wing populism. An alternative language of a dismembered, dissipated, divided and disenchanting West emerges extremely strongly. Second, however, one can not only read powerful articulations of the abandoned rural West's neglected geography through Vlautin's songs but also how this geography becomes entangled within everyday lives on the ground in more-than-despairing terms. Reading Vlautin's oeuvre for difference from the predominant 'inscribed totality' (Harris 2009: 60) demonstrates a positive, albeit fragile, minor language quietly spoken within, beneath and often in spite of 'the land of broken dreams' (cover picture of *Post to Wire*). It is a language that presents the rural to small-city West as supporting precarious heterotopic life-rafts.

Together, therefore, it can be concluded that the abandoned rural America around Vlautin's *13 Cities* expresses an **affective critical rurality**. It is **affective** as it is rooted in relational 'ground-level meaning making created in the practice of everyday life' (Lombardi 2013: 143) rather than in 'high' and distanced representation. It is **critical** in its political depiction of

people as victims of dominant political economics, in seeing few ‘solutions’ in the politics of the far-right or narcissistic mobile individualism, and in recognising the importance of life-course pauses in down-to-earth small-scale rooted spaces within an era of mobilities. And it is **rural** – notwithstanding its numerous cities - because it more-or-less explicitly draws on a sense of a West, ranging from remote logging communities to small cities, as still having a distinctive identity from nearby larger cities, such as Denver, Los Angeles or Portland, or wider urban America, an identity that can still be consumed as a key existential recuperative resource.

Lastly, let us return to the *Western Skyline*. By now, the utopian aim of going ‘beyond’ - the classic Frontier promise of the American West, arguably now enhanced by an era of mobilities – has been severely strategically qualified. Instead, Willy Vlautin, through his music (and novels), suggests an alternative ‘frontier’ to engage if one is to gain at least some solid grounding within a highly challenging everyday life. This involves cultivation of progressive elements of an affective critical rurality **within** the West. This is perhaps the best shot in present political-economic circumstances for achieving some fragile *Hope and Repair* (1999):

‘[F]rom the east blows uncertainty and from the north blows complete despair and from the south blows alcohol and from the west hope and repair’¹².

Footnotes

1. However, this roar alone did not swing the election (Monnat and Brown 2017) and there was considerable rural diversity, not least between liberal ‘recreational’ and conservative ‘farming’ counties (Scala *et al.* 2015; Scala and Johnson 2017).

2. This phrase was infamously used by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to emphasise her belief in the ubiquity and permanence of the capitalist market economy (*pace* Gibson-Graham) (Wikipedia 2017a).

3. This link is symbolised by Merle Haggard’s 1969 seeming riposte to the counterculture, *Okee from Muskogee*. Nevertheless, reflecting the need to be critical of overarching readings, neither Haggard nor his song were quite the ‘redneck’ representatives they appeared. Haggard endorsed Democrat Hillary Clinton’s Presidential candidature in 2007 and the song was more a call for countercultural self-awareness of their relative place in US society than a refutation of anti-Vietnam War beliefs (Bernstein 2016; Chilton 2016).

4. ‘Country’ in Country music, like ‘rural’ discussed earlier, is geographically relational today more than absolute. Indeed, mainstream Country has acquired considerable popular and commercial success in this century through becoming increasingly urban (Fay 2014).

5. This latter desire, of course, also lets in the strong nostalgia of mainstream Country to Americana, again reiterating the difficulty of conclusively separating minor from major.

6. Edited by UK-based American Studies Professor Neil Campbell (2018b), *Under the Western Sky* was published as the present paper was being finalised post-refereeing.

7. Selection of the material expressed here was a lengthy iterative process, albeit aided by the author's familiarity with Vlautin's oeuvre, involving much listening, reading and reflection. The latter was especially done in the context of the numerous interviews with Vlautin and articles on his music within the lively world of Americana culture, epitomised if not reducible to the No Depression (2018) web site. An emerging substantial body of academic work on Vlautin's novels especially, some referenced in this paper, was also highly informative. Although the author has spoken briefly with Vlautin a few times at gigs, he was not interviewed directly for the paper as it was felt that enough secondary insight was available and that academic interpretation of the songs was, as always, the responsibility of the author. He will, however, be sent a copy of the paper on publication! Finally, the paper focuses on song lyrics rather than on either full songs as musical constructs or on their performance and reception in live gigs. This admitted limitation in part reflects the regretted non-musicality of the author but also how performance of the songs merits at least a paper of its own, in line with the turn to performance within geographies of music noted in the literature review. This is beyond the scope of the present paper.

8. Vlautin's choice of Winnemucca is also indicative of Americana's roots. It is a town mentioned in the US version of the song *I've Been Everywhere* recorded by, amongst others, Hank Snow (1962) and Johnny Cash (1993), Country singers who influenced Americana (Wikipedia 2017b).

9. *Gas Food Lodging* was adapted from Richard Peck's 1972 novel *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt*, which was itself the title of a Richmond Fontaine song from *The Fitzgerald* (2005)...

10. *Western Skyline* (2002) was inspired by Vlautin's namesake Uncle Bill, killed accidentally by falling on his gun whilst hunting when he was 18 (Berhorst 2002).

11. The painting depicts the aftermath of the 1816 running aground of the *Méduse*, a French frigate. Whilst nearly 150 people escaped on a hastily-built raft, almost all died before survivors – starving, dehydrated, resorting to cannibalism - were rescued a fortnight later (Wikipedia 2017c).

12. This cartographic metaphor resonates with writer Henry Murger's infamous 1849 depiction of Paris Bohemia: 'bordered on the North by hope, work, and gaiety, on the South by necessity and courage; on the West and East by slander and the hospital' (quoted in Seigel 1999: 3).

Table 1: Three key influences on contemporary Americana

Gram Parsons (1946-73)

Now widely critically celebrated although little appreciated during his short lifetime (Fong-Torres 1991), Parsons explicitly rejected genre labels. He sought boundary-free 'Cosmic American Music': a 'holy [*sic.*] intersection of unpolished American expression: gospel, soul, folk, Appalachia, R&B, country, bluegrass, blues, rockabilly, and honky-tonk' (Meyer 2008: 6). Grounded authenticity was more important than superficially-labelled 'product'.

Post-Punk backlash (1980s-)

Parsons's anarchic yet musically committed attitude is reiterated and boosted by backlash against 'Nashville' commercialisation, a longstanding tension within Country (Holt 2007). The 1980s saw a rise of 'rebel' musicians, such as Steve Earle, steeped in earlier 'Outlaw' Country and Folk maverick traditions, epitomised by Waylon Jennings and Townes van Zandt. Indeed, Outlaw Country's fate ably demonstrates how minor languages can become at least partly recuperated rather than consistently sending the major language racing. Many Outlaws, such as Jennings, Willie Nelson and Kris Kristofferson, found fame and fortune, even if not always complete acceptance, within mainstream Country. Of the 1980s rebels, Earle, for example, not only expressed clear Rock influences but also a highly critical attitude towards both the music business and capitalist society generally (St John 2003; Garofalo 2007). Left-liberal politics features prominently in his life and music, again challenging Country's major (political) language.

Uncle Tupelo (1987-94)

Post-Punk 'shake out' and consequent search for DIY 'authenticity' (Russell 2009; Cooper 2012; Encarnacao 2013) was embodied by a band with Punk/Garage origins, Uncle Tupelo. Their 1990 debut album provides a key 'gateway' to - and an alternative name for - today's Americana, although its novelty should not be exaggerated in some 'myth of origin' (Peterson and Beal 2001: 235). Entitled *No Depression* after a song written by Country pioneer A.P. Carter (1891-1960), Uncle Tupelo's cover of the song on the album in part signalled a reclamation of the tradition. Crucially, *No Depression* is generally hard and bleak but with glimmers of uncertain hope. Thus, in *Whiskey Bottle* (written by the band), Jay Farrar sings of how: 'in between the dirt, disgust there must be... Some air to breathe and something to believe'.

Table 2: ‘Original’ Albums of Richmond Fontaine and the Delines

Title	Year	Description
<i>Safety</i>	1996	‘[F]airly raw’ (Brannan 1996: np) debut with a lingering garage-punk ethos that nonetheless immediately sets out the Richmond Fontaine stall’s ‘formidable road map of destinations Carveresque’ (<i>ibid.</i>).
<i>Miles From</i>	1997	Vlautin’s short-story writing was noted and seen reflected in the very detailed songs, where rough edges were somewhat smoothed via, for example, Paul Brainard’s sensitive pedal steel additions (Brannan 1997).
<i>Lost Son</i>	1999	Still with sharp edges, ‘a dismal ordeal of an album... but it’s beautiful in its unifying despair’ (Lieberman 2000: np). For Vlautin, ‘the darkest record I ever want to make’ (in Berhorst 2002: np). Perceptively, the inconclusiveness of many songs was noted (Gentry 1999: np).
<i>Winnemucca</i>	2002	Clearer Country style but with similar narrative. ‘[H]aunted by wanderlust... subjects... seek... not just a destination but refuge’ (Lippens 2002: np). Whether they find it is debateable; Reno artist Greg Allen’s cover picture is of two men dragging another, at best semi-conscious, for example.
<i>Post to Wire</i>	2004	Slightly more up-beat and musically eclectic, epitomised in the title-track duet. Dominant theme of ‘taking refuge and comfort, however temporary... [from] the storm’ (Clarkson 2004: np). Again, noted how ‘[m]any of its stories and tales are left open-ended’ (<i>ibid.</i>).
<i>The Fitzgerald</i>	2005	Reno-centred, the ‘Fitz’ casino closed in 2008, reflecting the gambling town’s decline. ‘[A]n evocative, mesmerizing work... [albeit] with an almost complete lack of hope’ (Greilsamer 2005: np), except - again perceptively - ‘in the solace and sympathy of personal relationships’ (<i>ibid.</i>). ‘[S]tripped down, sparse’ (Clarkson 2005: np).
<i>Thirteen Cities, plus \$87 and a Guilty Conscience that Gets Worse the Longer I Go</i> E.P.	2007a, 2007b	Maps Richmond Fontaine country (<i>sic.</i>) but recorded away from Portland base in Tucson, utilising Arizona-based guest musicians. Consequently strong desert presence for drifters’ tales ‘skirt[ing]... the borders of oblivion’ (McKay 2007: np).
<i>We Used to Think the Freeway Sounded Like a River</i>	2009	Part-autobiographical reflection after Vlautin’s ‘period of enforced introspection’ (Jones 2009: np) following loss of mother and serious injury. Features dimensions of emotional dependency prominently. Pared-down lyrically,

		with equally-restrained music.
<i>The High Country</i>	2011	Located in the Thirteen Cities' northwest corner, a murderously bleak concept album. A 'gothic kind of story' (Clarke 2016: np) of love, obsession and paranoia set in an isolated logging community 'ravaged by dark secrets and methamphetamine-induced madness' (Oinonen 2011: np).
<i>You Can't Go Back If There's Nothing to Go Back To</i>	2016	Richmond Fontaine's swansong returned to the pre- <i>The High Country</i> style. Its 'familiar heartache... [of e]veryone... afraid' (Jones 2016: 77) drew on experiences of friends and acquaintances to provide a sense of closure. 'Return' is a key theme for people 'paying the price for living hard and recklessly' (Wierzbicki 2016: np).
<i>Don't Skip Out on Me</i>	2017	An all-instrumental 'appropriate epitaph' (Oinonen 2018: np) recorded to support Vlautin's book of the same name.
<i>Colfax</i> by The Delines	2014	More of a 'retro soul' late-night sound (Oinonen 2014), not least from Amy Boone's vocals, but covers familiar ground. Slightly more 'urban', Denver's notorious Colfax Avenue a place Vlautin cut his teeth as a musician (McGrath 2015a).
<i>Scenic Sessions</i> by The Delines	2015	Low-key album that grew out of an intended single to be sold on the road. '[P]alpably lighter in tone than its predecessor' (McGrath 2015b: np) but stays within Vlautin's 'world of restless despair' (<i>ibid.</i>).

Note: individual songs in the text are given the date of the album they are found on.

Table 3: The *Thirteen Cities*

City	State	Population (2016)	Notable features
Albuquerque	New Mexico	559,000	New Mexico's most populous settlement. Rio Grande flows through, Sandia Mountains to east. Hosts world's largest balloon fiesta.
Bullhead City	Arizona	40,000	Directly across Colorado River from Laughlin, whose casinos employ many. On southern border of Lake Mohave. International Airport named Airport of the Year 2011 by Arizona Department of Transportation.
Laramie	Wyoming	32,000	County seat of Albany County. Settled in mid-19th century along Union Pacific Railroad. Home to University of Wyoming. Location between Snowy and Laramie Ranges makes it popular for outdoor recreation. Retirement centre.
Las Cruces	New Mexico	102,000	Economic and geographic centre of Mesilla Valley agricultural region. Major employer in White Sands Test Facility and Missile Range. Organ Mountains to east, Spaceport America to north. Virgin Galactic headquarters.
Mojave	California	4,000	In Mojave Desert, beneath Oak Creek Pass and Tehachapi Mountains. Near Edwards Air Force Base and other facilities, with rich aerospace history. Changed district name in 2012 to Mojave Air and Space Port.
Phoenix	Arizona	1,615,000	Capital and biggest city in state. In Sonoran Desert, subtropical desert climate. Canal system for irrigated crops. High-tech industries and retirees moved in since 1945; high population growth. Cultural centre of Valley of the Sun.
Portland	Oregon	640,000	Largest city in Oregon and major port in Willamette Valley. Noted from 1960s for liberal politics, counterculture and

			environmental consciousness. <i>Keep Portland Weird</i> unofficial slogan, <i>City of Roses</i> from ideal growth climate.
Reno	Arizona	245,000	<i>The Biggest Little City in the World</i> , famous for casinos and hotels. In high desert at foot of Sierra Nevada. Before late 1950s, US gambling capital but since declined. Economy diversifying.
Spokane	Washington	216,000	Second largest city in state. On Spokane River west of Rocky Mountain foothills. Northern Pacific Railway brought settlers. Local economy depended on mining, timber and agriculture until 1980s. Birthplace of Father's Day
Stockton	California	307,000	In San Joaquin Valley. Named an All-America City in 1999, 2004, 2015, 2017. Built during Gold Rush, seaport gateway to Central Valley. Second largest city filing for bankruptcy protection in 2008 financial crisis, exiting in 2015.
Tucson	Arizona	531,000	Under 100km from border, Mexican-Americans over third of population. Surrounded by minor mountain ranges. On Santa Cruz River, dry for much of year but floods during seasonal rains. Large employers include University and Raytheon Missile Systems.
Walla Walla	Washington	32,000	Native American name meaning <i>Place of Many Waters</i> ; tourists told 'town so nice they named it twice'. Palouse hills and Blue Mountains to east. Vineyards and wineries economically important. Quality restaurants and hotels.
Yuma	Arizona	95,000	Noted for weather extremes but especially dry and hot. More than 85,000 retirees overwinter, yet highest unemployment in US due to seasonal agricultural workforce.

(Sources: Facts from each settlement's Wikipedia page, accessed November 2017)

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