

# LOCAL HIERARCHIES IN CONTEMPORARY RURAL US FICTION

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Rural space is often portrayed as irrelevant to ‘modern’ society and culture. Perhaps one of the most famous analyses of this idea can be found in *The Country and the City*, where Raymond Williams discusses the English conception of rurality. In this work, Williams explores rurality as a means of reinforcing notions of nationalistic and capitalist progress through to the early 1970s. While the idea of rural spaces being behind ‘modern’ society is still used to reinforce these conceptions of (capitalist) progress and development, it is also used in various ways to support mainstream cultural norms, i.e. those norms of the middle–classless sub/urban.<sup>1</sup>

This use of rural space is not a strictly English phenomenon; the US too has made use of rural spaces, particularly those of the working–class and working poor, throughout its history to support changing notions of cultural propriety. This changing use of rurality has supported the beginnings of a middle–classless sub/urban culture in the late nineteenth century and into the early half of the twentieth century, but the predominant conception placing rural spaces as regressed continues today (see Hartigan, Wray). Usually, regressed rurality can be summed up through an easily recognised figure: the redneck, the hillbilly, white trash, etc. Theorists discuss this use of working–class rural inhabitants as a way to assuage fears about and reinforce notions of mainstream progress, something that can be seen in cultural products like modern horror films, television and the Internet (see Clover, Williamson, Harkins). This cultural figure and the regressed rural spaces that s/he has come to represent is placed ‘anywhere on the rough edges of the landscape and economy’, and embodies a ‘negative counterexample’ to changing definitions of modern society (Harkins 4–5; see also Williamson). As such, the cultural representations of rural spaces and those characters living within these spaces become a binary other to the mainstream: *not* urban and therefore, *not* modern—a limit case existing in a generalised elsewhere, easily dismissed from modern space, time and culture.

While these products exhibit the predominant notion of working–class rurality as a homogenised limit case behind the middle–classless sub/urban mainstream, there are cultural products set within these spaces

that directly exhibit working-class rurality as more complex than is usually assumed. Some of this complexity emerges in contemporary US literature and illustrates that far from regressed spaces, US working-class rurality can in fact illuminate the larger sociocultural contexts of which it is part. This paper is concerned with the ways in which this complexity emerges through local hierarchies represented within US contemporary fiction. Although certainly not uplifting examples of complexity, these hierarchies exhibit the ability of fictional 'locals' to place and consider themselves and their communities consciously, instead of being placed as the unconscious, homogenous beings generally perceived by the mainstream.

Furthermore, these hierarchies potentially critique the very binaries that place working-class rurality in a regressed cultural position, i.e. these hierarchies indirectly become a critique of the mainstream itself. Like the mainstream, these local hierarchies run along distinctions of geography (focusing on degrees of rurality) and/or class (in these works, between the working class and working poor). Although situated differently from the mainstream, these hierarchies mirror the tendency to centralise a particular perspective in relation to a periphery seen as lacking in some way. These fictional works allow an interrogation of these localised hierarchies, and in so doing, potentially extend this critique towards the mainstream's own dismissive hierarchies with regard to working-class rurality. The contemporary US works discussed here illustrate this critique in line with the very complexity emanating from these fictional rural places, simultaneously showing the complexity of rural spaces generally conceived as regressed, while beginning to question the naturalised classed and geographic binaries generally accepted by the mainstream for so long.

Using literature that is centred on rurality may seem like an obvious way to interrogate these predominant notions. However, there is a major obstacle that needs to be overcome when viewing literary representations of rurality as anything other than regressed holdovers outside of modern society and culture. As William Conlogue states with regards to the predominant view on literary representations of the rural, the rural is 'valued only as a touchstone for the cultured, urban, therefore, civilized human' (6). However, literary representations of rurality do not need to be reduced solely to their conventional role. Indeed, with the novels in question here, we can see examples where this devalued predominant role is brought to the fore, but also actively questioned by the very places deemed simple and regressed. As a result, these novels have the power to interrogate the relationship between the mainstream and its working-class rural periphery that exists in American society and culture through

to the present. Although we cannot conflate the literary representation of working-class rurality with its actual experience in the ‘real’ world, we can view such representation as producing commentary on the misconceived role of working-class rurality in American society at large. In this way, this contemporary fiction mirrors the efforts and observations put forth by the rural social sciences over the last couple of decades.<sup>2</sup> Given the working-class rural origins of most of these authors, perhaps this should come as no surprise—as people living within working-class rural spaces at some point in their lives, these authors are aware of the larger devaluation of working-class rurality, and also of the complexity that exists within these spaces.<sup>3</sup>

I am choosing to discuss novels set in working-class rural places across the US, from the Northeast (Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* and Russell Banks’ *Affliction*), the Midwest (Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*), to the South (Bobbie Ann Mason’s *In Country*). These four novels, while indeed representative of my larger argument, are certainly not the only examples where working-class rurality simultaneously asserts its complexity and throws into question mainstream assumptions surrounding geography and class. However, given the high visibility of these authors/novels as opposed to lesser-known works, it is perhaps easier to consider the interrelationship between these fictional accounts and the larger sociocultural contexts of which they are part. While set in different regions, the characters within these books are all aware of their place within US culture and society, but they also use hierarchies to make sense of identity on the local level. Those on the local level easily distinguish the hierarchies within these working-class rural spaces, whether the characters in question belong to industry-less small towns (*Empire Falls*, *Affliction*, *In Country*) and/or are victims of an impending farm crisis (*In Country*, *A Thousand Acres*). These differences at the local level can also be read as a mirror to the mainstream hierarchies that place working-class rurality as a regressed holdover behind ‘modern’ society and culture. In recognising and taking apart these local hierarchies, one can also begin to take apart the very mainstream hierarchies with which the local is co-extensive. As a result, one can also expose the arbitrary nature of mainstream hierarchies positing working-class rurality as a regressed space.

One place to start this analysis is to map out local hierarchies of power in relation to those of the mainstream. These hierarchies of power can be seen as extensions of the larger hierarchies that place working-class rurality lower on the sociocultural ladder than the mainstream. For example, in *Affliction*, we can see that power at the local level helps working-class Wade gain a semblance of self-respect in his otherwise

powerless position in larger American society.<sup>4</sup> In order to make his position in a community like Lawford acceptable (Banks 82), Wade depends upon his power as town cop even as this position rests upon the power of others, like his boss, Gordon La Riviere. Despite his relative authority within the town, it is an authority contingent upon those with real social power, whether those within the town or those from the more prosperous mainstream sub/urban. This contingency is obvious in the following reaction from a wealthy seasonal resident: ‘I can put your country ass out of work with one phone call, Whitehouse, and I’m just pissed enough to do it now’ (145). This interaction illustrates the binary between mainstream/rural other; Wade’s relative power within town is meaningless to an outsider who only sees Wade as part of the general low-class ‘country’-ness of Lawford. However, it is Wade’s power within town that gives him the semblance of self-respect that is ultimately denied by those outside the town’s limits.

Even in novels like *A Thousand Acres*, where the community in question is comprised almost completely of farmers, we are given local hierarchies of power, specifically as these hierarchies intersect with class position.<sup>5</sup> However, these hierarchies pale in comparison to power on a national scale. At points in *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny differentiates geographically between her farmland and two local small towns (Pike and Cabot), but also among the power relations within these frameworks: the banker, local lawyers, and even the farmers themselves. The farmers and the townspeople can differentiate between farms based on appearance, to the point of defining the relative success of particular farmers. Here, this class hierarchy is attributed to one’s ‘character’:

The farmer looks like himself, when he goes to the cafe, but he also looks like his farm, which everyone has passed on the way into town. What his farm looks like boils down to questions of character. (Smiley 198)

Ginny addresses here that all farmers may appear the same to an outsider, but in actuality every farmer has a place on the local pecking order. This place connotes a particular class status for the locals, and due to her father’s farming success, the family is placed relatively highly. Ginny, however, recognises that the local power afforded to her family through her father’s thousand acres means little when compared to other (corporate) farms elsewhere in the country: ‘Out west, even as close as Nebraska and South Dakota, there were farms that dwarfed my father’s in size.... In Zebulon County, though, my father’s thousand acres made him one of the biggest landowners’ (131). Although Ginny’s father is a

marginal farmer by comparison to national standards, locally, he is a man of stature.

Ginny's discussion of her community does not touch upon the mainstream's devaluation of working-class rurality, although we see this occur at other points of the book. One such example occurs as her nieces recollect the taunting of their schoolmates regarding their farm background; Ginny's physical reaction—'I felt a tiny pain in my throat, like the pressure of a knife point' (86)—represents her own feelings of devaluation in this othered space. Like Wade in *Affliction*, Ginny understands her cultural position as working-class rural other. However, both Ginny's outline of her local community and Wade's relative authority as town cop are examples of the different levels of power that occur within rural places. In both the country proper and small towns that appear to the outsider as comprised completely of 'hicks', 'white trash', 'rednecks', etc., there are more nuanced differences at the local level: in a geography appearing as a homogenous nowhere, class hierarchies emerge for the residents themselves. These hierarchies are very much co-extensive with American notions of class difference: at the most obvious, there is indeed a system of centralised 'haves' versus those others who lack access to this central circle. However, these localised class hierarchies also share the mainstream conceptualisation of class in America, namely that one's geography may be used to explain in part one's classed position, i.e. that the more rural, the more spatially 'undeveloped' by mainstream standards, becomes an explanation for one's classed failure.

At times, characters voice local hierarchies along class lines and/or geographic lines (degrees of rurality). I pointedly use the term 'and/or' in this description because, like the mainstream, some of these fictional interactions make sense of class difference (in this case, that between the working-class and working poor) through geography. That is, a seemingly 'undeveloped' landscape is used in conjunction with class analysis so that a more rural area is aligned to some extent with those of a lower class. The working-class rural characters in these novels mirror the larger conflation of seemingly undeveloped spaces with one's class position so that one's undeveloped geography becomes an explanation for one's class position.<sup>6</sup> However, these local hierarchies of geography and class also become a means for characters to feel relative power that is missing in larger contexts, at their respective local levels. In these local cases, the difference between the small town and the more rural places outside the town are the platform for understanding class difference.

The use of geography to attain power at the local level is only hinted at in the discussion on Banks' and Smiley's novels, but this conception comes to the fore more explicitly in the other two novels discussed here. In Mason's *In Country*, the relationship between teenaged Sam and her grandmother Mamaw provides one illustration of this point.<sup>7</sup> Sam is fully aware of the difference between herself and Mamaw, an awareness physically embodied: whereas Mamaw is described as having 'barrel hips and rolls of fat around her waist', Sam is seen as being 'too skinny' (*In Country* 4–5). This physical difference aligns with their respective positions: as a farmer's wife, Mamaw is still affiliated with rurality proper, whereas Sam's home in town and her desire to escape this small town places her in a higher hierarchical place, by mainstream norms and perhaps within the town itself. This cultural difference is especially accentuated when Sam visits her grandparents' farmhouse. As Sam speculates on what would happen if her father had survived Vietnam, she comes to the conclusion that instead of living in a 'garage apartment' like one of the Vets in town, her father would be 'discussing blue mold and whether to take risks on wheat prices. Irene wouldn't have gone to Lexington. Sam would be jiggling a baby on her knee, like [her aunt] Donna' (195). Like Donna, Sam too would be amazed at and jealous of modern homes and conveniences, like VCRs and eating out—a thought that makes her indirectly nauseous (195). This example intersects degrees of rurality with that of class: Sam is disgusted with her more rural and poorer relatives and sets herself apart from them, even as Sam (and her town) are clearly affiliated with the working-class. Here, geographic difference (the farm versus the local town) is co-extensive with the relative cultural positions at a local level. Sam maintains distance from the lower-class status of her relatives who are behind the 'modern' times of which Sam feels she is part.

Something similar happens in *Empire Falls* in a passing conversation between Miles Roby and the dishwasher Buster.<sup>8</sup> Buster relates to Miles: 'I don't know why I keep going up into the Allagash. People think there's nothing going on up there, but they're wrong. There's all kind of shit happening, all of it bad' (Russo 304). Notice Buster's use of geographic binaries to make sense of the more rural Allagash region of Maine. For Buster, the mountainous Allagash is a place he needs to go 'into', and implicitly, exit out of the more coastal, centralised Empire Falls. However, the movement out of one place and into another is more than a physical fact, but is also tied to respective cultural positions. In leaving for the Allagash, Buster is entering a 'bad' scene, which he ties to higher rates of alcoholism, and also to class:

‘Of course, up there near the border, they don’t share in the rest of the state’s prosperity’.

Miles turned to study his fry cook for the merest trace of irony. (305)

We can assume that Miles’ search for irony turns up nothing. Whereas Miles realises the depressed economic situation of Empire Falls, perhaps as a result of his own foray with upward mobility *outside* of Empire Falls and towards the mainstream proper, Buster does not. For Buster, the economic situation of Empire Falls is one of prosperity, in contrast to the Allagash. Buster ties this economic difference to the rural outreach of the Allagash itself, which is in turn tied to its ‘bad’ cultural situation. This binary places Buster—and Empire Falls—as the centralised perspective from which the Allagash fails, much as Miles’ failure at a more mainstream life places him back in the working–class rural outreach of Empire Falls.

Much like Sam’s desire to separate herself from her farming grandparents in *In Country*, Buster’s binarism mirrors the mainstream’s own separation from working–class rural places like Empire Falls, and the general devaluation of places failing to reach a more centralised position. However, at a local level, this hierarchical understanding is co–extensive with the mainstream’s approach to class and geography. While Buster feels relatively successful when compared to the Allagash, his position in working–class Empire Falls places him as a faceless other to the mainstream. It is this latter position that Miles gives voice to in his own failure at upward mobility *outside* Empire Falls, in the mainstream. Buster’s binarism mirrors Miles’—and the mainstream’s—own belief that working–class rural places like Empire Falls are lacking by comparison.

In the four novels discussed, the characters in question are aware of their devalued cultural positions as working–class rural others. We see Wade’s feelings of inferiority *in* the mainstream, the diminishment of Ginny’s locally powerful father to *national* definitions of farming success, Sam’s desire to go *anywhere* but her small town, and Miles’ feelings of failure having not attained mainstream success *outside* of Empire Falls. Yet these novels make clear that these characters, and the other characters we encounter throughout their stories, are not just unconsciously part of homogenous communities. Most of these characters are aware of their cultural devaluations within naturalised binaries created by the middle–classless sub/urban mainstream. Furthermore, these characters demonstrate the complexity existing on a local level, a complexity otherwise dismissed by larger conceptions

positing working-class rurality as regressed and irrelevant to ‘modern’ societies. Part of this complexity is comprised of potentially harmful hierarchies based on power and devaluation, mirroring the larger binaries that dismiss these same working-class rural places and people.

In some ways, this mirror provides a bit more insight into the intersection of geography and class in the United States. Geography, as much as in the mainstream, becomes a way of understanding the deeper class structures that run beneath the surface of American society and culture. The hierarchies built upon the intersection of geography and class, while used at the local level in order to assert relative power, reflect the larger conception of working-class rurality as regressed and negligible places. Much as those at the local level arbitrarily designate power through geographical and classed others, so the mainstream’s placement of working-class rurality can be read in kind: the mainstream is not naturally superior to these supposedly regressed places, but instead uses arbitrary definitions of progress and development to assert what culturally benefits it most.

Although not particularly encouraging, the local hierarchies within this fiction detail that far from isolated spaces, rural people are very much intertwined with the larger sociocultural concerns of a given time. These hierarchies in some ways reflect the larger mainstream conceptions that place rurality (and particularly that of the working-class) as irrelevant, backwards, behind the times—the losing half of a cultural binary. Just as the local differentiations made within these books may seem trivial or unremarkable to the reader, so perhaps are our larger distinctions between what is ‘modern’ and what is dismissed as regressed. Through these fictional, working-class rural places it is possible to interrogate our own naturalised assumptions surrounding geography and class in the US.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This is Robert Seguin’s term, referring to the rhetoric of classlessness in the United States. ‘Middle-classlessness’ substitutes middle-class appearances for real class divisions within American society.

<sup>2</sup> These novels fictionally illustrate what rural social scientists have maintained for at least the last two decades. One example can be found in Campbell et al, in addition to Wray and Hartigan, aforementioned.

<sup>3</sup> This point is particularly salient with regards to Banks (see Niemi), Russo (see Welsch), and Mason (see Mason, *Clear Springs*).

<sup>4</sup> *Affliction* recounts the story of Wade Whitehouse, a man eking out his existence within the small working-class town of Lawford, NH. Told

from the perspective of his upwardly-mobile brother, Rolfe, Wade's story can also be seen as co-extensive of Lawford's own devalued position in American society, and also a mirror to Rolfe's own struggles in his professional, urban existence outside of Lawford.

<sup>5</sup> *A Thousand Acres*, while ostensibly about the deterioration of one family farm and the people within that family, is also a commentary on the larger farm crisis that occurred in the 1980s. While pointing to the victimisation of the family farmer, however, Smiley also points out how the family farmer was integral to his own demise, through exploitative business and environmental practices.

<sup>6</sup> Social scientists have pointed out this tendency within the US from at least the postwar period, one example being the rhetoric surrounding the 1960s war on poverty (O'Connor). However, this rhetoric continues to exist within larger cultural conceptions, as both Wray and Hartigan point out.

<sup>7</sup> *In Country* is the story of a teenager who tries to come to terms with a father, killed in Vietnam, she never knew. Through her attempt to understand her father, Sam tries to connect with her Uncle Emmett, also a Vietnam vet. Her search for understanding leads the reader towards a reconciliation of that contentious time period—but it also indirectly leads the reader to engage with the working-class rural place from which Sam hails.

<sup>8</sup> Through an examination of two families—the working-class Robys and the wealthy Whitings—Russo also brings the working-class small town of Empire Falls, Maine into the purview of the reader. More than a setting, Empire Falls—and its socioeconomic position within the US from the postwar period to the present day—is interrogated in parallel with the Robys and the Whitings.

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