

MANIFEST AMERICANS: THE MODERN-DAY APPROPRIATION  
OF THE AGRARIAN MYTH

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

American Studies

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY  
Bozeman, Montana

December 2020

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my deep gratitude to my advisor Dr. Susan Kollin for her wisdom and guidance. I am also extremely grateful to my committee for their support and insights: Dr. Robert Bennett, Dr. Matthew Herman, and Dr. Kristin Ruppel. I especially want to thank Dr. Herman for sharing his time and Native American Studies expertise as I prepared for my comprehensive exams. I must also express my gratitude to the American Studies Program and Dr. Robert Rydell for program support and teaching assistant opportunities. The most meaningful experiences of my doctoral program came in the form of mentorship, support, and friendship accorded by Dr. Nancy Mahoney and Dr. Jennifer Hill, through whom I deepened my understanding of American Studies (taught with no fear). I learned a great deal about generosity and grace in the classroom from these two remarkable women. I also have deep gratitude for the Department of Native American Studies. Dr. Walter Fleming, Dr. Ruppel, and their impressive staff have been very supportive as I transitioned into designing and teaching courses demonstrating my great reverence and respect for the discipline and the ongoing work of the Department. Along with special thanks to Mary Guthmiller and the Library's Interlibrary Loan staff, I want to also thank The Ivan Doig Center for the Study of the Lands & Peoples of the North American West for research funding, which directly supported this project.

I want to especially thank my family—my children, Andrea, Christopher, and Wade—whose humor, love, and support fortified me during this arduous process. My brilliant Andrea especially put in considerable time and energy (and miles) aiding me in this endeavor. And my husband, Rob, with love and disagreement. I also want to thank my dear friend and academic ally, Andi Powers, whom I consider family.

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## ABSTRACT

In “Manifest Americans,” I examine the modern-day appropriation of the agrarian myth under neoliberalism and associated sheltering of systemic marginalization and health and environmental hazards. I argue persistent agrarianism rhetoric, perverted by neoliberal realities and devices, lies at the core of these problems. Specific to this neoliberal moment, my conception of neoyeomanship encapsulates the embrace of classic yeomanship dogma and modern neoliberal doctrine towards the realization of Manifest Americans as idealized persons(products) of the agrarian myth—created in the minds of republican agrarians, propelled forward by Manifest Destiny, and consolidated through white settlement and cultivation of stolen Native lands. Manifest Americans believe themselves the backbone of American society and the embodiment of democracy. Neoyeomen as Manifest Americans are the neoliberal reification of the nation’s most *American* Americans.

This project also presents a new framework for analyzing the neoliberalization of American society and culture, with emphasis on impacts to agrarian(rural) people and spaces. Specifically, I explore neoliberal cultural production through cultural products which work to either appease or disrupt the agrarian metanarrative in modern society. To accomplish this, I bring together cultural studies and ecocritical approaches as methodology for cultural criticism, with additional consideration of affect theory and nostalgia criticism to read the agrarian myth in this neoliberal age.

I also introduce my concept of perverse nostalgia. Perverse nostalgia explains how simple nostalgia, which normally works to mitigate disruptions in meeting core human needs, becomes perverted by neoliberal realities, which in turn creates discontinuity and exacerbates existential fears, resultantly triggering perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past—an *America made great again*.

“Manifest Americans” also expands myth criticism. Their overt exceptionalist associations notwithstanding, enduring American myths play a crucial role in projecting, informing, and affirming dominant modern-day ideologies and identity(ies). Far from being mired in history, American myths are well-evidenced in modern society and help us to understand and explain the nation’s complex ideologies and longings for an idealized(mythical) past. This is particularly true concerning the agrarian myth, which has largely evaded criticism and condemnation. The agrarian myth is alive and well in neoliberal America—and hides a multitude of sins.

## INTRODUCTION

“Manifest Americans”<sup>1</sup> concerns the modern-day appropriation of the American agrarian myth, along with the highly problematic sheltering of systemic marginalization and hazards to human health and the environment in this neoliberal age. This project presents a new framework for analyzing the neoliberalization of American society, culture, and cultural production, with emphasis on impacts to agrarian(rural) people and spaces. One cannot escape being exposed to the often loudly voiced consternation and frustration over the broadly perceived great national divide, beyond political affiliations (and antagonisms), towards rural<sup>2</sup> and urban—so called “red states” and “blue states,” *a la* the presidential electoral map. This project argues that persistent agrarian myth rhetoric, perverted by neoliberal realities, lies at the core of this issue, despite obvious hypocrisies, such as massive federal subsidization, immense indebtedness, inegalitarianism, and related social, political, economic, public health, and environmental problematics. Though the term yeoman has long fallen out of fashion to describe peoples who

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<sup>1</sup> I describe my notion of “Manifest Americans” in detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> While the terms “agrarian” and “rural” are certainly closely related, they have distinctive qualities. “Agrarian” concerns the cultivation of land, or things (including cultural ideologies) related to land cultivation (which brings notions of rurality to mind). “Rurality” concerns traits, characteristics, customs, and qualities of being rural, or the state of being rural. “Rural” concerns the sparsely populated countryside—living in it, its features, and other aspects. Dictionary.com clarifies that there are favorable (charming, rustic) or unfavorable (crude, provincial, boorish) connotations to the term. Interestingly, the U.S. Census Bureau defines “rural” by what it is not: “what is not urban—that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left” (Ratcliffe et al). The term “agriculture” is more specific in that while “agrarian” includes things related to land cultivation (including but not limited to agriculture), “agriculture” concerns the practices of farming (raising and harvesting crops) and ranching (raising and breeding livestock).

own and work the land, the tenets of yeomanship are well-evidenced in the modern-day idealization of the nation's agrarian(rural) peoples, spaces, and lifeways towards modern-day neoyeomanship. In fact, agrarian myth/agrarianism rhetoric is alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal American countryside—and hides a multitude of sins.

It is important to clarify, this project very much considers the present as part of the neoliberal era—not a transmogrification of neoliberalism into a post-neoliberal era, or “after” neoliberalism era. Post-neoliberal as a social mechanism can be defined as an ideology which rejects neoliberalism as a political, social, and economic reality towards social nationalism, wealth and income redistribution, and other associated far-left ideologies. It rejects neoliberal hegemony, namely the Washington Consensus<sup>3</sup> and its 10 recommendations (per British economist John Williamson):

1) fiscal discipline; 2) redirecting public expenditure; 3) tax reform; 4) financial liberalization; 5) adoption of a single, competitive exchange rate; 6) trade liberalization; 7) elimination of barriers to foreign direct investment; 8) privatization of state owned enterprises; 9) deregulation of market entry and competition; and, 10) secure property rights (Lopes).

Post-neoliberalism, as currently embraced by its proponents, primarily in/concerning the Global South, broadly and strictly theoretically concerns the

Search for progressive policy alternatives arising out of the many contradictions of neoliberalism. These progressive alternatives contain remnants of the previous neoliberal model, as neoliberalism does not suddenly disappear. At the same time, post-neoliberal policies emerge from within neoliberalism, in reaction to many of

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<sup>3</sup> The Washington Consensus includes institutions largely based in Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and the European Union.

the shortcomings and contradictions of neoliberal forms of governance. Thus, the concept of post-neoliberalism speaks to the idea that neoliberal practices are at the same time preserved and overcome; neoliberal policy has lost its dominance but is not annihilated (Macdonald and Ruckert 7).

I argue it is currently impossible to tangibly *reject* neoliberalism in any meaningful sense because it is so effectively embedded in American society and culture and yet expanding globally. Post-neoliberalism as an “after” neoliberalism era may be a goal but it not yet a real option let alone a near-reality.

Exalting the American farmer predates the nation, and in fact harkens back to our colonial beginnings and serves as the foundation of the agrarian myth. Though established in the colonial East, the American agrarian myth has become closely aligned with Manifest Destiny and the (endless) frontier myth; that is, “America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, [and] self-reliant” (Slotkin 5). In many ways, the agrarian myth was solidified during the long rolling process of western expansion (versus Jeffersonian agrarianism of the colonial era and early republic). While this project is inclusive of the entire geographical U.S., it spatially emphasizes the agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces of the American heartland (Midwest), Great Plains, and American West. The temporal parameters of this project are the 1980s to present, a dynamic period in U.S. history during which neoliberalism was consolidated, after its initial revolutionary transformation of the American economy in the 1970s, towards normalized precarity and precarization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss Isabelle Lorey’s tripartite thinking on the precarious (precariousness, precarity, and precarization) in relation to American neoliberal culture in Chapter 2.

### The Agrarian Myth

Unlike other American myths, which have been largely debunked due to their exceptionalist core natures and nationalistic purposes, the agrarian myth has endured mostly unscathed. Simply defined, the agrarian myth represents the strongly held belief that agrarian, and, by extension, rural spaces, peoples, and lifeways are the most desirable, the most virtuous, and the *most American*. Fundamental to the myth are distinctly American characteristics of rugged individualism, self-reliance, virtuousness, independence, and integrity, which, according to the myth, can only be fully developed in agrarian(rural) settings—the neoyeoman as Manifest American: the neoliberal reification of the nation’s most *American American*.

While the romanticization of the American farmer and (agrarian)rural peoples, spaces, and lifeways is nothing new, a focused modern critical treatment of this all too American mythology is overdue. While this project will provide context on the roots of the myth, its impact on thinking on Americanness and national identity(ies), and the literal and metaphoric erasure of peoples and cultures problematising the myth (towards national progress and promise), it will primarily explore modern-day use of the myth, including how its appropriation and perpetuation allows for harmful sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic associations and creates pathways for obscuring and/or discounting public health risks and environmental degradation. Though the credibility of national myths as studied in the past has been roundly condemned as exceptionalist, nationalistic, and ideologically unacceptable by the academy, the persistence of

the myth is well-evidenced in modern American society.<sup>5</sup> For example, clear and direct lines can be drawn between the rhetoric of early American yeomanship and the nation's proclaimed *most faithful* citizens ; that is, following the yeoman tenets of authenticity, democracy, individualism, faithful, and the like, and such pronouncements as vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin's 2008 identification of rural America as "the real America"<sup>6</sup> and the "pro-America areas of this great nation," or the similar commentary of the likes of conservative talk radio hosts, or the plain talk of many conservative patriot-minded white rural folks<sup>7</sup>—towards neoyeomanship, towards Manifest Americans (qtd. in Sinderbrand).

The notion of neoyeomanship is important to this project. The term "neo-yeoman" has been used by scholars primarily regarding various iterations of back-to-the-land movements; that

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<sup>5</sup> The study of American myths, though not popular in U.S.-American Studies is yet important in non-U.S. American Studies, as evidenced in the work of such scholars as Heike Paul, author of *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (2014).

<sup>6</sup> As *God Land: A Story of Faith, Loss, and Renewal in Middle America* (2019) author Lyz Lenz explains, rural America is "the quintessential ideal of America: the flat plains, the corn waving in the wind. *Little House on the Prairie*, these beautiful visions of nature and open spaces. It's so tied into the American dream" (qtd. in E. Green).

<sup>7</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 2018 "Rural America at a Glance" "Whites make up nearly 80[%] of the rural population, compared with 58[%] of the urban population" (3). According to Pew Research Center, rural voters are increasingly and predominately Republican: "Among rural whites, the GOP enjoyed a roughly 10-percentage-point advantage throughout much of the 2000s; the GOP advantage among rural white voters is now 24 percentage points (58% to 34%)" ("Wide Gender Gap" 22). Additionally, rural white voters tend to be more socially and politically conservative. In the 2016 presidential election, 64% rural white Republican voters voted for Donald Trump (Keeter and Igielnik 10). Nearly all those surveyed by Pew identifying as having "consistently conservative values" voted for Trump (98%; Hillary Clinton: 1%) and those identified as "mostly conservative," favored Trump by 87% to Clinton's 7% (Pew, "For Most Trump Voters" 12).

is, small-scale autonomous sustenance farming efforts with social reform motivations usually associated with religious separatists, antigovernment militias, and counterculture hippies. Specific to this neoliberal moment, my conception of neoyeomanship encapsulates the embrace of classic yeomanship dogma and modern neoliberal doctrine towards the realization of Manifest Americans as idealized persons(products) of the agrarian myth—created in the minds of republican agrarians, propelled forward by Manifest Destiny, and consolidated through white settlement and cultivation of stolen Native lands. Manifest Americans believe themselves the backbone of American society and the embodiment of democracy. Neoyeomen are *true* Americans: Manifest Americans.

In the U.S., the progression of neoliberalism has reached near-tyrannical heights—pervading nearly all aspects of American society, culture, and cultural production. Challenges to neoliberalism are perceived as challenges to the American way of life—a way of life that must be protected at all costs. This nationalist zealotry parallels cries to protect the American farming way of life—evoking notions of Jeffersonian yeomanship. The explicit acknowledgement and advancement of the neoliberalism and agrarian agendas have thus become entwined resulting in the neoliberalization of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces—a *neoyeomanization*, if you will—another neoliberal achievement with profound impacts on agrarian(rural) lifeways and landscapes, which has left many agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces in peril.

### Expanding Myth Criticism

American myths are popular, powerful, and enduring national metanarratives which explain the origins of the U.S., its purpose and values, and why and how the nation is exceptional. They have sacred status. Our nation's foundational myths include discovery, the

promised land, the melting pot, the (endless) frontier, the American West, the self-made man, the American Dream, and of course, the agrarian myth. Despite their questionable relationships with the historical record and overt associations with nation-centered exceptionalism, exclusion, imperialism, and hegemony, as well as the disreputation of Myth and Symbol school scholarship, American myths have endured and yet project and inform dominant American ideologies. As German Americanist Heike Paul explains in her textbook *The Myths That Made America* (2014),

American myths... play a crucial role in the symbolization and affirmation of the US nation; it is their cultural work, so to speak, to make discursive constructions of the nation plausible and self-evident, to create internal solidarity and commitment to the nation state and its policies, and to represent the US to outsiders. Myth in general, as it operates on the level of (often tacit) belief rather than rationality, can be seen as the prime discursive form of ideology (17).

Far from being mired in the past, the nation's foundational myths are well-evidenced in modern American and help us to understand and explain the nation's complex contemporary, and often problematic, ideologies.

### Methodological Framework

This project brings together cultural studies and ecocritical approaches as methodology for literary, art, and film criticism, with additional significant consideration of affect theory and nostalgia criticism in order to read the agrarian myth in this age of neoliberalism. Perverse nostalgia,<sup>8</sup> my original theoretical contribution to this project, will help explain how simple

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<sup>8</sup> In her chapter titled "Perverse Nostalgia Child Sex Abuse as Trauma Commodity in Neo-Victorian Fiction," in Elisabeth Wesseling's *Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia: Books, Toys, and*

nostalgia, which normally works to mitigate disruptions in the meeting of core human needs, such as one's sense of self or sense of belonging, is instead perverted by neoliberal realities, which in turn creates discontinuity and exacerbates existential fears, thus triggering perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past. Core to my analysis is the understanding of neoliberalism as a cultural structure; that is, the entrenchment of neoliberalism in American society and culture and its resultant staggering impact on American cultural production—what one scholar refers to as a zombie plague.<sup>9</sup>

American art, literature, and film serve as source cultural material (products) for illustrating how the agrarian myth has been used to both promote and disparage American agrarianism ideals, and to what ends, and more specifically, how agrarian-focused cultural narratives can be read as either appeasing or disrupting the neoliberal problematics and the reification of the agrarian myth. Federal legislation and reports, executive orders, academic scholarship, journalism, and various historic and contemporary primary and secondary source materials are key to identifying and explicating neoliberal sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical conditions and impacts directly related to the purpose of this project, especially

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*Contemporary Media Culture* (2017), literary scholar Marie-Luise Kohlke uses the term “perverse nostalgia” to describe the “desire for the knowledge/experience of sexual horrors, real and imagined” in neo-Victorian fictions of 19<sup>th</sup> century child sexual abuse (185). Kohlke’s use of this term is very different from my concept of perverse nostalgia, which concerns the modern-day neoliberal perversion of simple nostalgia, along with its highly raced, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed dynamics.

<sup>9</sup> See Mitchum Huehls’ *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (2016).

concerning the agrarian myth as cover for systemic marginalization, public health risks, environmental degradation, and the depletion of agrarian(rural) lands and resources. The interdisciplinary ethos and resources of American Studies and cultural studies will be employed throughout the project.

### American Studies and Cultural Studies

Cultural studies scholar Bruce Burgett and literary scholar Glenn Hendler clarify the evolutionary difference between American Studies and cultural studies in their introduction to *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2014). They explain, cultural studies asks “What is culture?,” while American Studies asks “What is American?” (Burgett and Hendler 4). They further explain (per cultural theorist Michael Denning) “the first question prove[s] more useful than the second since it open[s] inquiry onto a wider range of cultural forms and forms of political action” (Burgett and Hendler 4). American Studies, however, has more recently

Turned toward [broader cultural] modes of inquiry, partly as a result of its encounter with work in cultural studies on questions of region, migration, and diaspora but also due to the engagement of both fields with other forms of intersectional analysis, including work produced in the new interdisciplinary formations... such as ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, disability studies, working-class studies, and women, gender, and sexuality studies (Burgett and Hendler 4).

This project embraces both American Studies and cultural studies approaches.

### Cultural Studies

Cultural studies, as a discipline, provides a broad framework for making sense of the world. Because this project requires critical analysis of the relationships between historical, cultural, sociopolitical, affective, nostalgic and other aspects of the appropriation and perpetuation of the agrarian myth, such as shared social meanings and ideologies, contradictory

social meanings and ideologies, a critical cultural approach is required. Importantly, and much like in American Studies, “[t]here is an intrinsically critical and political dimension to the project of cultural studies that distinguishes it from objectivist and apolitical academic approaches to the study of culture and society” (Kellner, *Media Culture* 11). Particularly pertinent, and fundamental to cultural studies, is the critical examination of ideologies, as “dominant ideologies serve to reproduce social relations of domination and subordination” (Kellner, *Media Culture* 11). Critical consideration of hegemony—very similar but not synonymous with domination—and its impact on American identity(ies) and society is also of great importance. Hegemony “names the realm in which subcultures and subaltern groups wield their politics in the register of style and culture” (Yudice 69).

Indeed, in societies like the United States, where needs are often interpreted in relation to identity factors and cultural difference, culture becomes a significant ground for extending a right to groups that have otherwise been excluded on those terms. The very notion of cultural citizenship implies recognition of cultural difference as a basis for making claims (Yudice 69).

The concept of cultural hegemony is of course also important to consider (though from a Marxist-lite position) in relation to the dominance of specific aspects of American culture over local, regional, and traditional cultures within the nation’s borders (rather than the dominance of American culture over those of other countries). As cultural theorist Jim McGuigan explains, “To be effective, hegemony must operate not only at a philosophical or theoretical level but, also, at a mass-popular level. It is at the mass-popular or common-sense level that a leading ideology truly acquires hegemonic entrenchment within civil society” (20).

In neoliberal America—where society largely comprises angry, anxious, self-enclosed individuals,<sup>10</sup> manipulated by state and corporate power, and entrenched in market competition, which defines nearly all aspects of American life—cultural studies provides means for explicating societal conjunctures (along the lines of Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s notion of conjuncture: the coming together of complex societal forces and structures (economic, social, cultural, ideological) at a given time which shapes political outcomes), as well as meaningful exploration of new forms of knowledge. Through cultural studies, we can better understand

How power infiltrates, contaminates, limits, and empowers the possibilities that people possess to live their lives in dignified and secure ways. For if one wants to change the relations of power—if one wants to move people, even a little bit—one must begin from where people are, from where and how they actually live their lives<sup>11</sup> (Grossberg 257).

Further, through its expansion beyond the political and the economic to the cultural, neoliberalism has now become what Marxist theorist and cultural critic Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling”; that is, a hegemonic powerhouse with the great capacity to structure social sensibilities—ordinary lived experiences, emotions, and feelings.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Feminist theorist AnaLouise Keating uses “‘self-enclosed’ [in regard to self-enclosed individualism] to emphasize its inflexible boundaries dividing self from other, its absolute isolation, and its intense focus on the particular individual human being” (171).

<sup>11</sup> Optimistically, cultural scholar Lawrence Grossberg suggests, “power is never able to totalize itself. There are always fissures and fault lines that may become the active sites of change. Power never quite accomplishes everything it might like to everywhere, and there is always the possibility of changing the structures and organization of power” (257).

<sup>12</sup> This is explained in further detail in Chapter 2, in relation to literary scholar and critic Patricia Ventura’s thinking on neoliberal culture and her organization of key neoliberal components in

While the discipline of American Studies has long been interested in cultural production; that is, the creation, dissemination, and consumption of American cultural products, this project is only interested in the creation of cultural products in this neoliberal moment as considered through the lens of the agrarian myth and within the socioeconomic, sociopolitical, sociocultural contexts in which they were created. This project does not focus on the diffusion of cultural products or how various audiences have interpreted and/or consumed the selected cultural products discussed. Distribution, consumption, and audience analysis of American cultural production is beyond the scope of this project. These cultural production topics, however, are research areas ripe for future American Studies scholarship.

### Ecocriticism

Ecocritical analysis<sup>13</sup> provides an ethical mode through which to explore the agrarian myth, not only in relation to a real and knowable natural world, but in particular relation to peoples' and communities' relationships with the environment and allows for critical explorations into how the myth provides protection for ongoing environmental damage. As

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relation to Raymond Williams' structures of feeling, such as biopolitics, corporatocracy, erosion of welfare-state society, globalization, and hyper-legality.

<sup>13</sup> Formative influences on ecocriticism can be traced to such foundational American Studies texts as Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), and Marx's, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in American Culture* (1964)—Myth and Symbol explorations into representations of the environment in American literature as emblematic of cultural practices that helped to construct a national identity—as well as later texts, such as Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975) and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (1984).

defined by ecofiction scholar Jim Dwyer, ecocriticism is “a critical perspective on the relationship between literature and the natural world, and the place of humanity within—not separate from—nature” (1). This definition, especially its unequivocal linking of human and nonhuman spheres, is vital to any meaningful study of humanity’s relationship with and impact on the environment. This is especially true in acknowledgement that negative environmental impact is not truly localized for long, if at all. A global perspective is requisite to ecocriticism. “Unlike other approaches to literary criticism, ecocriticism addresses the relationship between writers, texts, and the world from a truly global perspective—one in which ‘the world’ is the entire ecosphere, not just human society” (Murfin and Ray 125). Equally important to an ecocritical approach is the clear understanding that the natural world has intrinsic worth apart from human matters and concerns. As comparative literature scholar Simon Estok points out, through “its ethical stance of commitment to the natural world,” ecocriticism values the nonhuman sphere as significant “rather than simply as an *object of thematic study*”—and, importantly, is “commit[ted] to making [such critical] connections” (198; emphasis in the original).

### Affect Theory

In the humanities and social sciences, affect theory provides a powerful approach for considering how one (or a community, region, or nation) affects and/or is affected, and in particular concerns critical analysis of felt experience as motivation for social action. Affect theory relates to “feelings” and “emotions,” though these terms are not commonly used due to their oft negative vernacular associations with irrationality; the term “affect” works to neutralize this adverse connotation (Cvetkovich 13). As gender studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich explains,

the affective turn “takes up debates about the construction of binary oppositions between reason and emotion and the reversal of hierarchies that subordinate emotion to reason as part of a mind/body split” (13). Of particular value to this project are feminist approaches that locate the political in affect—importantly, without prioritizing particular ontological aspects or separating ontological and epistemological realms of existence and politics, as evidenced in feminist scholar Clare Hemming’s concept of affective solidarity, which “[concerns keeping] ontology and epistemology together within feminist theory, and to integrate an account of experience that is dynamic rather than [essentializing]” (158). Also of interest to this project is the American Studies and cultural studies application of philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari’s theory of affect, which “describe[s] the impersonal intensities, forces, and movements that cause bodies and objects to affect and be affected by one another” (Cvetkovich 15). This project will consider Deleuze and Guattari’s theory in a slightly different manner, however, to more fully consider cultural ideologies and structures of power in relation to pertinent human and nonhuman relationships and human concerns and impacts on their environment. This effort will not join the debate over whether affect occurs prior- or post-cognition, or the debate concerning differentiating between affect and intentionality, as such matters are beyond the scope of this project.

Though the recent turn to affect theory in American Studies and cultural studies largely concerns centering affect and emotion within cultural memory and trauma focused discussion, incorporating an affect approach into my analysis will help to understand and explain outwardly seemingly hypocritical and damaging (affected and disaffected) human actions, such as persons actively or passively damaging the environment in which they live while believing/purporting

themselves to be the best stewards, such as engaging in “soil farming” (discussed in Chapter 1) or voting against their best interests, such as supporting the near wholesale dismantling of the so-called welfare state which diminishes or eliminates vital national safety nets and other federal and state support systems upon which they often heavily rely, and supporting federal and other efforts at deregulation, which put human and non-human health and the environment in danger and depletes local resources, while at the same time enriching neoliberal capitalist elites.

Important to this discourse is feminist theorist Lauren Berlant’s affective positioning of cruel optimism as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (Berlant 1, emphasis in the original). Where optimism is not inherently cruel, it becomes so when that which induces attachment actively prevents its original purpose (Berlant 1). This project considers cruel optimism to be a byproduct of the neoliberal socioeconomic, sociopolitical, sociocultural conditions, through which attachment collides (rather spectacularly) with the affective politics of precarity; that is, affective uncertainty as an effect of neoliberalism. (Cruel optimism is discussed further in Chapter 3.)

### Nostalgia Criticism

While nostalgia approaches are problematic for some cultural critics, postmodernists in particular,<sup>14</sup> according to cultural scholar Sean Scanlan, due to its perceived “inherent

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<sup>14</sup> Many feminist critics also perceive nostalgia this way, especially regarding nostalgia for patriarchal structures. As Kate Eichhorn finds in her article “Feminism’s There: On Post-Ness

conservatism and its distance from real history,” as well as seeming connotations of “mistake[ness] or... evasion,” current nostalgia criticism largely considers “nostalgia as warning, as pejorative marker of certain historical changes,” which “has given way to nostalgia as a more ambivalent, more engaged, critical frame” (4). “Now, nostalgia may be a style or design or narrative that serves to comment on how memory works. Rather than an end reaction to yearning, it is understood as a technique for provoking a secondary reaction” (Scanlan 4). Understanding the influence and impact of nostalgia is vital to meaningful ideological discourse on culture.

### Perverse Nostalgia

Simple nostalgia, the usually harmless sentimental longing for the past, is transformative in that it involves dynamic interaction between the past, the present, and the future (Sedikides et al. 306). Particularly important is the future/forward positive projection of retrospections (the past): (Sedikides et al. 306). Perverse nostalgia *perverts* simple nostalgia by disrupting future/forward positive projections making the normally healthy interplay between the past, present, and future impossible because perverse nostalgia is, at its core, fortified with

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and Nostalgia” (2015), critics offer scathing condemnation for nostalgia, such as Lynne Huffer’s warning that “even if ‘nostalgia can be harnessed for liberatory or oppressive aims,’ it ultimately holds no possibility for recuperation because ‘the structure underlying nostalgic thinking reinforces a conservative social system’” (258). Eichhorn also cautions about the perceived connection between nostalgia and conservatism (which is wholly undesirable to feminist politics): “while nostalgia has no place whatsoever in a radical political project,” it may be argued to be at the core of conservative politics (257).

problematic falsehoods and wishful thinking, exacerbated by neoliberal realities created through invented/skewed retrospection. Where simple nostalgia works to manage real or imagined threats to self-continuity and belongingness, perverse nostalgia, initiated through neoliberal-induced precarity and precarization, prevails over simple nostalgic longing in its drive to correct perceived societal wrongs; that is, restore an idealized(mythical) past: the Lost Cause of the Confederacy and “Make America Great Again.” In its desperate struggle to reestablish appropriate social conditions—especially those that are racialized, classed, gendered, faithed, and otherwise Othered—perverse nostalgia embraces an invented, idealized, and even mythical past, supported by already deeply entrenched national metanarratives.

Important to this project, and my concept of perverse nostalgia, is cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo’s notion of imperialist nostalgia. Understood through a framework of colonialism, imperialist nostalgia is sentimental mourning by colonizers for the historical and cultural past of the colonized, which allows the colonizers to think about their society through a framework of progress and transformation, while simultaneously disallowing the colonized the same capability. Absurdly, with imperialist nostalgia, it is the colonizer who laments that which is gone or nearly gone, not the colonized—overtly implying innocence instead of complicity.

Another important thinker informing this project is Russian literary scholar Svetlana Boym, who defines “nostalgia as a symptom of our age, a historical emotion” (*Future of Nostalgia* xvi). Particularly of interest is her bifurcation of nostalgia into the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia concerns the desire to return home; that is, the reliving or reconstruction of a real or imagined past, while reflective nostalgia concerns longing for the past along with acknowledgement that one cannot return to it. “While restorative nostalgia returns

and rebuilds one homeland with paranoid determination, reflective nostalgia fears return with the same passion” (Boym, “Nostalgia” 15). Boym’s concept of restorative nostalgia is important to my notion of perverse nostalgia.

Also important is psychologist Stacey Novack’s thinking on political nostalgia. “Political nostalgia involves a repudiation of present day social, economics, and cultural realities, and there is much in the present that has been rhetorically repudiated by the Trump campaign: immigration, globalization, feminism, and the growing multiculturalism of the U.S., to name just a few factors” (“Perils and Untapped Potentials” 2-3). Perverse nostalgia is closely linked with political nostalgia, as well as Boym’s restorative nostalgia. Perverse nostalgia grossly misrepresents reality while claiming a historical and cultural real, and ultimately (often dramatically) works against the self-interests of those who engage with (fall prey to) it.

#### The Agrarian Myth in American Studies: A Review of Cultural Products

America’s preoccupation with nature and the natural world is well-evidenced in the literature. Relatedly, the agrarian myth, with its innate connections to being in or close to nature, has strong ties to the founding of American Studies as “an organizing category... often figured abstractly as wilderness, frontier, or garden” (Sweet 403). This may be because conceptions of nature for early Americans served as “the basic ingredient of American culture” through which American civilization and identity were created—a belief still quite recognizable in modern American society (Nash xix-xx).

Founding American Studies scholars, including Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, and Leo Marx, found great inspiration in the nation’s natural (or natural seeming) environs, as represented in the nation’s literary works, as evidenced by their largely idealistic and optimistic

focus on the nation's perceived unifying myths and organizing symbols. These distinctly American myths and symbols, such as virgin land, American Adam, the frontier, the machine in the garden, were directly related to, and explained, American national identity and experience through American Studies' original unifying school of thought, Myth and Symbol. Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) looks at the construction of American identity through the interaction of Americans with the natural world. In particular, he studies "the impact of the West, the vacant continent beyond the frontier, on the consciousness of Americans" and importantly, and in large part through surveying the impact and legitimacy of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, "concerns himself with how representations of the West—as paradisiacal Nature... as a garden for the nurture of democracy—helped nineteenth-century Americans to imagine themselves collectively as a distinct nation" (Lowry 317). Lewis' *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955) employs J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of an American as a *new man* to describe the construction of national identity; that is, the transformative notion of an innocent Adam, with no past, who is creating a new (vacant) world for himself and his progeny. This "American as Adam" was "an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (R. Lewis 5). Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964) explores the complex relationship between 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century culture and technology. He "describe[s] and evaluate[s] the uses of the pastoral idea in the interpretation of American experience," especially regarding the idyllic representation of agrarian(rural) spaces, such as Smith's myth of the garden concept—romanization of the agrarian myth (Marx 4). Marx also

introduces the notion of the machine in the garden as metaphor for the deepening “conflict between civilization and nature,” and the urban and the rural (33). Collectively, these founding texts, though now methodologically obsolete, introduced important critical themes in American Studies, such as American as Eden/Arcadia, America as a garden, pastoralism, “middle landscape,” the impact and consequences of modern industrialization, and cultural transformation—themes which have significant lasting impact on modern-day thinking on the idealization of agrarian(rural) spaces, peoples, and lifeways, as well as on the contemptuous urban-rural divide.

Though not American Studies scholars, the likes of Wendell Berry, Donald Worster, William Kittredge, Eric Freyfogle, Norman Wirzba, David Orr, Stephanie Mills, and Scott Russell Sanders, as well as popular writers such as Barbara Kingsolver and Michael Pollan, have contributed significantly to the new agrarianism movement which “marks [the] resurgence of [sustainable] agrarian practices and values in rural areas, suburbs, and even cities... and attempts... to strengthen society’s roots in the land while bringing greater health to families, neighborhoods, and communities” (“The New Agrarianism”). According to environmental law scholar Eric Freyfogle, in his introduction to the anthology *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life* (2001), “Agrarianism is very much alive and flourishing in America today” and speaks passionately about the moral dimensions of new agrarianism (xvii). Theologist and ecologist Norman Wirzba describes this new agrarianism, or *authentic* agrarianism as he terms it, in his introduction to *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land* (2003), an anthology on sustainable agrarianism, as a “compelling and coherent alternative to the modern industrial/technological/economic

paradigm”; that is, “a deliberate and intentional way of living and thinking that takes seriously the failures and successes of the past as they have been realized in our engagement with the earth and with each other” (4). Wirzba clarifies authentic agrarianism is not farming, as such, but rather signifies “the sustained attempt to live faithfully and responsibly in a world of limits and possibilities” and represents “a comprehensive worldview that holds together a synoptic vision the health of land and culture” (4-5). The new agrarianism movement relates to larger discussions on modern sustainable agrarianism and is primarily concerned with food and farming activism and far less so (if at all) on the perpetuation of the American agrarian myth and its sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical implications, though certainly the new agrarianism movement has grave concerns about negative environmental impacts, agricultural or otherwise.

Though American Studies generally has a strong connection and has contributed significantly to environmental-focused literary and history scholarship since its inception, the current focus of the discipline, and the American Studies Association (ASA) and its academic journal, *American Quarterly*, in particular, have not focused near as much on environmental issues as in decades past, especially those which concern happenings within the nation’s geographical boundaries. The ASA does however have an Environment and Culture Caucus, organized “to promote further work on the environment, broadly understood, within the association,” and sponsors conference and other panels “on environmental issues... and engage[s] in a variety of other efforts to raise the profile of environmental work within and around the ASA and American studies as a field” (“Environment and Culture”). In particular, this caucus is interested in “historical and cultural analysis of environmental issues and concerns,

and hope[s] to demonstrate the relevance of environmental scholarship to the central issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and colonialism at the heart of much work in American culture studies” (“Environment and Culture”).

### Agrarian Myth Cultural Products: Art, Literature, and Film

American Art There is remarkably little scholarly attention to date on agrarian-focused art, and there is but one fine art museum exclusively dedicated to American agrarian art: The Bone Creek Museum of Agrarian Art in David City, Nebraska. A review of the literature finds no dedicated critical books on the subject, and very few journal articles and the like. For example, Gene Logsdon's *The Mother of All Arts: Agrarianism and the Creative Impulse* (2007), which purportedly focuses on visual art, literature, and music, appears promising at first look but it is not a scholarly effort and works rather as a quasi-new agrarianism memoir/meditation on new agrarianism culture. Some critical books on American art movements include agrarian-focused works, but they are not a major emphasis nor contemporarily focused.<sup>15</sup>

Early American agrarian art was largely pastoral in nature, and as art historian Barbara Novak explains, was principally concerned with depicting a disappearing pastoral way of life, rather than agrarian life itself (8). Closely linked with agrarian art, however, is the celebration of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny, which is well represented in 19<sup>th</sup> century artwork. One of the most famous, and representative of such works is John Gast's allegorical painting

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<sup>15</sup> See Barbara Novak's *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (1969) and Michael P. Conzen's *The Making of the American Landscape* (1990).

*American Progress* (1872) (also known as “Spirit of the Frontier,” “Westward the Course of Destiny,” “Manifest Destiny,” or “Westward Ho”), oil on canvas, which features the goddess Columbia, guide and protectant of pioneers, settlers, and farmers. George Crofutt, who commissioned the painting explains, “In her right hand she carries a book—common schools—the emblem of education and the testimonial of our national enlightenment, while with the left hand she unfolds and stretches the slender wires of the telegraph, that are to flash intelligence throughout the land” (“Frontispiece”). Native peoples are being pushed ahead out of the way; in retreat from *progress*. Behind the initial expansion comes progress: technological advances including the railroad, steamboats, telegraph wires, and the like.

During the 1930s, artists responded to the Dust Bowl through works depicting environmental disaster and resultant destitute farmers and migrants, or “Okies,”<sup>16</sup> through a variety of mediums, such as paintings, photographs, and large-scale public murals. Representative works include Alexandre Hogue’s “Drouth Stricken Area” (1934), oil on canvas, from his Erosion series, in which employs what he refers to as psychoreality: the deliberate intensification of the conditions depicted in order to generate empathy in the viewer. Hogue was among artists who placed blame on human ineptitude and thoughtlessness, viewing overcultivation and the plow as agents of disaster: the belief that the land had been destroyed

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<sup>16</sup> “Okies” is a generic derogatory term given to poverty-stricken Great Depression migrants from Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas looking for work and opportunities in the West, primarily in California.

“first by fence, then by overplowing, now by drought” (qtd. in “Drouth”). Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California” (1936), gelatin silver print, is probably the best-known work of art from this period. The photograph famously depicts the plight of migrant farmworkers during the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression famously embodied in John Steinbeck’s great American novel. The photograph is of Florence Leona Christie Thompson, a Cherokee woman born in what was then Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Though she moved westward ahead of other migrants, her life is representative of others who sought but could not achieve a better future in California.

American Regionalists, such as Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and Thomas Hart Benton, focus on depression and post-depression era grassroots American heartland themes and scenes, versus the period’s opposing sophisticated cosmopolitan abstract style. For example, Grant Wood’s famous and oft imitated and parodied “American Gothic” (1930), oil on beaver board, reflects Midwest peoples and values: strong, stern, serious, religious, traditional, unpretentious, nationalistic. Thomas Hart Benton’s “July Hay” (1943), egg tempera and oil, reflects the everyday activities of the so-called average American: harvesting hay in a bounteous Midwestern landscape. John Steuart Curry’s “The Homestead and Building of the Barbed Wire Fence” (1939), oil and tempera on canvas installation (mural), and “The Oklahoma Land Rush” (1939), oil and tempera on canvas installation (mural), both at the Department of Interior Building, Washington, D.C., depict widely divergent but representative scenes: the essence of Midwestern family life—the happiness, fruitfulness, peacefulness, and promised prosperity of agrarian society—in “The Homestead,” and the frenzy of acquiring “surplus” Indian lands as part

of the western expansion in “The Oklahoma Land Rush.” Both murals focus on the common (white) agrarian(rural) experience.

A June 2019 search of the Smithsonian American Art Museum for works with the term “farm” in the title or description, returns a list of 1,033 works covering nearly two and half centuries of artistic production, of which only 32 are currently on display; a search of the “agrarian” lists just one artwork. (Not all these works are of American themes or scenes but were created by American artists.) Most of the works depict bucolic idealized themes and scenes of sentimentalized (white) American rural life. Only a few works portray people of color, such as William H. Johnson's “Farm Workers” (1940), tempera and pen and ink on paperboard, which depicts two African American men breaking a field.

American Literature Since the early days of the republic, writers such as J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson have advanced a pastoral agrarian vision for the young nation, with the yeoman farmer at the core of this philosophy. Yeomanship is synonymous with autonomous farming, where the yeoman farmer is representative of the highest morality, industriousness, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance. As example, Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) celebrates American agrarianism as a humble endeavor full of promise, independence, and prosperity for those willing to toil. Franklin's “Positions to be Examined” (1769) names agriculture as the only honest path to acquiring wealth, after naming war (conquering) and commerce (cheating) as the other two primary (and disreputable) means. Jefferson's “Notes on Virginia” (1788) connects yeoman farmers directly and securely to idealized American ideals, characteristics, and values—with considerable lasting impact.

Despite propitious beginnings, and clear signals embracing the myth, there have been significant challenges to the agrarian myth in American literature, as evidenced in many American Romanticism (American Renaissance) works of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, such as the various works of James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Henry David Thoreau, through which farmers are often portrayed as rubes, louts, and bumpkins. Works such as Edgar Watson Howe's *The Story of a Country Town* (1882), Harold Frederic's *Seth's Brother's Wife* (1887), Hamlin Garland's *Jason Edwards* (1891) and *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917), Frank Norris' *The Octopus: A California Story* (1901), and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) reveal disputatious elements between the myth and an emergent 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialized, commercialized, corrupt, and capitalist world. Jay Martin, in *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865–1914* (1967) describes the agrarian(rural) world depicted in such works as “[s]urrounded by decay, death, and evil, the people who came west to ‘grow up with the country’ are merely degraded by it” (118). It is important to note that some works of the same era, such as Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918), which comprise her commercially and critically successful *Prairie Trilogy*, largely proclaim successes on the western prairie. Later 20<sup>th</sup> century texts, however, such as John Updike's *Of the Farm* (1965), Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991), and Annie Proulx's *Postcards* (1996), continue to distance the American farmer from the myth through emphasizing the severe mental and physical demands associated with keeping and running family farms in a time of growing agricorporatization, as well as the risks of agripreneurial efforts. While yet other texts from this period revive and rewrite the myth in terms of social, racial, and environmental justice; that is, centering farmers, ranchers, and farm laborers of color in the myth.

Such texts include Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), John Nichols' *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1974), David Mas Masumoto's *Epitaph for a Peach: Four Seasons on My Family Farm* (1995), and Leslie Marmon Silko's (Laguna Pueblo) *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). In recent years, there has been a turn back towards presenting agrarian(rural) lifeways as not only aligned with the agrarian myth but as embodying the ability to *save* American society from itself. Ecologically focused texts that help to recover the myth include Arthur Versluis' *Island Farm* (2000), in the same vein of Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Barbara Kingsolver's intimate *Prodigal Summer* (2000), and Wendell Berry's revised *A Place on Earth* (2001; previously published in 1983), which effuses nostalgia for earlier iterations of agrarianism. Hopeful works, such as the recent texts comprising Jane Smiley's *The Last Hundred Years Trilogy: A Family Saga*, which includes *Some Luck* (2014), *Early Warning* (2015), and *Golden Age* (2015), work to significantly rehabilitate the myth. As one reviewer comments, "unlike the folks who populated *A Thousand Acres*, these are overwhelmingly good, religious, salt of the earth country folk in mostly healthy family and personal relationships, and we can hardly help but root for them" (Bergman 98).

Concerning pertinent popular cultural nonfiction, there are a slew of recent popular publications looking at the *plight* of rural whites and the white working class, such as Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: the 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016), Justin Gest's *The New Minority: White Working-Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality* (2016), Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016), J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016), Sarah Kendzior's *The View from Flyover Country: Dispatches from the Forgotten*

*America* (2018), Jonathan Metzler's *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (2019), and Timothy P. Carney's *Alienated America: Why Some Places Thrive While Others Collapse* (2019). While clearly the time is ripe for such analysis, with the exception of Isenberg's *White Trash*, a monumental undertaking uncovering the history of the white underclass in the U.S., Metzler's *Dying of Whiteness*, a well-argued call for white Americans to reject racial hierarchies and their false promises and damaging consequences, and Carney's *Alienated America*, a panoramic *Hillbilly Elegy*-esque effort to explain the urban-rural divide, the bulk of these *white plight* works largely seek to empathize with their modern-day subjects rather than hold them accountable for their participation in the current state of affairs, such as acknowledging their white privilege, their acts of whitelash, and the like—including what is occurring in their own backyards. For example, Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* in particular endeavors not to criticize what I would argue is explicit complicity in the systemic marginalization of people of color and the poor, increased risks to human health, and ecological damage, as well as highly problematic zero-sum thinking.

American Film Since its beginnings, film has depicted agrarian(rural) themes, including aspects of the agrarian myth, working to further fix American agrarianism in the minds of audiences. Like other entertainment media, film tends to either whitewash or idealize agrarian(rural) landscapes and lifestyles, though some films certainly work to expose the darker side of agrarianism, especially in relation to the industrialization, capitalization, and corporatization of agriculture.

John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), based on John Steinbeck's 1939 novel of the same name, concerns the plight of a family of migrant farmworkers making their way from

Oklahoma to California after losing their farm during the Great Depression. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma!* (1955), adapted from Lynn Riggs' play *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1930), pays homage to traditional turn-of-the-century agricultural communities, depicting the agrarian(rural) ideal: red barns, white fences, tidy farmhouses, flourishing fields, and fruit laden orchards—despite being set on newly opened lands in Oklahoma Territory (just previously vast Native lands). Historical agrarian epics such as Elia Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955) and George Stevens' *Giant* (1956) depict the transition from small-scale agrarian to large-scale industrial society, necessitating the need to hire Latinx laborers. *East of Eden*, an adaptation of John Steinbeck's 1952 novel of the same name, is a variation of the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. Set in Salinas, California, in 1917, the film depicts California farmlands as Edenic paradise. *Giant*, based on Edna Ferber's 1952 novel of the same, is a sweeping tribute to 1920-50s Texas cattle and oil largesse. The shift from the agrarian to the industrial is symbolized in a memorable scene overlaying the gates of the ranch, a large herd of cattle, and an oil field.

Farm crisis films of the 1980s, or “mortgage melodramas,” largely focus on contemporaneous problematics concerning centering blame for agrarian(rural) decline not on the farmer/rancher but rather on corruption presumed to be inherent to federal agricultural policy, banking and financing, and/or individuals with economic and/or political power, as well as the exorbitant/prohibitive cost of farm equipment and technological improvements. These films include Robert Benton's *Places in the Heart* (1984), William Witliff's *Country* (1984), and Mark Rydell's *The River* (1984). According to Esther B. Fein's *New York Times* review of *The River*, these films have in common “elements of a family's devotion to their farm, a devastating force of nature, an unsympathetic bureaucracy and a strong-willed woman who binds her family

during adversity” (“How ‘The River’”). Though ostensibly a baseball movie, Phil Alden Robinson’s *Field of Dreams* (1989), an adaptation of W. P. Kinsella’s *Shoeless Joe* (1982), somewhat fits the above description. This is especially true in relation to depicting small-scale farmer struggles in an increasingly large-scale corporatized industry, and certainly idealizes the fertile beauty of the Iowa countryside: Shoeless Joe: “Hey, is this heaven?” / Ray: “No, it’s Iowa” (*Field of Dreams*).

Family films such as Charles A. Nichols and Iwao Takamoto’s *Charlotte’s Web* (1973), Chris Noonan’s *Babe* (1995) and Wes Anderson’s *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) offer a fairytale-esque, or storybook, depiction of the agrarian(rural), where animals are mostly anthropomorphized and farmsteads are quaint and happy places. Interestingly, the livestock animals (geese and chickens) in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* are not anthropomorphized as are the wild animals, suggesting a psychic disconnection between large-scale animal production and healthy substance farming (depicted in films like *Babe*).

Films from the 1990s look more towards the role of tradition and legacy associated with family farming (working livestock and land). These include Jocelyn Moorhouse’s *A Thousand Acres* (1997), a dark, modern, agrarian reimagining of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, based on Jane Smiley’s 1991 novel of the same name, Robert Redford’s *The Horse Whisperer* (1998), an idealization of rural Montana, based on Nicholas Evans’ 1995 novel of the same name, and Lasse Hallström’s *The Cider House Rules* (1999), a story that contrasts orphanage life (no family, no tradition) with family farming (a family-based collective/generational enterprise), based on John Irving’s 1985 novel of the same name. *A Thousand Acres* is particularly interesting in that it frames classical tragedy against a traditional agricultural family farm setting,

using both human conflict and the difficult emotional and economic transition to larger-scale farming to destroy both family and farm.

Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a neoWestern gay love story, adapted from Annie Proulx's 1997 short story of the same name, and Mick Johnson's *Temple Grandin* (2010), a biopic about Temple Grandin, an autistic woman who transformed industry practices for the more humane production of livestock, work to break the above molds while retaining vestiges of traditional agrarian(rural) life. Set in Wyoming in the 1960-70s, *Brokeback Mountain* chronicles the romance between Jack and Ennis framed within the decline of the western ranchers and ranch hands. *Temple Grandin* leaves behind grand landscapes and focuses on industrialized livestock production. The film also chronicles Grandin's effort to improve(mechanize) the cattle industry and navigate the highly gendered and ableist world of U.S. cattle ranching.

Films of the last decade depicting agrarian(rural) spaces, in particular, the American family farm, tend to be in the drama/thriller or horror genre. Examples include Hank Bausch and Andrew M. Jackson's *The Farm* (2010), Breck Eisner's *The Crazies* (2010), Gus Van Sant's *Promised Land* (2012), Henry Hobson's *Maggie* (2015), and Anne Hamilton's *American Fable* (2016). The plots of these films range from disease ridden cannibalistic zombies and contaminated rural residents turned into violent psychopaths to the ethos of corporate profits versus small town values and ecological anxieties.

### The Chapters

This project is divided into two parts. Part 1: Foundations includes three foundational chapters on the agrarian myth, neoliberal American culture, and perverse nostalgia, respectively. Each of these chapters provides important background on the specific topic, including theory and

criticism. Part 2: Cultural Production includes three context and analysis chapters each dedicated to a specific timeframe, particular neoliberal circumstances and devices, and a cultural product. Each of these chapters provides extensive context followed by thorough analysis of a pertinent American cultural product: art, literature, or film.

### The Agrarian Myth

In this chapter, I explore the history and trajectory of the American agrarian myth—the idealized and nostalgized myth and the often appalling associated realities—and extend myth criticism to analyze this persistent and popular metanarrative in this challenging age of neoliberalism. While the conceptual flaws evidenced in the Myth and Symbol school scholarship of early American Studies are many and the school of thought’s condemnation are well-warranted, it is clear we are a nation built on and sustained by its many formidable metanarratives. America’s myths work to legitimize the nation and preserve its exceptionalist purpose. Resultantly, reexamination of the agrarian myth—its history, its influence, and its promise—is necessary to understanding its shifting and problematic use and abuse in this precarious neoliberal moment. In this chapter, I also provide critical analysis on the ongoing proliferation of rural food deserts and dollar stores, as well as the implementation of dubious energy-agricultural practices as evidence of the neoliberal appropriation of the agrarian myth to provide cover for the harmful effect of these cultural products on agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces.

### Neoliberal American Culture

In this chapter, I explore and analyze key thinking on theoretical neoliberalism and relate it to interconnected neoliberal American culture and cultural production in order to provide a

framework for thinking about neoliberalism as a structuring theme for understanding the neoliberalization of agrarianism/the agrarian myth and how it works as a powerful structure for sheltering societal and environmental problematics. There is no easy understanding of neoliberalism and its all-consuming audacity and authority in modern American society and culture. Before explaining my concept of perverse nostalgia (in Chapter 3) and applying it to agrarian(rural)-focused neoliberal circumstances and cultural production (in Chapters 4-6), it is important to have a firm grasp of neoliberalism the phenomenon, the related concept of “the precarious,” and full awareness of neoliberalism’s absolute insinuation into our nation’s society and culture. In this chapter, I also provide critical analysis of modern-day reality television, including agrarian(rural)-focused iterations, as cultural production, which evidences the full exploitation of a neoliberalized American—*the American precarious*.

### Perverse Nostalgia

In this chapter, I introduce my theoretical concept “perverse nostalgia,” which explains how simple nostalgia—itsself a powerful tool of national mythologies—can become perverted by neoliberal realities when disturbances to an individual’s core human needs, such as one’s sense of self or sense of belonging and other ontological casualties of living under neoliberalism, cannot be resolved, resulting in profound discontinuity and heightened feelings of existential fear towards embracing an idealized(mythical) past out of sync with reality and in conflict with progressive/inclusive societal norms. I also discuss perverse nostalgia’s undeniable racialized, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed dynamics of inequality and its ability to transfer false information, which creates space for either identity consolidation (for those it supports/benefits; such as white straight Christian men) or identity disruption (for those it attacks/uses; such as

people of color, poor people, women, those who identify as LGBTQ+, differently abled people, people of non-Christian faiths, and (O)thers). This racism, sexism, anti-queerism, ableism, and other problematic *isms*, reifies a neoliberal society in which the targeted are made to feel emotionally and economically insecure, while simultaneously eliminating possibilities for or denying reciprocity—with reciprocity being a vital function of a cohesive, egalitarian democratic society. My discussion on perverse nostalgia provides additional perspective for understanding neoliberalism as a cultural structure—the entrenchment of neoliberalism in American society and culture and its staggering impact on the nation’s cultural production. In this chapter, I also provide critical analysis using a perverse nostalgia approach to look at social studies curricula and textbook problematics, Trump era deregulation and whitelash, and the removal of Confederate flags and monuments from public spaces.

### Reagan Country

In this chapter, I look at the 1980s and Ronald Reagan’s (nostalgic) mythical America, the ascent of Reagan-style neoliberalism and his role in fundamentally shifting the national psyche towards embedded neoliberalism, his powerful and persuasive use of political symbolism, persistent agrarian myth rhetoric, and skewing of national metanarratives to his purposes. For context, the chapter explores the 1980s farm crisis and emergent neoliberal agripolicy, which set in motion profound precarity and precarization and established precedents for modern-day agripolicymaking. The chapter also further elucidates connections between national myth making and neoliberalism, as well as analyzes Reagan’s use of idealized agrarian myth imagery for political purposes through the highly nostalgic painted mural “Reagan Country” as used in his successful 1984 presidential reelection campaign.

Moo U.

In this chapter, I move closer to the present to look at Bill Clinton's 1990s iteration of neoliberalism and the consolidation of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in the modern U.S. land grant university system. For context, the chapter analyzes late 20<sup>th</sup> century neoliberal agripolicymaking including the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the 1996 Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act (a farm bill better known as the Freedom to Farm Act), as well as intensified monocropping and concentrated animal feeding operations (better known as "factory farms"). I also provide a close reading of Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), a novel published during the ascendance of Clinton era neoliberal agripolicymaking, which presciently predates the neoliberal turn in American Studies.<sup>17</sup> Set at a fictitious midwestern land grant university (Moo U.), the novel demonstrates the disastrous effects of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism; that is, the modern U.S. land grant university

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<sup>17</sup> The neoliberal turn in American Studies concerns the initiation of critical inquiry into the initiation or impact of neoliberalism on American society and dates to the early 2000s, with its first appearance in *American Quarterly* occurring in March 2003. The turn coincides with the discipline's most recent reformative moment, begun in earnest in 2004, with Shelley Fisher Fishkin's American Studies Association (ASA) presidential address, which continues anti-exceptionalist modes of scholarship taken up by New Americanists (1990s to present; through which they embraced anti-imperialist studies concerning postcolonialism, borders, diaspora, migration, and other theories). At present, American Studies focuses almost exclusively on the continuation of decentering the imperialist nation-state and closely associated denationalizing perspectives (hemispheric, transatlantic, transpacific), participation in social movements and activism (such as, the 2013 boycott by the ASA of Israeli educational institutions in support of Palestinian students and scholars and numerous pleas for solidarity and calls to action in ASA presidential addresses and *American Quarterly* contributions). In American Studies scholarship, the term "neoliberal" is almost never employed in a positive light.

system under the intoxicating sway of neoliberalism's embrace at its most wanton and absurd, as it kowtows to the neoliberal realities of the 1990s. I also explore the novel's environmental critique of the insidious link between neoliberalism and its devices.

### Consumed

In this chapter, I bring the project fully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to look at the crises of overproduction and overconsumption—effects of the globalization of the industrial diet under neoliberalism: the neoliberal diet—which facilitate ongoing devastation to human health and environmental degradation and contributes to food inequality. The neoliberal diet integrates an already industrialized American diet with neoliberal problematics. It is a diet facilitated by destructive neoliberal agripolicymaking, aggressive agribusiness biotechnologies, and oligopolistic transnational agrifood producers, processors, and distributors. This chapter focuses on neoliberal agripolicy, market-distorting governmental subsidization, impacts to human health (antibiotic resistance, factory farming and pandemics), negative impacts to the environment, inequitable access to healthy foods, and the impact of aggressive agricultural biotechnology. I also provide a close reading of Zoe Lister-Jones and Daryl Wein's independent film *Consumed* (2015), an environmentally themed political thriller concerned with the production and consumption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and their believed associated risks to human health. This chapter explores how *Consumed* works implicitly and explicitly as social commentary on modern-day neoliberal realities, in particular, neoliberalism's highly problematic economic doctrine of profit over people, as embodied in the neoliberal diet, neoliberal corporatism, and university-industry collaborative efforts, to expand its already strong hold on global food systems.

### A Note on Terminology

This project actively seeks to avoid homogenizing Native peoples, cultures, and communities. I use the collective terms “Indigenous,” “Native,” “Native American,” and “American Indian” more or less interchangeably. “Alaska Native” and “Native Hawaiian” are used as specific entities. Specific tribal/nation names are used when known. I do not change (update) nomenclature within quotations.

Following the lead of *The Associated Press*, Black media, and other major news outlets, as well as the American Studies Association, I capitalize “Black” in reference to people of African descent as a race—not as skin color identifier, but as a working convention in reverence to shared Black history and shared Black economic, social, and political reality(ies) and engagement, while also endeavoring to not erase the diversity of Black peoples and Black experiences. I use “Black” to signal a culture, not a color. In this project, I use “Black” and “African American” more or less interchangeably. I do not capitalize “white” as I do not perceive whiteness as a shared experience in the same way as Blackness or Nativeness, though admittedly, not capitalizing “white” may effectively work in an adverse way to reinforce white power and privilege and sustain whiteness as the dominant/default race—if perceived as a race at all; that is, whiteness as transcendent of race; white people as raceless: not raced or separate from race.<sup>18</sup> Though not taken up in this project, capitalizing “white” racializes whiteness, which may

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<sup>18</sup> The exceptions to this of course are white nationalists, white supremacists, Ku Klux Klan members, Aryan Brotherhood members, neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, and others of this ilk.

work towards decentering white power and privilege. Capitalization is unchanged within in quotations.

This project maintains a gender-neutral/inclusive posture, using gendered pronouns when known. For generic reference to an individual I employ the singular “they,” “them,” and “their.”

I use the common term “straight” in relation to historical and contemporary heteronormativity, despite the term, in relation to heterosexuality, being a contemporary social construct of sexuality. I admittedly use the term anachronistically to help make my points. I also embrace the term “queer” as inclusive of the entire LGBTQ+ community. My use of “LGBTQ+” is meant to be an umbrella term inclusive of all queer identities.

When discussing race and ethnicity data, to avoid confusion, I use the terms used by the reporting entity. For example, the U.S. government uses qualifiers per the federal statistical system such as “Hispanic” instead of the preferred gender neutral Latinx.

I use the term “class” as part of the well-trodden academic inquiry into the axes of inequality (race-class-gender), though arguably the concept of “privilege” has replaced class as assessed and asserted intersectionally. At varying times, I address the nexus of race, class, gender and other axes of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical inequality and injustice, with the understanding that class is often better understood as existing within the structure of power and privilege: who has it and who does not.

I use the term “American Studies” to represent U.S.-American Studies; that is, the discipline as primarily practiced in the United States versus international iterations of the discipline, of which there are many.

I use the term “farming” nearly exclusively; however, it is inclusive of the practice of ranching. Many American farmers both farm (raise and harvest crops) and ranch (raise and breed livestock).

Lastly, I use considerable and various agro/agri terminology in this project. “Agro” and “agri” are the same in that they are combining forms pertaining to “the agricultural”; however, “agri” specifically concerns industry, trade, and/or policy, while “agro” specifically concerns science and/or technology.

## CHAPTER ONE

## THE AGRARIAN MYTH

*This great savage country should be furrowed by the plough, and combed by the harrow; these rough Alleghanies should know their master; these foaming torrents should be bestridden by proud arches of stone; these wild prairies should be loaded with wheat; the swamps with rice; the hill-tops should pasture innumerable sheep and cattle.... In this country, where land is cheap, and the disposition of the people pacific, every thing invites to the arts of agriculture... How much better when the whole land is a garden, and the people have grown up in the bowers of a paradise.*  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Young American* (1844)

*[The agrarian myth], underlying many conceptions of rural life is so ubiquitous that it has become a singular cultural icon.* —Mark B. Lapping, Ivonne Audirac's *Rural Sustainable Development in America* (1997)

*The [agrarian myth] is an old one, yet old as it is as Leo Marx points out, it still sells cigarettes.* —Orley I. Holtan, “The Agrarian Myth in ‘Midnight Cowboy, Alice’s Restaurant, Easy Rider’ and ‘Medium Cool’” (1970)

In this chapter, the first of three foundational chapters, I explore the history and trajectory of the agrarian myth in the United States—the idealized and nostalgized myth and its deep association with challenging modern reality(ies)—and extend myth criticism to analyze its persistence and popularity in this neoliberal era. Because America’s myths work to legitimize the nation and preserve its exceptionalist purpose, it is important to extend myth criticism into the modern day. While the conceptual flaws evidenced in the Myth and Symbol school scholarship of early American Studies are many and the school of thought’s condemnation well-warranted—its stanch promotion of American exceptionalism and nationalism, its romantic, nostalgic, homogeneous, and autotelic conception of American culture, and its overt lack of meaningful consideration of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, and (O)ther identities—the need to

examine and explain our national myths remains. Despite the discipline's current disinterest in the contemporary study of American myths (largely due to the above—the discipline has *moved on*), U.S.-American Studies neglects vital contemporary myth theorizing and criticism in these very *interesting times*. It is clear we are a nation built on and sustained (and arguably constrained) by its many formidable metanarratives. Resultantly, reexamination of the agrarian myth—its history, its influence, its promise, and its purpose—is necessary to understanding its shifting and problematic role, especially in this highly precarious national and global neoliberal moment.

Utilizing American Studies and cultural studies interdisciplinary ethos and resources, I explain how the agrarian myth has long been used to promote American agrarianism ideals for larger national purposes and how the modern iteration (appropriation) of the myth is currently being used to sell the notion of the American neoyeoman,<sup>19</sup> a neoliberal reification of the nation's *truest* American, or Manifest American, while simultaneously creating and compounding risks to marginalized peoples, human health, and the environment. I argue the agrarian myth, with its continued romanticization and nostalgization of American-style farming

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<sup>19</sup> As explained in this project's Introduction, the term "neo-yeoman" has been used by scholars primarily regarding various iterations of back-to-the-land movements, including small-scale autonomous sustenance farming efforts with social reform motivations usually associated with religious separatists, militia groups, and counterculture hippies. My use of "neoyeoman" is specific to this neoliberal moment wherein both classic American yeomanship dogma and the modern neoliberal economic doctrine are embraced towards the realization of Manifest Americans.

and (agrarian)rural peoples, spaces, and lifeways, provides powerful cover for devastating harms to American peoples, places, and beyond—harms condoned by centuries of propaganda and propagation and cemented by contemporary neoliberal edacity and opportunism.

### Introduction

The notion of agrarianism long predates the American experiment. Its beginnings in the United States are closely associated with early republican yeoman idealist, or agrarian myth, philosophy; that is, the belief that toiling for one’s own sustenance, and therefore living and working in close communion with nature, makes one a better person and resultantly a better American—one who is more honest, more self-reliant, more egalitarian, and more economically, socially, and politically stable than those who do not live on and work the land for the benefit of God and country. “The farmer... is without class—all distinctions between tenant, landowner, subsistence farmer, and aristocrat are collapsed into a single representative... American” (Van Tassel 52). This representative American (and distinctively white straight Christian male) figure, with his inherent pastoralism, is emblazoned with all the nation’s desired and honored attributes.

In addition to the belief that yeoman farmers are ideal citizens who fortify democratic society, the agrarian myth includes the precepts of man’s natural right to own and work the land, merited government protection,<sup>20</sup> America as the nation’s garden, and that nature rewards honest

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<sup>20</sup> Such protection is core to agrarian fundamentalist thinking; that is, the importance and primacy of U.S. agricultural production to the nation’s economy and national identity.

labor with benevolent bounty (Burkholder 294). Due to the many hardships associated with farming,<sup>21</sup> especially in relation to highly variable and frequently negative financial conditions and difficult physical circumstances and environments, persevering American farmers “are owed a social debt by society because they suffer so that a democratic society can prosper” and that the world may be fed (Murphy 28). The idealized yeoman in this foundational American myth was also early on generally depicted as a subsistence farmer who was above participating in debased industrial agribusiness and market economics.

Unlike other national metanarratives, which have for-the-most-part been discredited in academia due their fundamentally exceptionalist and nationalistic origins, attributes, and purposes, the American agrarian myth has survived largely intact. Simply defined, the agrarian myth represents a highly idealized and nostalgized notion of agrarianism and agrarian peoples and spaces, and, by extension, rural spaces, peoples, and lifeways, as the most desirable, the most virtuous, and the *most American*. Conveniently, the agrarian myth disregards the fact that America’s agrarian lands—all the nation’s lands, to be exact—exist on stolen Native lands taken with genocidal force.

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<sup>21</sup> As stated in the Introduction to this project, I use the term “farming” nearly exclusively; however, it is inclusive of the practice of ranching. Many American farmers both farm (raise and harvest crops) and ranch (raise and breed livestock).

In its simplest form, the agrarian myth is a gendered, racialized, and faithed romanticization of the life of the hard-working American farmer (Larkin 19). As agrarian myth scholar Sharon Larkin explains,

The farmer can be only virtuous and satisfied, for there are no gray or black areas in his characterization. Since those who work with the earth have always been considered blessed, farming as a profession was not treated in the same way as other professions. It was set on a pedestal, an icon for the worship of the pastoral (19-20).

It is this notion of the American farmer as the ideal citizen—indeed, the ideal (white straight Christian) man—that is at the core of the agrarian myth.

In the present, the agrarian myth is employed either for its romanticized attributes or its practical or real-world applications. Romantically speaking, the agrarian myth embodies the ethical, emotional, and spiritual vitalness of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces, reinforcing shared(united) national vitalness. Romanticized agrarian myth attributes are yeoman attributes: morality, industriousness, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, individualism, virtuousness, independence, and integrity. Practically speaking, the agrarian myth embodies the distinctive role of farmers in U.S. history, aligning with nation building, progress, and underpinning American democratic society, and in modern society, aligning with food security, agribusiness, agrotechnology, and merited government protection. Practical attributes of the agrarian myth also concern the immense significance of U.S. agricultural production and profit to American society and the economy, as well as American exceptionalist national identity.

### Manifest Americans

I argue Manifest Americans are the idealized persons(products) of the agrarian myth—created in the minds of republican agrarians, propelled forward by Manifest Destiny, and

consolidated through generations of (white) settlement and cultivation of stolen Native lands. Manifest Americans believe themselves to be the backbone of American society and the embodiment of American democracy. As “the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous” of the nation’s people, Manifest Americans are the nation’s “most valuable citizens” (Jefferson 217).

Manifest Americans assume humanity’s truest and most basic occupation, embrace agrarian(rural) life as morally superior to all others, and believe agrarianism to be the foundation of American democratic society. They have intimate knowledge of and appreciation for agrarian(rural) lands. This, along with their enduring and embracing of the struggles of agrarian(rural) life, solidifies in their minds the belief that they are the best stewards of agrarian(rural) spaces. Their agricultural work produces something far more meaningful than mere money. Their work nourishes the nation (nay, the world), as well as their (solidly Christian) souls. They believe their purposes noble and their sacrifices great and bold. They toil for family and community, as well as God, country, and the greater good. They nurture the nation’s garden,<sup>22</sup> hold the middle ground (“middle landscape”) between civilization and the wilds,<sup>23</sup> embody the innocent (Adamic) undertaking of the American project to create, produce, possess,

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<sup>22</sup> See Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950).

<sup>23</sup> See Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964).

and expand,<sup>24</sup> while remaining above class, power, and privilege, superior to society's many trivial angsts and anxieties, and faithfully eschew market whims and the pressures of agrincorporatism. Manifest Americans, of course, are as fabled and fabricated as the myth they embrace.

### Myth and Reality

#### Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny is entirely tied to the structural system of settler colonialism, wherein “the object is to acquire land and to gain control of resources,” which requires the “[elimination of] the indigenous occupants of the land” (Glenn 55). By its very nature, settler colonialism requires vast quantities of lands and resources. Lands in the so-called New World became accessible to early white Christian settler colonists through the Doctrine of Discovery—a 15<sup>th</sup> century papal bull declaring “any land not inhabited by Christians was available to be ‘discovered,’ claimed, and exploited by Christian rulers” (“The Doctrine of Discovery”). European nations used this international law principle to claim discovery of much of the non-European world (R. Miller 329). As the basis of U.S. occupation and western expansion, in *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823),<sup>25</sup> U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion,

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<sup>24</sup> See R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (1955).

<sup>25</sup> *Johnson v. M'Intosh* (1823) was the first of the landmark “Marshall Trilogy” cases heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, which become the basis for American Indian law. The Court found

grounded in imperialist logic, held “that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands” (Ruppel 17-18; qtd. in “The Doctrine of Discovery”). The Doctrine of Discovery ensured the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

The bedrock of the American agrarian myth is Manifest Destiny, with its imperialist expansionist motivations and ensuing building of an American agrarian nation. Though the term “Manifest Destiny” was not added to the American lexicon until 1845, when John L. O’Sullivan famously declared, “our manifest destiny [is] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions,” and soon after extended his argument, explaining “*the right of our manifest destiny [is] to over spread and to possess the whole of the continent* which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated development of self-government entrusted to us,” this core American philosophy has been demonstrated since colonial times (qtd. in Pratt 796, emphasis Pratt’s). Even before the creation of the nation, colonial settlers migrated westward into Native lands. The ineffectual Royal Proclamation of 1763, intended to stop settlers from moving into lands west of the Appalachians, did little more than anger colonists. Despite subsequent treaties,<sup>26</sup> which pushed the settlement boundary westward momentarily appeasing some,

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Native peoples “have only a ‘right of occupancy’ and hold no title to the land. Marshall based the decision on the ‘Discovery Doctrine,’ referring to the way colonial powers laid claim to newly discovered land: in other words, title to the land lay with its discovery” (NIH).

<sup>26</sup> Such as the Treaty of Fort Stanwix (1768), the Treaty of Hard Labour (1768) and the Treaty of Lochaber (1770).

lingering resentment over the proclamation contributed significantly to the desire for independence. This was followed soon after by the ratification of the Articles of Confederation (1777), the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the War of 1812, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which significantly expanded the nation's territory and continued the brutal process of clearing Indigenous lands towards actualizing Manifest Destiny. These western lands were vital to early republican thought and foundational American notions of freedom, independence, liberty, equality, individualism, self-reliance, and the like—incidentally, all values reflected in the notion of yeomanship and the belief that white Americans not only had the right to expand in search of arable lands and natural resources but were destined to so, and in the process, impose the above *distinctly American* values upon (O)ther peoples and spaces.

The Americanization of the agrarian ideal towards nation building and righteous progress dates to the origins of the American project and is emphasized in the early influential writings of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur,<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Franklin,<sup>28</sup> Thomas Jefferson, and even the averse Alexander Hamilton.<sup>29</sup> Jefferson famously wrote,

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<sup>27</sup> In “What Is an American,” in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Crevecoeur describes how immigrants are transformed through farming into true Americans. Through farming (owned lands), Crevecoeur claims, an immigrant is “naturalized” and “for the first time in his life counts for something” (83).

<sup>28</sup> Franklin names agriculture as “the only honest way, wherein man receives a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground, in a kind of continual miracle, wrought by the hand of God in his favor, as a reward for his innocent life and his virtuous industry” (109).

<sup>29</sup> In his 1791 “Report of the Secretary of Treasury on the Subject of Manufactures,” Alexander Hamilton writes, “It ought readily to be conceded, that the cultivation of the earth as the primary and most certain source of national supply—as the immediate and chief source of subsistence to

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people... Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests, by the most lasting bonds (217).

Jefferson believed (always presumed to be white Christian male) farmers to be the most virtuous of citizens because their efforts align with both private and national interests. Agrarianism, or more specific to the period, Jeffersonian agrarianism and the notion of the yeoman farmer as the moral pillar of American society, was an essential component of the emergent white American identity—the belief that one is a better, more democratic person, and consequently a better American, when living and working close to nature;<sup>30</sup> conversely, those living in urban environs are believed to be less democratic, less independent, less virtuous, and the like, and therefore, less American—a notion with considerable enduring traction in both historical and contemporary American politics and culture. Concerning the “complex[ity] of ideas” that come together to form the myth, historian Richard Hofstadter identifies the yeoman farmer as its “hero,” with

Its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. Unstinted praise of the special virtues of the farmer and the special values of rural life was coupled with the assertion that agriculture, as a calling uniquely productive and uniquely important to society, had a special right to the concern and protection of government. The yeoman, who owned a small farm and worked it with the aid of his family, was the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy, happy human being. Because he lived in close communion with beneficent nature, his life was believed to have a wholesomeness and integrity impossible for the depraved

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man—as the principal source of those materials which constitute the nutriment of other kinds of labor—as including a state most favourable to the freedom and independence of the human mind—one, perhaps, most conducive to the multiplication of the human species—has intrinsically a strong claim to pre-eminence over every other kind of industry” (281).

<sup>30</sup> This early republic thinking in no way included people of color, namely African slaves, working antebellum agrarian lands.

populations of cities. His well-being was not merely physical, it was moral; it was not merely personal, it was the central source of civic virtue; it was not merely secular but religious, for God had made the land and called man to cultivate it. Since the yeoman was believed to be both happy and honest, and since he had a secure propertied stake in society in the form of his own land, he was held to be the best and most reliable sort of citizen (23).

This notion of farmers as “yeoman heroes” and “chosen people” lies at the core of the emergent (and enduring) American agrarian myth towards modern-day neoyeomanship.

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century political theorist John Taylor later articulated an influential agrarian-centric argument about American government and society, which consolidated many of the key tenets of Jeffersonian agrarianism in the American psyche, especially concerning farmers as the nation’s “chosen people”; that is, the belief that farmers merit special standing and consideration in American society. Taylor’s southern (Virginian) libertarianism varies from the thinking of Jefferson and other early republican agrarians, however, in its conservatism and through Taylor’s divergent thinking on democracy and equality. Where “Jefferson to the core was an agrarian democrat, for whom economic and political power ought to be very widely dispersed,” Taylor, “at heart was an agrarian republican for whom liberty inevitably and not unjustly resulted in an unequal social order” (Montmarquet 53). Abhorring Hamiltonian federalism and the capitalist class, with its “aristocracies of interest” (favoring manufacturing over agriculture, working to establish a national bank) and its privileges for the wealthy, Taylor advocated centering agriculture as the national interest (Taylor, *Arator* 18). As historian F. Thornton Miller explains in his 1992 forward to Taylor’s *Tyranny Unmasked* (1822), “Along with watching and trying to check nationalism and unlimited power, Taylor opposed the advocates of mercantilist economics” linking them with “artificial, or paper, wealth” (xvi). Farmers, on the other hand, “could exist without government, and thus produced real wealth” (F. Miller xvi). According to

Miller, “Taylor criticized financial gains realized at the expense of agriculture” and believed “independent farmers were fighting for liberty, opposing dependent, city-dwelling, immoral, and corrupt parasites who lived off the farmers’ hard work” (xvi). For Taylor, as moral natural rights, the pursuit of liberty and political and private happiness is paramount and man’s first care should be to acquire “a home, independence, and leisure” as a farmer (*Tyranny* 88). In his 1817 treatise, Taylor writes American agriculture “both from its nature, and also as being generally the employment of a great portion of a nation, cannot be united with power, considered as an exclusive interest” (*Arator* 241). Under a tyrannical government, agriculture is exploited by “masters... [who] enjoy more pleasures” than agriculture can provide (Taylor, *Arator* 241). Under a free government “where power is not an exclusive, but a general interest, agriculture can employ its own energies for the attainment of its own happiness” and therefore, “has before it the inexhaustible sources of human pleasure, of fitting ideas to substances, and substances to ideas; and of a constant rotation of hope and fruition” (Taylor, *Arator* 241).

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner widely spread the notion of the inscrutability of the yeoman farmer through his 1893 address “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in response to 1890 census findings on the loss of a contiguous frontier line—the “line of most rapid and effective Americanization” (4). In his famed address, Turner synthesized the nation’s fears over a closing frontier—the loss of the nation’s safety valve; the West as means of both escape and opportunity—and redirected the nation’s attention westward. According to Turner, westward expansion, with its continuous confrontation of advancing peoples, vacillating between “savagery and civilization” as they settled the frontier with yeoman perseverance, defined not only American history, but America itself (3).

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are the traits of the frontier (F. Turner 37).

In Turnerian terms, as pioneers and settlers moved westward to settle all remaining pockets of land, both the people and the nation “became more and more American” (4). Whether or not at some point in the nation’s history the tenets of this mythology were true or ever provided a remotely accurate description of agrarian(rural) peoples is of little consequence in relation to the largely privileged place agrarianism and the agrarian myth have since held in the American imagination. I assert, the belief that agrarian virtues sustain the morality of the nation remains pervasive in much of the nation’s collective consciousness, though arguably, primarily from the perspective of those it most benefits. For example, rare is the political candidate, past or present, who does not evoke some aspect of the agrarian myth and tries to tie themselves if not to agrarian ideals than at the very least to their (real or imagined) rural roots.<sup>31</sup> The agrarian(rural) has long been, and remains, shorthand for *true American*.

Manifest Destiny has long been justified on the premise that the nation is righteously indomitable and infallible and that its distinct gifts—liberty, democracy, pioneering, ingenuity, equity, progress—its very Americanness, must be cultivated and dispersed across the continent.

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<sup>31</sup> The two notable exceptions to this in recent history are John F. Kennedy, who knew near nothing when he entered the presidency about agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces, or even much about the U.S. agricultural sector, and Donald Trump, who, arguably, knows even less.

Where Native peoples, African slaves and their descendants, and all variety of Others were (and are yet) demeaned, dishonored, and deemed unworthy as true and valued participants in American society and contributors to the American project, unassailable white settlers had/have the essential qualities required to shepherd the nation to its full potential. This biased belief yet justifies the ongoing conquest and colonization of the nation.

(Native) American Lands<sup>32</sup>

While the agrarian myth works to define the distinctiveness and superiority of the nation—its Americanness, its lands, its chosen people—it near wholly erases Native peoples and cultures from its narrative. America and the myth are nothing without the nation’s considerable fertile lands. The myth’s narrative, however, conveniently ignores the means through which the nation obtained its agrarian(rural) and vast other spaces. The agrarian myth erases the unjust dispossession of Native peoples in order to remove them from their ancestral homelands.<sup>33</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> This highly truncated synopsis of how Native lands came to be American lands focuses precious little on the unjust treatment of Native peoples by white industrialists, politicians, bureaucrats, military leaders, Indian agents, and pioneers and settlers in pursuit of their ancestral lands and associated resources. Beyond the scope of this project, for example, is discussing what is aptly described by Richard Edwards, et al. as “the disreputable progression of unequal treaties forced upon [Native peoples and nations] by the federal government under compulsion of hunger or military might, followed by the appointment of corrupt, misguided, and sometimes megalomaniacal Indian agents, followed by U.S. failure to live up to even the minimal obligations of unjust treaties, followed by the replacement of the earlier treaties by even more unequal treaties or executive orders (and all that followed by the outrageous mismanagement and misappropriation of Indian ‘trust’ lands and funds)” (15-16).

<sup>33</sup> If mentioned at all, the agrarian myth’s narrative implies Native peoples willingly and peacefully gave up their lands by ceding it to the federal government so that the nation could

agrarian myth erases the indiscriminate slaughter, starvation, and forced migration of millions of Native peoples and the attempted obliteration of Native cultures in order to seize billions of acres of Native lands. The agrarian myth erases how America's ownership over lands was established and sustained. The agrarian myth erases just how America's lands came to be *America's lands*.

The nation was founded on the principles of liberty and democracy. In turn, American democracy was conceived and achieved through the genocidal removal of Native peoples<sup>34</sup> and the taking of Native lands. The nation's founders understood an emergent nation required continuous access to land in order to produce the conditions through which a burgeoning democracy could develop and thrive. To the founders' early republican thinking, as requisite for political participation in the American project, a significant portion of the white populace must be independent landowners. The creation of the nation—the launch of the American project—thus, fundamentally depended upon the lands of Native peoples, and the persistence of white settler colonialism.

As the American population grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and white settlers increasingly moved westward, it became necessary to outright disregard Native peoples' traditions and rights, treated or otherwise, and their status as sovereign nations. White settlers conveniently believed

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rightfully grow and prosper, or were deservedly driven from the land or sacrificed (massacred) in the name of American progress.

<sup>34</sup> “At the time of European contact, the population of Indigenous people within the area that would become the United States is estimated to have been upward of five million people. The population then rapidly declined due to colonial violence, wars, deprivation, and disease, reaching its nadir of about 248,000 in 1890” (Bruyneel 19).

they were directed by God Almighty to expand and settle the nation. They believed, through divine providence, they had the right and duty to invade Native lands and remove Native peoples in order to cultivate the land the way it was meant to be—following the American agrarian ideal; that is, American-style farming. They were inspired by God and country to settle and “civilize” the nation, from sea to shining sea. It was their sacred *destiny* and duty, after all, to *manifest* America’s future across and through Native lands—a destiny undergirded by federal policy resulting in the massive transfer of Native lands to white ownership or federal trust.<sup>35 36</sup> The “heroic” settling of the nation and the spreading of the agrarian ideal could not have occurred without unjust violence and inequitable federal treating, which explicitly and compulsorily removed Native peoples, seized their lands, and dismantled their lifeways.

In addition to inequitable federal treating, the expansion of yet burgeoning American agrarianism was reliant on the consolidation of the agrarian myth through federal intervention, legislation, and executive order. This is especially true regarding the frontier iteration of the agrarian myth, which includes the pioneering and settling of lands west of the Mississippi; that

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<sup>35</sup> While the early American republic had generally recognized Native claims to ancestral lands and their status as tribal nations, as evidenced through treaty making, it should be made clear that of the 371 formally ratified treaties between 1778 and 1871, none return or increase Native lands (Robbins 89-90). Treaties between the U.S. government and tribes work only to remove land, rights, and resources from Native peoples.

<sup>36</sup> The Indian land trust system was established in 1887 through the General Allotment Act. Under this Act, reservation lands were allotted to individual tribal members; however, the title was held in trust by the federal government for 25 years. At the end of the trust period, fee patent could be issued if the allottee was deemed *competent*.

is, homesteading, through which, per Turner, the nation “became more and more American” (4). Homesteading, by almost exclusively white pioneers and settlers, was a major factor in the creation of agrarian spaces in the Midwest, on Great Plains, and in the American West. Before 1900, homesteading “was responsible for nearly two out of three new farms and almost a third of the new land brought into farming” (Edwards et al. 40). Before it was repealed in 1934,<sup>37</sup> the Homestead Act of 1862 alone transferred (subsidized) more than 270 million acres (approximately 10% of all the nation’s lands) to over 1.6 million nearly exclusively white male homesteaders,<sup>38</sup> almost entirely west of the Mississippi River (“The Homestead Act of 1862”).<sup>39</sup> According to U.S. National Park Service 2019 data, approximately 93 million people, or 28% of the nation’s total population, are descendants of those who received land through the Homestead Acts (Arrington).

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<sup>37</sup> Additional early homesteading acts included the Southern Homestead Act of 1866, the Timber Culture Act of 1873, the Kinkaid Amendment of 1904, the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916, and the Subsistence Homesteads provisions of 1930 (under the New Deal). The last of the homesteading acts (Urban Homestead Act of 1986) concerned homeownership and resident management opportunities for families living in public housing.

<sup>38</sup> The Homestead Act and later homesteading acts and amendments (such as The Kincaid Act of 1904) required that homesteaders be American citizens or have filed for citizenship. The Naturalization Act of 1870 extended citizenship rights only to African Americans. Homesteading acts thus discriminated against people of color, or “aliens ineligible for citizenship”—primarily people of Asian descent, as well as Native Americans (“California Alien Land Act of 1913”).

<sup>39</sup> Additional mass land transfers were facilitated through the Pacific Railroad Acts of 1862, which expedited and subsidized the construction of a transcontinental railroad (through government bonds and land grants to railroad companies), creating the infrastructure necessary to move people (homesteaders) and goods (agricultural products) across the nation towards eventual U.S. global food dominance.

Under the guise of assimilating Native peoples into white American society and creating harmony between white settlers and Native peoples,<sup>40</sup> the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 (aka: General Allotment Act) and the Curtis Act of 1898 (An Act for the Protection of the People of the Indian Territory, and for Other Purposes) authorized the carving up of communal reservation tribal lands to allot to enrolled Native peoples to be individually owned and farmed. The remainder of these lands, the so-called “surplus lands,” were opened to white settlement. Progressive white reformers believed by forcing Native peoples to adopt mainstream white social, cultural, and economic values, such as white American-style farming, Native “nomadism, economic collectivism, and tribalism” would be replaced “with sedentary agriculture private property, and individualism” (Greenwald 92). These federal policies devastated Native communities, enfeebled tribal governance, and forced Native peoples to assume heretofore

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<sup>40</sup> In his *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior* (1880), Carl Schurz linked opening tribal (reservation) lands and white settlement of these lands with creating harmony between white settlers and Native peoples. Allotment will “inspire the Indians with a feeling of assurance as to the permanency of their ownership of the lands they occupy and cultivate; it will give them a clear and legal standing as landed proprietors in the courts of law; it will secure to them for the first time fixed homes under the protection of the same law under which white men hold theirs; it will eventually open to settlement by white men the large tracts of land now belonging to the reservations but not used by the Indians. It will thus put the relations between the Indians and their white neighbors in the Western country upon a new basis, by gradually doing away with the system of large reservations, which has so frequently provoked those encroachments which in the past have led to so much cruel injustice and so many disastrous collisions” (Schurz 12).

unknown distinct tribal affiliation and percentages of ancestry<sup>41</sup> and proprietary relationships with land and place (Blansett 161–162).

The Curtis Act, which extended the Dawes Act to the once protected lands of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek (Muskogee), and Seminole) and other tribes in and possessing lands in the Indian and Oklahoma territories, clearly evidences the terrible impact 19<sup>th</sup> century federal policymaking had on tribal sovereignty. The Act called for the division and allotment of communal tribal lands—lands previously assigned through treaties to forcibly removed eastern tribes (following the Indian Removal Act of 1830), later removals of Native (Plains) peoples, and the lands of peoples indigenous to the region. The Act allowed for the so-called surplus and “unassigned lands” to be seized, tribal systems (governments, legal systems and courts, and schools) to be abolished and tribal land titles to be nullified (Fixico xxi). The surplus and “unassigned lands” facilitated, through the Indian Appropriations Act of 1889, the Oklahoma land runs<sup>42</sup> and the eventual creation of the state of

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<sup>41</sup> In order to assign Native allotments, the federal government (via the Dawes commission) determined which Native individuals were “eligible, igniting the official search for a federal definition of Indian-ness”; that is, “Indian-ness in terms of blood quantum” (Grande 143).

<sup>42</sup> The major lands runs included: The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889 (to settle “unassigned lands” previously held by the Muskogee (Creek) and Seminole), the Land Run of September 22, 1891 (to settle Shawnee, Potawatomi, Sac and Fox, and Iowa lands), the Land Run of April 19, 1892 (to settle Cheyenne and Arapaho lands), the Land Run of September 16, 1893 (aka: the Cherokee Strip Land Run) (to settle previously Cherokee-held lands), and the Land Run of 1895 (to settle Kickapoo lands). The land runs and (smaller) land lotteries (not listed) opened more than 16.4 million acres to white settlement on Native lands in Oklahoma (Oklahoma Historical Society).

Oklahoma in 1907—a state which wrote white supremacy into its constitution, as well as temperance, extending federal prohibition in the Indian and Oklahoma territories and the state’s *moral responsibility* to keep alcohol out of the hands of Native peoples.<sup>43</sup>

Between 1776 and 1887, the U.S. government seized over 1.5 billion acres of Native lands through treaty, federal legislation, and executive order (Saunt). Between the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887 and 1900, the landholdings of Native peoples were reduced from 150 million to 78 million acres (McCoy and Fountain 185). At the time of the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, or the Wheeler-Howard Act, remaining Native lands totaled just 48 million acres (McCoy and Fountain 185). Over the five most impactful decades the Homesteading Acts, nearly 100 million acres of Native lands were removed through federal designation as “surplus lands” or through direct private sale by Native allottees who had gained fee simple titles<sup>44</sup> (McCoy and Fountain 185).

Further complicating the agrarian myth is forced farming by Native peoples. While 19<sup>th</sup> century white settlers took possession of and farmed expanses of Native lands, many Native

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<sup>43</sup> White Oklahomans were allowed alcohol for *medicinal purposes*. The state stayed dry until 1959, despite Will Rogers’ fabled assertion that *Oklahomans would vote dry as long as they could stagger to the polls*.

<sup>44</sup> Native allottees were plagued by white land greed, and encountered immense intimidation, deception, and fraud on the part of whites coveting their lands. According to historian Donald Parman, roughly 60% of Native allottees (with fee simple titles) had lost ownership of their land by 1908 (227).

peoples, removed to reservations, allotments, or Indian boarding schools,<sup>45</sup> were forced into America-style farming; that is, compelled sustenance farming of allotted lands. Many white reformers of the time argued for assimilation through farming or working as farm laborers to address the so-called “Indian problem.”<sup>46</sup> White reformers sought to turn Native peoples into productive members of white American society; that is, transform them from “savages” to “civilized” peoples.<sup>47</sup> To progressive white reformers, as articulated by so-called “friend of the

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<sup>45</sup> An important component of the federal government’s late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century forced assimilation policy was the Indian boarding school system, through which Native children were inculcated with white Christian and cultural values so that they could eventually assimilate into dominant white society, or, more accurately, “to assimilate them into the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder of the larger society” (A. Smith 90). Removed from their families and communities, as well as their languages and cultures, Native children were forced to learn white ways. Indian boarding schools prepared Native girls for domestic labor and Native boys for farm work or other manual labor (A. Smith 90). Native children were *reformed* into workers and groomed to become good “Christian yeomen farmers and domestics or housewives” (Whiteman 28).

<sup>46</sup> The “Indian problem” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century concerned the belief that Indian reservations were obstructing western expansion (national progress). The solution to the “Indian problem” was forced assimilation into dominant white American society (“Kill the Indian, and Save the Man”), following white American norms, to be accomplished through federal policies, which dissolved tribal (communal) land ownership of reservation lands and forced individual allotments for American-style farming. The intent of forced assimilation (Americanization) was to turn Native Americans into worthwhile American citizens by first making them into American-style farmers.

<sup>47</sup> In response to the so-called “Indian problem,” Massachusetts Senator Henry L. Dawes, author and sponsor of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, believed “If you will prepare the Indian to take care of himself upon this land that is allotted, you will find the solution to the whole question... He shall have a home and be a citizen of the United States, shall be one of us, contributing his share to all that goes to make up the strength and glory of citizenship” (qtd. in Riley 17-18).

Indian,”<sup>48</sup> Captain Richard H. Pratt, founder and first superintendent of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (established in 1879), “The solution of the Indian problem hinges upon the destruction of the present systems and in the devising of means that will disintegrate the tribes and bring them into association with the best of our civilization” (qtd. in Lajimodiere 5). Native peoples and communities were forced to abandon their “Indianness” and take up white social, cultural, economic, and agricultural practices (McCoy and Fountain 184). “Harkening back to Jefferson and his ideas about democracy and the role of independent yeoman farmers, many white Americans believed that owning and working the land was the best way to become part of society” (McCoy and Fountain 184).

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<sup>48</sup> “Friends of the Indian” were an “influential, pro-allotment... social reform group” who convened in upstate New York to address the “Indian problem” through mainstreaming Native peoples into model American citizens (Ruppel 25-26). “The movement they generated built on the reform traditions of Christianity and the antebellum era. Ethnocentrism, individualism, patriotism, and Darwinism also shaped their thinking, as did the conviction that past federal Indian programs had failed miserably. Policy platforms hammered out by delegates each year at Lake Mohonk testified to the remarkable consensus they achieved about what was best for Native Americans... Dawes, chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and a leading light at the Lake Mohonk Conferences, led the lobbying effort for a general Indian allotment act. Besides reformers, the railroads, white settlers, and other entrepreneurs favored severalty legislation. They had their eyes on surplus reservation lands that would end up for sale following allotment... Success for the ‘Friends of the Indian’ came in 1887. The Dawes Act provided 160-acre allotments to reservation families plus all the ‘rights, privileges, and immunities’ of other United States citizens. Following a quarter-century trust period, Washington would issue fee simple titles to the new owners” (Danzinger). According to Historian Frederick E. Hoxie, the Dawes Act “was the first piece of legislation intended for the general regulation of Indian affairs to be passed in half a century, and it remained the keystone of federal action until 1934, when the Indian Reorganization Act replaced it... [S]upporters of the Dawes Act hailed it as the ‘Indians’ Magna Carta” (qtd. in Danzinger).

### (White Male) Yeoman's Work

Simply stated, yeoman's work is white work, in which white work means white privilege to own and work the nation's lands. I argue, from early republican agrarianism to the present, the agrarian myth must be understood through the hegemonic gendered lines of patriarchy and the racialized lines of white supremacy and the erasure of nonmale and nonwhite peoples. At the myth's core are patriarchal and white supremacist narratives through which white men have not only—rightfully, to their (and much of the nation's) minds—conquered and brought nature under their control, but women, Native peoples, and people of color, as well. Agrarian myth rhetoric is saturated with dominant narratives and images and hegemonic constructions and perpetuations of white masculinity. The agrarian myth not only assigns and aligns nationalist values and interests, it reinforces sexist and racist and other harmful societal norms.

Vital to understanding the erasure which occurs through and as a result of the agrarian myth is structural racism, which has been essential to the vast development and success of modern (white) agriculture, largely through the nation's enduring primacy of white settlers and farmers and the exclusion of nonwhites, by law and/or by white violence, in obtaining and keeping agrarian(rural) lands. For example, Black farmers, who once had a small foothold in farming and farm ownership after the Civil War, “lost around 90[%] of the land they owned between 1910 and 1997, while white farmers lost only about 2[%] over the same period”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “Black land ownership peaked in 1910, when 218,000 African American farmers had an ownership stake in 15 million acres of land. By 1992, those numbers had dwindled to 2.3 million

(Rosenberg and Stucki, “How USDA Distorted Data”). According to 2002 U.S Department of Agriculture (USDA) reporting in *Rural America*, despite comprising 13% of the U.S. population, African Americans own less than 1% of the nation’s agrarian lands, less than 8 million acres, for a total worth of \$14 billion (Gilbert et al. 55, 56). White farmers on the other hand own more than 98% of the nation’s agrarian lands, some 856 million acres, for a combined value of over \$1 trillion, or 97% of its corresponding value (Gilbert et al. 55, 56). Farmers of color own far less land and, resultantly, generate far less wealth than white farmers and are far more likely to be tenants than owners (Horst and Marion 1).

In addition to the mass appropriation of Native lands, discriminatory state and federal policy, such as alien land laws and state constitutional provisions,<sup>50</sup> targeted people of Asian descent and widely prohibited people of color from owning land. The collection of Homesteads Acts is another example, which historian Keri Leigh Merritt rightfully describe as “unquestionably the most extensive, radical, redistributive governmental policy in U.S. history,” worked to solidify the supremacy of white agrarianism (“Land and the Roots”). Such discrimination is not only of the past. Modern-day implementation of federal policy is disgracefully biased, as evidenced by decades of egregious discrimination against Native

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acres held by 18,000 black farmers. And that wasn’t just because farming was declining as a way of life: Blacks were being pushed off the land in vastly disproportionate numbers. In 1920, one out of seven U.S. farms were black-run; by 1992, African Americans operated one out of 100 farms” (Kromm).

<sup>50</sup> Examples include the California Alien Land Law of 1913 and the Washington State Constitution, 1889 Article II, Section 33 “Ownership of Lands by Aliens, Prohibited.”

American, African American,<sup>51</sup> Latinx, and women farmers by federal agencies, including the USDA—an agency commonly referred to today by some as the “last plantation” (J. Williams xii).

In their investigation into the decades of discrimination against Black farmers at the USDA, Nathan Rosenberg and Bryce Wilson Stucki found African Americans currently receive a fraction of federal agricultural loans: around just 1% annually (less than 0.2% in 2015) (“How USDA Distorted Data”). The Trump administration’s 2018 Market Facilitation Program (MFP), a response to Donald Trump’s going trade war with China, has thus far paid \$8.5 billion of \$12 billion in aid to help farmers with lost income—more than 99% of which has gone to white farmers. As of mid-2019, of the billions of dollars distributed, 99.5% was paid to white farm operators (which includes white Hispanics, but only at 0.1% of the total); and, more than 91% of the subsidies went to male farm operators (Rosenberg and Stucki, “USDA Gave”). White male farmers have thus far received 99.4% of all of Trump’s MFP subsidy payments (Rosenberg and Stucki, “USDA Gave”).

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<sup>51</sup> “Black farmers tell stories of USDA officials—especially local loan authorities in all-white county committees in the South—spitting on them, throwing their loan applications in the trash and illegally denying them loans. This happened for decades, through at least the 1990s. When the USDA’s local offices did approve loans to Black farmers, they were often supervised (farmers couldn’t spend the borrowed money without receiving item-by-item authorization from the USDA) or late (and in farming, timing is everything). Meanwhile, white farmers were receiving unsupervised, on-time loans” (Hoffmann).

The unwavering view of the nation’s yeoman farmer as white and male (and straight, with a supportive and subservient traditional/nuclear family)—as the embodiment of republican virtue and value, as the vessel for creating and sustaining the nation—lies at the core of the agrarian myth. Resultantly, throughout the nation’s history, nonwhites have largely been kept from owning and operating farms yet have been instrumental to their success—whether it be through their lands or their labor. They have been legally and extralegally prohibited from or pushed out of farming; yet, nonwhites—removed Native peoples, antebellum African slaves and their sharecropper descendants, interned Japanese Americans, and modern Latinx industrialized agricultural and migrant farmworkers—have been and remain crucial to the success of American-style agricultural labor and production.

The agrarian myth established and sustains both the perception and reality of yeoman work as white work (white possession, production, and profit). Resultantly, the white-centricness of today’s neoyeoman farmer has not evolved much from the nation’s early republic. According to the USDA’s 2017 Census of Agriculture, using 2012 and 2017 data, 95.4% of all agricultural producers<sup>52</sup> are white (62). The total nonwhite (including American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians) and those identifying as more than one race is just 4.5% of all agricultural producers (“2017 Census of Agriculture” 62). Just 1.3% of all agricultural producers are African

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<sup>52</sup> The USDA broadly defines a producer as the primary “person who is involved in making decisions for the farm operation” (“2017 Census of Agriculture” B19). Most primary producers are farm owners.

American;<sup>53</sup> just 1.7% of all agricultural producers are American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian; and, just 33.5% of all producers are female (“2017 Census of Agriculture” 62, 68). The USDA does not report the ethnic or racial demographics of the nation’s nearly two and a half million farmworkers. The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), however, estimates, using 2015-2016 survey data, just 24% of the nation’s farmworkers are white, with the remainder identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian (1%), and African American (3%), or “Other” (73%)<sup>54</sup> (1). Jefferson’s “nation of farmers” remains a nation of white male farmers.

I contend, at the core of the agrarian myth is domination. Domination of lands (nature), domination of bodies (Native peoples, African slaves and their descendants, women, and

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<sup>53</sup> Despite suffering generations of devastating adversity and discrimination through racist and corrupt tenant/sharecropper and agricultural policies and practices, many African Americans yet adhere to tenets of the agrarian myth towards obtaining and enjoying the full rights of American citizenship. As Juan Williams writes, to freed African slaves and their descendants, “ownership of a farm meant more than owning a business: the deed to the land signified the end of their days as slaves, as sharecroppers, as workers for someone else. It was true emancipation—no one could confuse a slave with a landowner. To be a landowner meant status as a voter, taxpayer, and citizen. Thus possession of land represented a defiant step towards racial equality with white farmers” (J. Williams xi). According to Williams, the Black farm is symbolic of American democratic ideals. The Black farm is “a Garden of Eden in the African American memory where the first black slaves, after the Civil War, worked to regain the humanity that had been robbed from them in slavery. This deep memory is at the core of the black experience” (J. Williams x).

<sup>54</sup> Within the “Other” designation of hired farmworkers, “84[%] classified their race as Latino or Hispanic..., 10[%] referenced their complexion (including *moreno/a* and *café*), 3[%] identified with an indigenous group, 2% identified with their Central American origin (Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran), and another 1[%] provided a variety of other responses (examples include American, Filipino, and Portuguese)” (DOL 3). Sixty-nine percent of hired farmworkers were born in Mexico (DOL 31).

(O)thers), and domination of self(identity), or transformation in pursuit of the nation's higher purpose. The sacred myth assigns white men and his signifiers—courageous, rugged, enterprising white men as frontiersmen, pioneers, cowboys, yeoman heroes—the task of bringing unsettled Native lands under their control. It assigns (their) women the bodily role of virgin-wife-mother to a powerful and growing nation of intrepid pioneers and settlers. It also assigns (their) national identity—the distinctively (white Christian male) American traits of individualism, self-reliance, self-actualization, resiliency, and patriotism towards nation building. This ability to dominate lands, bodies, and self(identity) is what emboldened and entitled white men to *manifest* his and the nation's *destiny*.

The agrarian myth also concerns man *in* nature and woman *as* nature. In her classic feminist ecocritical work *The Lay of the Land* (1975), Annette Kolodny thoroughly demonstrates this gender-centric mythmaking and reevaluates American pastoralism in relation to the gendering of nature and agrarian(rural) spaces as female (all-passive virginal bride, all-nurturing mother) (16-17). This gendering allowed for, and arguably facilitated, its conquering (rape, penetration, enclosure) and exploitation by male frontiersmen, pioneers, and settlers (Kolodny 150). According to Kolodny, women were erased from settlement narratives, while the land itself was overtly feminized in

What is probably America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction (4).

Kolodny's foundational critique demonstrates the importance and centrality of gender in constructing and crystalizing the persistent language and imagery employed by the agrarian myth.

Concerning the gendered modern realities of American agrarianism, “women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds [have and continue to experience] structural barriers to land ownership and farming” (Horst and Marion 3). As discussed above, today, just one-third of American farmers (primary owners/operators/producers) are women.<sup>55</sup> Like farmers of color, women farmers face entrenched prejudice and discrimination. It is clear, discourses of American agrarianism symbolize and sustain institutionalized narratives and norms (systemic marginalization) concerning who is and is not allowed to participate in the agrarian iteration of the American dream.

### New Agrarianism

Often confused with the traditional agrarianism discussed in this project, as practiced in modern commercial/industrialized farming from small-scale family farms to huge multinational agriconglomerates, is *new agrarianism*, or sustainable agrarianism, which its supporters are quick to clarify is not traditional “farming,” but rather concerns the intellectual and practical “intersection of land and people” and is particularly concerned with the environment; specifically, the land: “its use, its health, its connection to local culture through careful and kindly work” and applied sustainable practices (Major ix, x). New agrarianism is the antipode of

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<sup>55</sup> Most women farmers are white. The only demographic where women have equitable participation are Native American/Alaska Native women, whom are the primary producers for nearly half of all Native American/Alaska Native owned/operated farms (“2017 Census of Agriculture” 78).

modern commercial industrial farming, which embraces such environmentally harmful practices as monocropping,<sup>56</sup> overproduction, and concentrated animal feeding operations (aka: factory farms). (See Chapters 5 and 6 for more on these topics).

Wendell Berry, Donald Worster, William Kittredge, Eric Freyfogle, Norman Wirzba, David Orr, Stephanie Mills, and Scott Russell Sanders, as well as popular writers such as Barbara Kingsolver and Michael Pollan, have contributed significantly to the new agrarian movement which “marks [the] resurgence of [sustainable] agrarian practices and values in rural areas, suburbs, and even cities... and attempts... to strengthen society’s roots in the land while bringing greater health to families, neighborhoods, and communities” (“The New Agrarianism”). According to environmental scholar Eric Freyfogle, “Agrarianism is very much alive and flourishing in America today” and speaks passionately about the moral dimensions of new (sustainable) agrarianism (xvii). Ecology scholar Norman Wirzba describes this new agrarianism, or *authentic* agrarianism as he terms it, as

A compelling and coherent alternative to the modern industrial/technological economic paradigm. It is not a throwback to a never-realized pastoral arcadia, nor is it a caricatured, Luddite-inspired refusal to face the future. It is, rather, a deliberate and intentional way of living and thinking that takes seriously the failures and successes of the past as they have been realized in our engagement with the earth and with each other (4).

Wirzba clarifies authentic agrarianism is not farming, as such, but rather

Represents the sustained attempt to live faithfully and responsibly in a world of limits and possibilities... [It] is not simply the concern or prerogative of a few

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<sup>56</sup> Monocropping is growing single crops on the same piece of land year-after-year. This practice is discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

remaining farmers but is rather a comprehensive worldview that holds together a synoptic vision the health of land and culture (4-5).

The new agrarianism movement relates to larger discussions on modern sustainable agrarianism and is primarily concerned with food and farming activism in both rural and urban environments. While the new agrarianism movement has similar concerns to my own about negative human health and environmental impacts, agriculturally-related or otherwise, it does not concern itself with the modern-day perpetuation of the American idealized and nostalgized agrarian myth and associated neoliberal sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical implications and therefore is not discussed in this project much beyond putting it in context with larger modern-day thinking on American agrarianism.

### Modern Realities

Though Part 2: Cultural Production (Chapters 4-6) of this project, focuses on cultural production context and analysis for specific modern American timeframes along with particular neoliberal circumstances and selected cultural products, it is beneficial to pause here to consider modern agrarian realities and their neoliberal repercussions. To do so, I discuss the ongoing proliferation of rural food deserts and dollar stores, as well as the implementation of dubious energy-agricultural practices as evidence of the neoliberal appropriation of the agrarian myth to provide cover for the harmful effect of these cultural products on agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces.

Stating the obvious, cultural and media scholar Jean Retzinger declares, “The agrarian society of Thomas Jefferson’s America has disappeared” and “pastures, fields, and feedlots

(which constitute [more than] 40% of all U.S. land) garner relatively little attention among environmentalists or the public at large though ample reason for concern exists” (45).

As agricultural lands are lost to urban spread and development, fewer acres are continuously asked to produce more. The results can be found in an ever-increasing dependence on chemical pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and antibiotics in food production; in rates of soil erosion exceeding those of the 1930s “dustbowls”; in loss of genetic diversity in both crops and livestock; and in the contamination and depletion of the nation’s groundwater (Retzinger 45).

Federal deregulation of agricultural-related and considerable other environmental protections exacerbates these concerns. In her damning exposition, *Crimes Against Humanity: Climate Change and Trump's Legacy of Planetary Destruction* (2019), sociologist Judith Blau indicts the Trump administration’s agricultural policies, along with commercial industrial farming, as accelerating climate change.

Industrial agriculture is responsible for over 50% of greenhouse gas emissions through intensive use of agrochemicals, toxins, fossil energy, freight land grabbing, and forest degradation through plantations, mining, logging etc. Multinational agricultural corporations include Monsanto, Dow, BASF, Bayer, Syngenta and DuPont. They control the global seed, pesticide and agricultural biotechnology markets. They have displaced farmers and greatly reduced biodiversity (Blau 70).

Blau also condemns the Trump administration’s Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Purdue, a strong advocate of commercial industrial agriculture, and argues “Trump’s motto ‘America First’ finds expression in, among other arenas, a food policy that promotes trade practices that are not sustainable and an agricultural policy that will increase greenhouse gases” and exacerbate the climate crisis (70).

In addition to agricultural-related degradation of lands and depletion of resources, the oil and gas industry, including the innocuous sounding *unconventional* natural gas extraction and production—otherwise known as horizontal drilling and hydraulic- or hydrofracturing,

commonly referred to as “fracking”—and its vast energy sprawl across agrarian(rural) lands,<sup>57</sup> significantly changes land use and harms local ecosystems by polluting soil, water and air, as well as creates considerable public health and food supply problems. This is in addition to negative “impacts on wildlife mortality, habitat loss, fragmentation, noise and light pollution, invasive species, and changes in carbon stock and water resources” (N. Jones, et al. 290).

Concerning the socioeconomics of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces, according to psychological anthropologist Axel Aubrun and linguist Joseph Grady’s W.K. Kellogg Foundation Institute report on the collapse of rural life in America,<sup>58</sup>

Thanks to the disintegration of the agrarian economy and the family farm, rural life is increasingly about disconnection, decline and the lack of a reliable economic base. Less than 2% of Americans now work on farms, and the largest employer in many rural areas is Wal-Mart. A realistic view of rural America includes the domination of retail and other commercial service jobs, a lack of facilities and services, and increasing division between the locals interested in finding a way out of rural economic traps, and urban refugees buying their way into the rural landscape (4).

This disintegration of agrarian(rural) lifeways, especially the small-scale family farm, is inarguably connected to neoliberal “get big or get out” rationale in pursuit of vastly expanding

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<sup>57</sup> “Energy production in the United States for domestic use and export is predicted to rise 27% by 2040. ... Over 800,000 km<sup>2</sup> of additional land area will be affected by energy development, an area greater than the size of Texas. This pace of development in the United States is more than double the historic rate of urban and residential development, which has been the greatest driver of conversion in the United States since 1970, and is higher than projections for future land use change from residential development or agriculture. New technology now places 1.3 million km<sup>2</sup> that had not previously experienced oil and gas development at risk of development for unconventional oil and gas” (Trainor et al. 1).

<sup>58</sup> Aubrun and Grady’s “The Agrarian Myth Revisited: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations” (2003) was commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute for The W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

agricultural production, cheaply producing (high calorie, low nutrition) food, and exporting mass amounts of agricultural products. (This rationale is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4, 5, and 6.)

Further complicating the issue is biased and cliched utopian and dystopian thinking about agrarian(rural) peoples. Aubrun and Grady have identified these dominate and distorted public views and ordered them under three rudimentary models: Rural Utopia, Rural Dystopia, and Rural Systems (3). Per their study, the Rural Utopia model, essentially Hofstadter's version of the agrarian myth, is the dominate way of thinking for most Americans, and "assumes that rural people are hard-working, virtuous, simple, and have little money" (3). The less dominant but nonetheless persistent Rural Dystopia model is the inverse of the Rural Utopia model and envisions rural American as "a place of poverty, hardship, and hopelessness" (Aubrun and Grady 7). Associated with the poorest of rural and/or isolated areas of the nation (Indian reservations, Appalachia, the deep South), the model "describes a negative and largely unfixable situation, that is believed to be (partly) due to the inherent nature of the rural inhabitants themselves" (Aubrun and Grady 3). The Rural Systems model concerns neither utopian or dystopian thinking and rationally acknowledges the many challenges facing rural America. Rural Systems, however, is the weakest of the three models, with far fewer people think along these lines, because, according to Aubrun and Grady, public thinking is "often (mis)guided by more familiar and better-developed" core beliefs and assumptions about agrarian(rural) peoples along the diametrically opposed lines of utopian (brave neoyeoman) versus dystopian (dumb hayseed) (9-10).

As Aubrun and Grady find, by “many measures, rural life in America is collapsing” (1). “Large areas of the country, including much of the heartland, are being drained of population as farmers sell out [or fail], businesses close, and young people move elsewhere to find opportunity” (Aubrun and Grady 1). The agrarian myth, with its persistent and pervasive rhetoric of agrarianism aggravates this collapse and is further perverted by modern neoliberal realities: agrarian(rural) ruin in the age of neoliberalism. Simply, neoliberal economics sacrifice agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces to the primacy of the global free market and neoliberal (global) food systems, and markedly increases wealth and prosperity for some, and disparity for others.

### Neoliberal Repercussions

The advancement of neoliberalism in the United States has reached near-authoritarian levels and resultantly permeates nearly all aspects of American society, culture, and cultural production. Challenges to neoliberalism are effectively challenges to what is perceived to be the American way of life—a way of life that must be protected. This zealotry parallels cries to protect the American farmer(rural)-way-of-life (with call backs to Jeffersonian yeomanship). The overt recognition and realization of the neoliberalism and agrarian agendas have thus become fully entwined resulting in the neoliberalization of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces—a *neoyeomanization*, if you will—representing yet another blatant neoliberal triumph, which has dramatically impacted agrarian(rural) lifeways and landscapes leaving many agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces in danger.

It is remarkable to think of food and health disparities existing in American agrarian(rural) spaces—where purportedly, the greatest Americans farm and feed the greatest

nation; however, much of agrarian(rural) America does not have access to healthy affordable food. Fueled by greed and the globalization of agricorporatism, namely global food production and distribution—the worldwide integration of the industrial diet under neoliberalism towards the neoliberal diet—many agrarian(rural) peoples experience significant food disparity and insecurity and, resultant, poor health and nutrition. According to a 2010 nationwide analysis of USDA and U.S. Census data, conducted by PolicyLink and The Food Trust, 418 rural counties (20% of all rural counties) are considered “food deserts” (Treuhaft and Karpyn 7). “Rural food deserts (places located > 10 miles from a supermarket) often lack access to fresh produce; cluster in low resource, low-income, ethnic minority communities; and are associated with disproportionate rates of poor health outcomes and chronic disease among residents” (Ramirez et al. 166). The nearly 2.5 million people living in these 418 rural food desert counties, do not have access to a decent supermarket (Treuhaft and Karpyn 7). These food desert counties are as also high agricultural commodity production counties located in the West and the Great Plains. In Troy C. Blanchard and Todd L. Matthews’ analysis of concentrations of retail food stores, food deserts, and food-disadvantaged communities in rural America, using 2000 U.S. Census data, key trends reveal:

Food desert counties tend to cluster together, both within and between state boundaries... [and] there is a high concentration of food desert counties stretching from the Rocky Mountains east into the western part of the Great Plains and from the Canadian border to the Mexican border. Virtually all of the nonmetropolitan counties in Montana, eastern Wyoming, eastern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, western Kansas, western Oklahoma, Texas, and western Minnesota qualify as food desert counties (208-09).

Neoliberal food systems fail the very agrarian communities which grow the nation’s food.

Neoliberal realities have created precarious conditions where rural food consumers are forced to sacrifice for the market’s unbridled growth. One of the markers of this forfeiture is the

ubiquitous dollar store (Dollar General, Dollar Tree, Family Dollar). For many peoples living in agrarian(rural) spaces, the only place to buy food somewhat nearby is a convenience store or dollar store. It is not uncommon to see dollar stores in the middle of seemingly nowhere, such as at rural crossroads far beyond any town limits and not in sight of other structures.

While dollar stores sometimes fill a need in cash-strapped communities, growing evidence suggests these stores are not merely a byproduct of economic distress. They're a cause of it. In small towns and urban neighborhoods alike, dollar stores are triggering the closure of grocery stores, eliminating jobs, and further eroding the prospects of the vulnerable communities they target. These chains both rely on and fuel the growing economic precarity and widening inequality that plague America (Donahue).

The more agrarian(rural) America struggles, the more dollars stores take root. “Between 2007 and 2017, over 11,000 new dollar stores were opened... roughly 93 new stores a month, or three per day” (Ghosh). By 2021, the number of dollar stores is expected to reach 38,000—up from 30,000 dollar stores nationwide (Ghosh).

### Appropriation of the Agrarian Myth

Today, whether recognized as part of the agrarian myth or not, I argue aspects of the resilient myth, especially nostalgic notions of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces as the true(best) America/ns (neoyeomen), are well-evidenced in modern neoliberal society. I contend this debatably overly generous (if not outright misguided) idealization and nostalgization of the agrarian(rural) has allowed for its tropes to be exploited and abused, especially in these neoliberal times, wherein agrarian tropes are routinely appropriated to advance certain aspects of the neoliberal paradigm, such as the energy-agricultural alliance. Such appropriation is well-evidenced through the use of semantically prosodic descriptors employed to positively affect impressions about conditions masking the degradation the agrarian(rural) spaces. For example,

through favorable semantic prosody, the fairly innocent notion of “farming,” which is at the very core of the agrarian myth, has been appropriated to cover a slew of modern agricultural and industrial evils.

Sowing Toxins “Soil farming” (also known as “mud farming”) is a valanced term used to innocently describe the vast dispersal of disposal fluids and solids (toxic fracking mud/drilling mud and wastewater—“flowback water” and “produced water”) generated by drilling for oil and gas through horizontal drilling and hydraulic- or hydrofracturing in agrarian(rural) spaces.<sup>59</sup> Flowback water is wastewater comprised of “chemical additives to increase water flow and improve deposition efficiency,” which has returned to the surface immediately after the initial injection process to generate fractures (Pichtel 1). Produced water is the “remaining fluids [which] either permeate into the formation or return to the surface over the life of the producing well” (Pichtel 1). Flowback water and produced water may contain “[hydraulic fracturing] fluids, naturally occurring salts, radioactive materials, heavy metals, and other compounds from the formation such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, alkenes, alkanes, and other volatile and semivolatile organics” (Pichtel 1). Produced water comprises the largest byproduct stream associated with horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing. Along with hydraulic fracturing fluids, produced water contain hundreds of distinct chemicals, some known to be harmful to the

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<sup>59</sup> For an excellent step-by-step explanation of the fracking process, see Rachel Maddow’s *Blowout: Corrupted Democracy, Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth* (2019), pages 144-45. In *Blowout*, Maddow identifies and diligently details Oklahoma as a model for harboring and encouraging oil and gas industry abuse and greed.

environment, as well as public health. The entire hydraulic fracturing uses approximately 1,000 distinct chemicals, many of which are undisclosed for proprietary reasons. As part of the disposal process, the toxic fracking mud/drilling mud and wastewater is spread on pastures and other agrarian lands using common farm equipment, such as those normally used to spread fertilizers and pesticides. In addition to creating significant groundwater and run-off problems, this noxious mud adds various combinations of clay, salts, and heavy metals to the soil—quite effectively poisoning the land. In other words, innocuous common farming terms and equipment are being used to describe and implement obscene and damaging actions.

Farming the Wind Land-based wind “farms,” the *cute* term for often very large wind energy power stations, are comprised of numerous wind turbines clustered in very close proximity to each other to produce electricity to be transmitted to urban and suburban customers. These wind farms may consist of several hundred or more utility-scale turbines, each with fiberglass blades the size of Boeing 747 wings, and occupying hundreds of square miles. While the wind energy industry touts its low environmental impact and compatibility with agriculture, such as proclaiming the area between the turbines may be used for agricultural purposes, the “farming” of wind has significant drawbacks for agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces. Despite this, agrarian(rural) communities are largely supportive of the wind energy power industry because of real and perceived localized economic advantages and positive financial returns to a rare and lucky few.

While in contrast with the oil and gas industry, wind energy, the celebrated “clean” renewable alternative to fossil fuels, “has the lowest lifecycle emissions of carbon dioxide and

other greenhouse gases,”<sup>60</sup> so-called wind “farms” have a significant negative impact on biodiversity and ecosystems in agrarian spaces (N. Jones et al. 290). This is in part due to energy sprawl<sup>61</sup> and the vast infrastructure needs of the wind energy industry. Per unit of energy produced, wind energy production requires nearly twice the footprint of oil and gas<sup>62</sup> (N. Jones et al. 295). “By 2030, wind is forecasted to require substantially more land area (72.1 hectares [ha]) than oil and natural gas (44.7 and 18.6 ha, respectively) per terawatt of power produced in the United States”<sup>63</sup> (N. Jones et al. 295). And like the oil and gas industry, wind energy requires significant infrastructure, including road networks, transmission lines, turbine pads, meteorological towers, transmission lines, substations, and operation buildings, to capture and transport the wind produced power, which causes such harm as wildlife mortality (due to collision, contamination, or electrocution), habitat loss and fragmentation,<sup>64</sup> light and noise pollution, released toxic or hazardous materials (lubricating oils, hydraulic and insulating fluids), impacts to carbon stock and water resources, invasive species, and the creation of localized

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<sup>60</sup> See Mark Z. Jacobson MZ’s “Review of Solutions to Global Warming, Air Pollution, and Energy Security” (2008) in *Energy and Environmental Science*.

<sup>61</sup> See Robert I. McDonald, et al’s “Energy Sprawl or Energy Efficiency: Climate Policy on Natural Habitat for the United States of America” (2009) in *PLOS ONE*.

<sup>62</sup> See Nathan F. Jones and Liba Pejchar’s “Comparing the Ecological Impacts of Wind and Oil and Gas Development: A Landscape Scale Assessment” (2013) in *PLOS ONE*.

<sup>63</sup> See Robert I. McDonald, et al’s “Energy Sprawl or Energy Efficiency: Climate Policy on Natural Habitat for the United States of America” (2009) in *PLOS ONE*.

<sup>64</sup> “Compared with other energy sources, such as hydroelectric or coal, oil, gas, and wind require less infrastructure but result in higher levels of habitat fragmentation, because their impacts are geographically scattered rather than concentrated” (N. Jones et al. 295).

ambient electric and magnetic fields (harmful to crops and livestock) (N. Jones et al. 290, 293, 295). Further, installing and maintaining wind farms creates additional and ongoing adverse environmental impact and negative agricultural yields due to soil compaction, soil mixing (fertile soil with subsurface clay), soil erosion, and drainage issues, as well as adding thousands of turbine blades a year to landfills.<sup>65</sup>

Rhetoric concerning the “virtuousness of agriculture and of farmers’ sacrifice for the good of all obscure the realities of modern agriculture by shifting the debate to a symbolic and emotional level” (Kelsey 1173). Due to the neoliberal realities of our time, I argue the agrarian myth no longer articulates an accurate description of American agrarian life nor reflects current agricultural conditions—if it ever did. Rather, the myth works to prop up an idealized and nostalgized (and homogenized) agrarian(rural) cultural identity and often serves as partisan fodder for politicians and pundits. No one, however, perpetuates the myth more so than farmers themselves. Jeffersonian yeomanship—self-sufficient, economically independent farmers feeding their own and their communities via their highly productive local diversified family

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<sup>65</sup> According to 2020 *Bloomberg News* reporting, “Tens of thousands of aging blades are coming down from steel towers around the world and most have nowhere to go but landfills. In the U.S. alone, about 8,000 will be removed in each of the next four years,” with that number projected to be much higher in coming years due to greatly increased installations (C. Martin). “Built to withstand hurricane-force winds, the blades can’t easily be crushed, recycled or repurposed,” creating an urgent need for landfill space (C. Martin). Currently, the massive blades are being “interred” in landfills in Iowa, South Dakota, and Wyoming (C. Martin).

farms—is largely extinct in this modern era. It has been replaced by commercial/industrial monocrop farmers, large and small, seeking international markets—yet these farmers continue to think of themselves as idealized yeomen figures (now neoyeoman) working for the good of God, community, and country.

Politicians and bureaucrats in service to neoliberal forces use the modern-day wannabe yeoman (neoyeoman) fallacy to exalt the primacy of the global free market. This is well-evidenced in the Trump administration’s agricultural sector stances and policymaking, where farmers (a very important voting base for Republicans in general and Trump in particular) have been used as pawns in Trump’s intrigues. This is especially apparent in his ongoing trade wars with China and Mexico over agriculture tariffs. In 2019, “U.S. farmers lost their fourth largest export market after China officially cancelled all purchases of U.S. agricultural products, a retaliatory move following... Trump’s pledge to slap 10% tariffs on \$300 billion of Chinese imports” (Newburger). Despite huge financial setbacks and record bankruptcies, American farmers, while accepting billions in conciliatory federal bailout subsidies, continue to play their part as the encumbered farmer laboring for the national good by supporting Trump’s trade war and supporting his presidency (with an approval rating of 79% among farmers)<sup>66</sup> (Breuninger

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<sup>66</sup> A Purdue Center for Commercial Agriculture’s survey (September 2019) “showed a record-high 78% of farmers said they believe the trade war will ultimately benefit U.S. agriculture. That roughly matches Trump’s overall approval rating of 79% among farmers, according to a Farm Pulse survey conducted around the same time” (Breuninger and Schoen).

and Schoen). In reward, Trump describes American farmers as “great patriots,” who “understand that they’re doing this for the country” (qtd. in Sanchez).

### Conclusion

The agrarian myth works to signify, embody, and affirm what it is to be American—a *true* American. As a discursive construction of the United States, in congruence with the thinking of German Americanist Heike Paul, the agrarian myth produces mythologized manifestations of the nation which are “plausible and self-evident” and creates the circumstances for core cohesion and commitment among its citizenry not only in support of the nation as a construct but to its purpose and policies—at home and abroad (17). The myth reinforces righteous legitimacy, worthiness, and providence. The myth reinforces ingrained (white) Americanness.

The agrarian myth also indelibly binds together core American metanarratives, including inherent pastoralism, Adamic innocence, the frontier, the cultivation of virgin lands, and the occupation of the “middle landscape,” and iconic tenets, including American farmers as the nation’s “the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous” and therefore the nation’s “most valuable citizens” (Jefferson 217). Though arguably incredibly successful in its seemingly righteous and patriotic purpose, namely, to encourage the nation’s nearly two and a half centuries of immense agricultural innovation and growth and domination of global food production and distribution, the myth has also provided cover for immense damage and devastation—from the nation’s early genocidal removal of Native peoples from their lands to enslaving Africans and their descendants and stealing their labor to grow the nation to the modern-day sheltering of harmful sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical circumstances, risks to human health,

and climate change fueling environmental degradation under the guise of neoyeomanship and neoliberal progress. The work of the agrarian myth is far from innocent and far from finished.

In these precarious times, the agrarian myth provides vital space for neoliberal cultural production (discussed in Chapters 2, 4-6), which work to either celebrate neoyeomanship and appease neoliberal realities or push back against exclusionary American agrarianism ideals and agrarian(rural)-focused cultural narratives, which provide shelter to the oppression of marginalized peoples, risks to human health, and damage to the environment. Like other stalwart national metanarratives, the modern iteration of the America agrarian myth deftly employs perverse nostalgia, which embraces an invented, idealized, and even mythical past. Both a gendered and racialized consequence and device of neoliberalism, perverse nostalgia, a concept I conceived to help explain the distortion and/or reconstruction of the past in order to accommodate a precarious neoliberal present, works to underwrite the current malicious fantasy of an *America made great again*, which, of course, includes *farmers made great again*.

In the next chapter, I explore key thinking on theoretical neoliberalism towards understanding neoliberal culture and relate it to modern American culture and cultural production to provide context for thinking about neoliberalism as a structuring theme in understanding the neoliberalization of the nation, and more specifically, the neoliberalism of agrarianism, and how it provides shelter to a multitude of neoliberal problematics under the agrarian myth; that is, the neoliberal transformation of the agrarian myth. I also explain the related concept of “the precarious” (precariousness, precarity, and precarization) to reinforce awareness of neoliberalism’s extension into nearly all aspects of American life. This chapter also

explores modern-day reality television, including agrarian(rural)-focused iterations, as cultural production, which evidences the full exploitation of a neoliberalized American—*the American precarious*.

## CHAPTER TWO

## NEOLIBERAL AMERICAN CULTURE

*Neoliberalism exerts a powerful force in American life because its influence and power are spread across a diverse range of political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. Its ubiquity is matched by its aggressive pedagogical attempts to reshape the totality of social life in the image of the market, reaching into and connecting a wide range of seemingly disparate factors that bear down on everyday life in the United States. Neoliberalism is persuasive because its language of commercialism, consumerism, privatization, freedom, and self-interest resonates with and saturates so many aspects of public life. —Henry Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* (2008)*

*Beneath the dream of fame, another dream, a dream of no longer dissolving and staying dissolved in the grey, faceless and insipid mass of commodities, a dream of turning into a notable, noticed and coveted commodity, a talked-about commodity, a commodity standing out from the mass of commodities, a commodity impossible to overlook, to deride, to be dismissed. In a society of consumers, turning into a desirable and desired commodity is the stuff of which dreams, and fairy tales, are made. —Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (2007)*

In this chapter, I explore key thinking on theoretical neoliberalism and relate it to interconnected neoliberal American culture and cultural production with the intention of providing a framework for thinking about neoliberalism as a structuring theme in understanding the neoliberalization of agrarianism and how it works as a powerful structure for sheltering societal ills under national metanarratives—namely, the agrarian myth. There is no easy understanding of neoliberalism and its all-consuming audacity and authority in modern American society and culture. Before explaining my concept of perverse nostalgia (in the next chapter) and applying it to agrarian(rural)-focused neoliberal circumstances and cultural production (in Chapters 4-6), it is important to have a firm grasp of neoliberalism (the phenomenon), the related concept of “the precarious,” and neoliberalism’s absolute insinuation

into our nation's cultural production. In its ubiquitousness, neoliberalism deftly rendering itself practically indiscernible; that is, as to be so pervasive in everyday life, it is practically imperceptible. Like air, it is everywhere. I contend, neoliberalism—the U.S.'s centering of neoliberal capitalism in particular—underpins nearly all aspects of American society and culture.

Processes of neoliberalization are well-evidenced in American Studies scholarship of recent decades, especially in relation to complex multiscalar constructions of neoliberalism and neoliberal transformations of sociopolitical, socioeconomic, sociocultural conditions, socio-ontologies and ethics, and the environment. This chapter furthers American Studies' engagement with neoliberalism as a powerful and dynamic space from which to consider the rampant anxiety, uncertainty, and disparity (towards the precarious: precariousness, precarity, and precarization) perpetuated by national and global neoliberal realities. It is particularly important to understand processes of neoliberalization key to the instrumentalization of contemporary American culture and cultural production along with their harmful local, national, and global repercussions to marginalized peoples, human health, and the environment (arguably all of which can now be defined as free market commodities). Understanding processes of neoliberalization is also necessary to fully consider the neoliberal transformation of the agrarian myth along with its vast ramifications.

### Introduction

Neoliberal American culture embodies the incursion, internalization, and expression of neoliberalism and neoliberal realities in contemporary American society. Neoliberalism is a “ubiquitous and omnipresent” force, which compels exaggerated market expansion and participation—its technologies, its beliefs, and its practices—into all dimensions of society, and

works to construct a unique culture by undoing what social welfare protections yet exist through deregulation, privatization, and the favoring of finance capital and the free market, and by forcing competition into all aspects of human life (Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 48; Ventura 11). It compels hyper-individualization, self-optimization, and self-enterprise; or, in Foucauldian terms, neoliberalism reconstructs humans into human capital: *entrepreneurs of the self* (Foucault 226). This concept is well-evidenced in the resurrected notion of *homo oeconomicus*, or “economic man”; that is, individuals as hyper-rational self-interested agents driven by achieving optimal satisfaction and utility-maximizing personal outcomes. According to political theorist Wendy Brown, economic man is “an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavors and venues”<sup>67</sup> (*Undoing the Demos* 10). “The relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism” disseminates and infuses “the *model of the market* to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*” (Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 31; emphasis in the original). As social theorist Julie Wilson further explains, all aspects of life have thus

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<sup>67</sup> “These are also the mandates, and hence the orientations, contouring the projects of neoliberalized states, large corporations, small businesses, nonprofits, schools, consultancies, museums, countries, scholars, performers, public agencies, students, websites, athletes, sports teams, graduate programs, health providers, banks, and global legal and financial institutions” (Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 10).

“become defined by self-enterprise and the appreciation of our human capital” (117). Resultantly, the individual is personally responsible for all successes and all failures. In neoliberal America, “failure to successfully enterprise the self is attributed not to broader systems like capitalism, racism, or patriarchy, but rather to individuals and individuals alone”<sup>68</sup> (J. Wilson 123-24). Destructive and demoralizing neoliberal realities are reified in neoliberal culture and cultural production. It is imperative in this neoliberal era, to recognize the political, economic, and social contexts in which cultural products are created, disseminated, consumed, and ultimately entrenched; that is, as cultural scholar Liane Tanguay explains, to fully consider the context of neoliberalism, “a financialized, upward redistributive economy that disempowers ordinary citizens along the axes of race, class, and gender alike, pressuring them to cultivate entrepreneurial subjectivities in increasingly inhospitable conditions and to subsequently internalize their inevitable failures” (27).

### Framing Culture

“Culture” is a nebulous term which is difficult to define, and its usage often contested and contestable. Resultantly, the term is frequently used as a catch-all expression to cover a vast array of identities: ethnic, racial, national origins, religious, gender, sexual, and many others. Further frustrating its usage is that it is often purposely treated differently by various disciplines,

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<sup>68</sup> If you are sick, it is your fault (you did not keep yourself fit and healthy). If you are poor, it is your fault (you did not work hard enough or seek out sufficient/appropriate education). If you are unemployed, it is your fault (you are unqualified or lazy or both). And on and on.

fields, and theorists. Despite these complications, for the purposes of this project, a definition of culture must be articulated, especially regarding how culture is *produced and sustained* in neoliberal American society.

Valuable to understanding how culture is produced and sustained, is British sociologist Tony Bennett's definition of culture as an "assemblage of materially heterogeneous elements" (610). Bennett defines culture as a "provisional assembly" of societal miscellany (bits and pieces) transformed into enduring networks through which interactions and exchanges create culture; that is *specific* kinds of readily perceptible organizations of people and things, in contrast with being comprised of distinctive kinds of "cultural stuff," such as representations (612-13). This creates "the possibility of accounting for the historical emergence of culture as a result of the production of new assemblages of human and non-human actors through which its differentiation from the social and the economy was effected" (T. Bennett 612-13). Additionally, as cultural scholar Henry Giroux explains (per the thinking of Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman),

Culture plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, images, and desiring maps that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think about themselves and their relationship to others. From this perspective, culture is the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns. It is also the sphere in which the translating and pedagogical possibilities of culture are under assault, particularly as the forces of neoliberalism dissolve public issues into utterly privatized and individualistic concerns (*Against the Terror* 111-12).

Such thinking about culture provides a conceptual framework for examining the legitimization of neoliberal ideology and discourses, especially regarding how neoliberalism has extended its powerful clutch from the economic and the political to include the cultural.

### Framing Neoliberalism

Like “culture,” “neoliberalism” is a nuanced, contested, and contestable term. There is considerable disagreement in academia regarding what neoliberalism is (or was) and whether the phenomenon is limited to the circumstances of late 20<sup>th</sup> century free market thinking, privatization, and deregulation or if it extends beyond globalization and the favoring of marketization, corporatization, and related politics, into the turbulent sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thinking on the influence and persistence of neoliberalism ranges widely from, for example, economist Deirdre McCloskey’s discounting of its existence as little more than a passing phase in the globalization of bourgeois ideologies and values; that is, contemporary liberalism as “a vulgar version of neoliberalism advocated at the country club and in some classrooms and in some Cabinet rooms,” to British political economist Jamie Peck’s description of neoliberalism’s doggedness as ongoing flawed experimentation, which tends to “fail forward,” resulting in “repeatedly animat[ing] further rounds of neoliberal innovation,” or Wendy Brown’s description of the modern neoliberal reality of “civilizational despair” as a “novel world in the making today, the neoliberalization not only of markets, institutions, and everyday life, but of democracy and the democratic citizen”

(McCloskey 500; Peck 6; Brown, *Undoing the Demos* 221, 47). According to Brown,

Neoliberalism is neither singular nor constant in its discursive formulations and material practices. This recognition exceeds the idea that a clumsy or inapt name is draped over a busy multiplicity; rather, neoliberalism as economic policy, modality of governance, and order of reason is at once a global phenomenon, yet inconstant, morphing, differentiated, unsystematic, contradictory, and impure... Neoliberalism is a specific and normative mode of reason, of the production of the subject, “conduct of conduct,” and scheme of valuation, yet in its differential instantiations and encounters with extant cultures and political traditions, it takes diverse shapes and spawns diverse content and normative details, even different idioms. Thus the

paradox of neoliberalism as a global phenomenon, ubiquitous and omnipresent, yet disunified and nonidentical with itself (*Undoing the Demos* 48).

Further, neoliberalism is a “riven with contradictions” (McGuigan 21). As, British cultural theorist Jim McGuigan summarizes, neoliberalism’s contradictions (per the thinking of British economic geographer David Harvey) include,

Individual freedom is constantly extolled yet, in practice, neoliberal regimes are authoritarian; claims concerning financial probity are made persistently yet continually undermined by instances of dishonesty and greed that become public scandals; competition rhetoric is rendered implausible by actual monopoly and oligopoly in the marketplace; and, fundamentally, the commodification of everything distorts ordinary human social relations (*A Brief History* 21).

Irish literary scholar Sharae Deckard and British literary scholar Stephen Shapiro describe neoliberalism as, until recently, an *almost unused* term that was “never unequivocally deployed by the historical figures now routinely taken as its exemplary advocates,” which nonetheless, has become a common, go-to, keyword to identify the current neoliberal regime of power and accumulation, particularly after the global financial crisis of 2008, after which the term “globalization” seem wholly inadequate to describe the powerful and prevailing market-driven political approach to hyper-capitalist world economics (1). The term “neoliberalism” is now deployed across disciplines. Deckard and Shapiro warn, “as the term spreads through academic and media apparatuses, it is in danger of becoming so ubiquitous that its historical insight is blurred and its analytical edge is blunted or lost” (1).

Clearly, and consequently, it is very difficult to define and explain neoliberalism and neoliberal realities beyond generalities of ideologies, principles, values, and sociohistorical events and processes. This lack of clear and precise usage of the term in contemporary discourse, according to political theorist Rachel Turner, this has made “what [neoliberalism] stands for and what it explains... both confused and confusing” (2). The largely, though not exclusively,

conservative economic ideology term is further obfuscated because it “has a weak presence in the vernacular and often elicits confusion, if not cognitive resistance, as the listener is habituated to read liberal as left wing, and this habituation acts as a wonderful decoy from imperative issues” (Bonfiglio 138). Further, though globally perceived as an American-driven means of capitalist imperialism, in the United States, “neoliberalism is rarely part of the popular discourse outside of academic and progressive circles” (Ventura 1).

### Neoliberal Culture

Explaining neoliberalism becomes increasingly difficult when further applied to American culture and cultural production. The *confused and confusing* use of the term “neoliberalism,” for example, is well-evidenced in recent critical cultural studies works, including those published in *American Quarterly*, as it is often used as shorthand for a litany of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical ills. Social anthropologists Thomas Hylland Eriksen et al. aptly refer to neoliberalism as “a slur for all seasons” (912). While recent economic theory rarely employs the term “neoliberalism”<sup>69</sup> and instead uses interchangeable terms like “free market economy” and

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<sup>69</sup> British economist Rajesh Venugopal explains in “Neoliberalism as Concept” (2015), “Beyond conceptual proliferation and incoherence,” an important “terminological feature of neoliberalism that more clearly distinguishes it from the multitude of other stressed and stretched concepts that dot the social sciences: it dares not speak its own name. While there are many who give out and are given the title of neoliberal, there are none who will embrace this moniker of power and call themselves as such. There is no contemporary body of knowledge that calls itself neoliberalism, no self-described neoliberal theorists that elaborate it, nor policy-makers or practitioners that implement it. There are no primers or advanced textbooks on the subject matter, no pedagogues, courses or students of neoliberalism, no policies or election manifestoes that promise to

“economic liberalization,” in critical cultural analysis it is routinely invoked as an all-powerful malicious force, which arguably strains the usability and credibility<sup>70</sup> of the term.<sup>71</sup> This does not however negate the term’s usefulness as an analogy for “a radicalized form of capitalist imperialism centered in the United States and Anglo-Europe” (Duggan 181). Further, where economists find the concept of neoliberalism unserviceable, it is very useful for those working in culture-based disciplines, or as New Zealander cultural studies scholars Jennifer Lawn and Chris Prentice explain, “neoliberalism is far from an invisible concept but is, instead, *hypervisible*, being used to explain a wide range of cultural phenomena” (3; emphasis in the original). In “Six Theories of Neoliberalism” (2014),<sup>72</sup> Australian media scholar Terry Flew finds neoliberalism

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implement it (although there are many that promise to dismantle it). Pedantic as it may seem, this is a point that warrants repetition if only because there is a considerable body of critical literature that deploys neoliberalism under the mistaken assumption that, in doing so, it is being transported into the front-lines of hand-to-hand combat with freemarket economics” (15).

<sup>70</sup> “Advocates of market deregulation, private-sector-led growth or any of the various shifting components that might be part of neoliberalism do not describe themselves or their policies as such. Instead, neoliberalism is defined, conceptualized and deployed exclusively by those who stand in evident opposition to it, such that the act of using the word has the twofold effect of identifying oneself as non-neoliberal, and of passing negative moral judgment over it.

Consequently, neoliberalism often features, even in sober academic tracts, in the rhetorical toolkit of caricature and dismissal, rather than of analysis and deliberation” (Venugopal 15).

<sup>71</sup> Cultural critic Lisa Duggan describes a more subdued definition of the term as used by American Studies and cultural studies: “current tendencies in global politics and a critique of those tendencies, even as its meanings have dispersed” (181).

<sup>72</sup> Flew’s taxonomy of uses of the term neoliberalism: “(1) an all-purpose denunciatory category; (2) ‘the way things are’; (3) an institutional framework characterizing particular forms of national capitalism, most notably the Anglo-American ones; (4) a dominant ideology of global capitalism; (5) a form of governmentality and hegemony; and (6) a variant within the broad framework of liberalism as both theory and policy discourse” (49).

has been linked to such wide-ranging cultural products as highly performative (Bollywood-style) weddings to increased violence in film to standardized education curricula and national testing to performative sexuality (giving the example of *South Park's* (Comedy Network, 1997-) Mr. Garrison character) to the privileging of digital databases over books in public libraries to elimination-based reality television shows (such as *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2002) and *MasterChef* (Fox, 2010-)) as staging grounds for neoliberal social norms to public universities as businesses and contemporary performance-based university management (51, 60). Arguably, though it is unclear exactly what neoliberalism *stands for* and *explains* across situations and circumstances, that it is a powerful phenomenon greatly impacting the world beyond mere economics is (mostly) undisputed.

Indistinct of a term though neoliberalism is, it is important to have a general framework for understanding just what kind of spectacle we are dealing with. Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall describes the current iteration of neoliberalism as a Gramscian conjunctural crisis; that is, Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's thinking on "conjunctural" or "occasional" crises (versus "organic" crises) as "[excluding] the possibility of a quick resolution by the ruling classes and signals the gradual dismantling of the old 'social bloc'"; or, as "another unresolved rupture" according to Hall, "which we can define as 'the long march of the Neoliberal Revolution'" (Coutinho et al. 97; Hall 9). Hall further describes neoliberalism as "grounded in the 'free, possessive individual,' with the state cast as tyrannical and oppressive" where the "welfare state, in particular, is the arch enemy of freedom" and the "state must never govern society, dictate to free individuals how to dispose of their private property, regulate a free-market economy or interfere with the God-given right to make profits

and amass personal wealth” (9) Further, “State-led ‘social engineering’ must never prevail over corporate and private interests. It must not intervene in the ‘natural’ mechanisms of the free market, or take as its objective the amelioration of free-market capitalism’s propensity to create inequality” (Hall 10-11).

At the level of theory, David Harvey arguably provides the most significant conceptual framework on neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit (Harvey, *A Brief History* 2).

Accomplishing the above requires Gramscian *common sense*; that is Antonio Gramsci’s “the sense held in common” (qtd. in Harvey, *A Brief History* 40). Gramsci’s common sense “is constructed out of longstanding practices of cultural socialization” that is “often rooted deep in regional or national traditions” (Harvey, *A Brief History* 40). Gramsci’s common sense is different than *good sense*, which can be developed through critical engagement with daily issues and matters; common sense can be “profoundly misleading, obfuscating or [disguise] real problems under cultural prejudices” (Harvey, *A Brief History* 40). Harvey reframes Gramscian common sense as political consent towards the larger popular consent of neoliberal ideologies

and discourses, which are legitimized through powerfully influential (political, economic) ideologies disseminated through societal institutions: corporations, media, churches, educational institutions, and professional and political organizations<sup>73</sup> (*A Brief History* 40). In Gramscian terms, the insolubility of political and economic matters is disguised as cultural and circulated through cultural production, through which cultural and traditional values can be catalyzed to conceal other dangerous realities (Harvey, *A Brief History* 39). Neoliberalism endeavors to subsume civil society, effectively conflating past differentiations between political, economic, and social realms, resulting in the production of new neoliberal cultural forms. McGuigan describes neoliberalism's global significance as total and controversial; "its transformative effect is of epochal consequence around the whole world today across a comprehensive range of economic, political, ideological and cultural structures and processes" (10).

Neoliberalism is also a form of biocapital, or capitalization of the living, or biological materials, that extends to all aspects and arenas of the global social order and challenges norms concerning understanding boundaries between human/nonhuman and nature/culture binaries<sup>74</sup> (Giroux, *Against the Terror* 160). As Wendy Brown explains,

Neoliberalism is not simply a set of economic; it is not only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neoliberalism carries a social analysis that, when deployed as a form of

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<sup>73</sup> "[T]he capture of certain segments of the media, and the conversion of many intellectuals to neoliberal ways of thinking, created a climate of opinion in support of neoliberalism as the exclusive guarantor of freedom. These movements were later consolidated through the capture of political parties and, ultimately, state power" (Harvey, *A Brief History* 40).

<sup>74</sup> See Clayton Pierce's *Education in the Age of Biocapitalism* (2013).

governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neoliberal rationality, while foregrounding the market is not only or even primarily focused the economy; it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player (*Edgework* 39; emphasis in the original).

Neoliberalism transcends economics and politics to the biopolitical, whereby human life and its many varied processes are controlled by systems of authority over skills, knowledge, health, power, and modes of subjectivation, or as French philosopher Michel Foucault explains, individuals as ability-machines (the result of acquired human capital) whose assets, such as health, genetics, skills, and education, are hyper-commoditizeable (229). “As neoliberalism becomes biopolitical, the boundaries of the cultural, economic, and political become porous and leak into each other” (Giroux, *Against the Terror* 160). Resultantly, neoliberal biocapitalism impacts all areas of life and all areas of culture and its production.

Interestingly, neoliberal global biopolitics can be circumstantially liberating or repressive (Lu 4). Privileged citizens may be liberated “from the political oppression of the old nation-state” and freed “from the economic conditions of scarcity, unemployment, overproduction, and overcapacity,” creating opportunities for flexible citizens “to navigate the geography of the world with ease while seeking opportunistic gains,” while less-than-privileged citizens are subjugated by global biopolitics “to new forms of commodification,<sup>75</sup> control, exploitation, and

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<sup>75</sup> “While... a similar commodification and instrumentalization of the body accompanied the biopolitical forms associated with imperial conquest and colonialism, with their uses of slave labor and the slave trade, in the neoliberal version of biopolitics, the commodified body is no longer a tool of labor (traditionally conceived) but one commodified and appropriated end product of the production process itself” (Breu 170).

victimization” (Lu 4). Literary scholar Sheldon H. Lu calls this phenomenon “a neoliberalist economy of affect,” a circumstance under which the “old economic and power relationships between the rich and poor, the empowered and dispossessed” may be reversed (4-5).<sup>76</sup> A neoliberalist economy of affect suggests significant circumstantial potentialities for cultural production.

Literary scholar Patricia Ventura perceives neoliberal culture as a structure of feeling; a perception which grounds her thinking on neoliberal culture and drives her organization of key neoliberal components: biopolitics, corporatocracy, erosion of welfare-state society, globalization, and hyper-legality. She relies upon Welsh Marxist theorist Raymond Williams’ theory of structures of feeling, which describes “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” and refers to different and competing ways of thinking struggling to emerge at any one moment in history (qtd. in Ventura 2). Through structures of feeling, Williams seeks to enable an historical understanding of “affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” and sees structures of feeling as a “general change rather than a set of deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from [them], as well as effects” (*Marxism and Literature* 132). Williams’ concept encapsulates the contradiction that the individual (personal, intimate) experiences, emotions, and feelings are

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<sup>76</sup> See French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and French psychoanalyst Felix Guattari’s preliminary thinking on the internal schizophrenic contradiction of capitalism in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983).

continuously and unceasingly informed by the collective (society). Structures of feeling represent the complex systems of negotiations between the particular (individual) and the general (society) at this junction.

Modern-day neoliberal structures of feeling concern political interventions (and antagonisms) and economic reductionism profoundly affecting social sensibilities and the invention (through competition) and idealization of the ideal neoliberal self. Ventura uses structures of feeling to analyze the impact of neoliberalism at the level of American everyday life through widely varied cultural products; that is, seemingly unrelated objects and events, which she refers to as “artifacts,” such as Las Vegas, Walmart, the Iraq War, and Oprah’s Book Club. She also looks at the connections between the structures shaping these artifacts. Going back to Foucault and the notion of becoming entrepreneurs of ourselves, Ventura describes neoliberal culture as a structure of feeling, which

Impels us to extend the market, its technologies, approaches and mindsets into all spheres of human life, to move the ideology of consumer choice to the center of individual existence, and to look to ourselves rather than larger social-welfare structures or society as the source of our success or the blame for our failure—indeed, to define “success” and “failure” in market terms (2).

Importantly, neoliberalism as a structure of feeling, according to Ventura, is “not merely an ideology, not merely an economic perspective, not merely a rationality, but is the concatenation of them” (2).

Literary scholar Mitchum Huehls describes neoliberalism as “*the* socio-cultural dominant of our contemporary moment” (ix; emphasis in the original).

No longer just a set of free-market economic policies with an attendant ideology (although it is still that too), over the last few decades neoliberalism’s entrepreneurial, profit-maximizing, cost-benefit rationalization of contemporary life has massively expanded into domains of human existence previously untouched by such economizing (Huehls ix).

Huehls goes on to identify some of the many facets of society impacted by neoliberalism—ranging from romance to war, art to environment, education to security, health and fitness to politics—describing neoliberalism as more than an entrenched thought mode, but as rather “an entirely new mode of being”: a zombification of society (x). Acquiescence to this zombification requires what British cultural studies scholar Jeremy Gilbert refers to as disaffected consent, an affective condition in which great dissatisfaction with extant neoliberal circumstances is registered but also accepted.

Broadly speaking, this attitude could be [characterized] as follows: on the one hand, it involves a profound dissatisfaction with both the consequences and the ideological premises of the neoliberal project; on the other hand, it involves a general acquiescence with that project, a degree of deference to its relative legitimacy in the absence of any convincing alternative, and a belief that it cannot be effectively challenged (Gilbert 29).

This dissatisfaction, what British cultural diagnostician Mark Fisher has termed “capitalist realism,” along with acceptance recognizes the all-encompassing nature of neoliberalism as definitive; that is, where no other option for society can be even imagined (2). In response, there is a turn inward (towards hoped-for meaning and contentment) allowing neoliberal hegemony to continue unabated. This persistent continuation embroils us all in the unrelenting cycle of the precarious.

### The Precarious: Precariousness, Precarity, and Precarization

Vital to understanding neoliberal American culture is the notion of the precarious in current society, primarily through the thinking of German political theorist Isabelle Lorey. She describes the precarious as representing “both the condition and the effect of domination and security” and may be broadly described as insecurity, instability, uncertainty, vulnerability, and

endangerment; that is, the lack of protection and the lack of social and political immunization (Lorey, “Governmental”). In effort to locate and demonstrate the powerful position of the precarious in neoliberal society, Lorey argues that the precarious is comprised of three particular dimensions: precariousness, precarity, and (governmental) precarization.

Precariousness is the state or condition of being in great danger; being reliant upon circumstances or entities outside your control. Philosophically speaking, precariousness signifies “an ontological dimension of life and bodies,” and aligns with Judith Butler’s notion of precariousness; that is, “that life requires various social and economic conditions to be met in order to be sustained as a life” (Lorey, “Governmental”; Butler “Precariousness”).

Precariousness does not imply an anthropological constant, a transhistorical property of being human, or a discrete being; that is, philosophically speaking, it does not exist *in itself* (Lorey, “Governmental”). Rather, it is a state or condition applied to collective and respective human and (living) nonhuman conditions (Lorey, “Governmental”). Precariousness “is always relational and therefore a socio-ontological ‘being-with’ in the tradition of [Jean-Luc] Nancy *with* other precarious lives” (Lorey, “Governmental”; emphasis in the original).

Precarity concerns the loss of stability (work, personal economics, family, personal relationships, and domestic interests, work-life balance) and its attendant instabilities, resulting in existentially precarious personal circumstances. It largely pertains to structural inequalities and sites of insecurity; that is fractured realities originating from damaging relations of domination concerning intersections of race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and (O)ther identities, much in line with critical theorists Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s notion of

the undercommons<sup>77</sup> (Lorey, “Governmental”; Lorey, “Constituent”). Deeply gendered, classed, racialized, and the like, precarity assigns varying dimensions of precariousness as conditions and circumstances of inequality, “the hierarchization of ‘being-with,’ which accompanies processes of *Othering*” and includes accepted relations and modes of domination over groups and individuals, particularly regarding belongingness and social positionings (Lorey, “Governmental”; emphasis in the original).

Precarization is the undercurrent of governmental precarization (the systemic destabilization and disinvestment of the neoliberal regime of power); that is,

Modes of governing since the emergence of industrial-capitalist conditions [which] cannot be separated in occidental modern societies from bourgeois self-determination. Governmental precarization means not only destabilization through wage labor, but also a destabilization of ways of living and hence of bodies. Understanding precarization as governmental makes it possible to problematize the complex interactions of an instrument of governing with conditions of economic exploitation and modes of subjectivation in their ambivalence between subjugation and empowerment. A governmental perspective allows for precarization to be considered not only in its repressive, striating forms, but also in its ambivalent productive moments, as they arise through techniques of self-government (Lorey, “Governmental”).

Governing through unremitting precarization establishes and sustains societal dynamics that produce persistent (and compounded) feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, along the lines of

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<sup>77</sup> As Canadian cultural scholar Max Haiven explains, Harney and Moten’s undercommons concerns “that network of insurgent unruly commoning activity that is occurring even in the most oppressive and enclosing of institutions, where we mobilize mundane solidarities and creative cooperation to struggle within, against and beyond exploitation” (280-81).

Foucault's biopolitical governance and sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato's production of subjectivity. According to Lorey,

The precarious and the immune are no longer only in a relation of opposites in postfordist societies, but rather more and more also in a relation of overlapping, tending, in fact, to become indistinguishable. The foundation for this development is that precarization in neoliberalism is no longer perceived as a phenomenon of "exception," but is instead in the midst of a process of normalization, which enables governing through insecurity ("Governmental").

No longer located at the margins of society, precarization is now the primary scheme of social/societal existence—where subjectivity, ontologically-speaking, has become economized. "Precarization means living with the unforeseeable, with contingency... insecurity and vulnerability, destabilization and endangerment" (Lorey, *State* 10). Neoliberalism normalizes and expands through precarity. Precarization, a phenomenon specific to neoliberalism, distributes material and affective *insecurity, vulnerability, destabilization and endangerment* across all of society. Precarization is normalization (the new norm)—with frightenedly fresh disparities and inequalities.

Precarity creates and perpetuates fear, which can be instrumentalized (and weaponized). It also advances the neoliberal regime of power, which normalizes precarization to the point those affected consent to and even actively participate in their own exploitation. As in many places across the globe, in the United States, under neoliberalism, precarization has become the predominant means of governance; it represents the hegemonic neoliberal paradigm. Precarization forces Americans (ordinary people; the precarious masses) into states of insecurity, instability, uncertainty, vulnerability, and endangerment. As an instrument (or weapon) of the neoliberal regime, neoliberal culture and cultural production help form and sustain *the American precarious*.

### Neoliberal Cultural Production: Reality Television

Though Part 2: Cultural Production (Chapters 4-6) of this project focuses on cultural production context and analysis, it is beneficial to pause here to further consider neoliberal cultural production as a manifestation of *the American precarious* and explore a particularly powerful and pernicious contemporary cultural product: the neoliberal phenomenon of reality television.

Presently, no other cultural product so fully exploits the American precarious than reality television—a genre which supposedly presents ordinary people (versus professional actors) in real-life (unscripted) situations.<sup>78</sup> Reality television epitomizes the neoliberal impetus for consumption-orientation and the commodification of humans and embodies the neoliberal imperatives of adaptation, aspirationalism, competition and elimination, individualization, responsabilization, self-enterprise, self-optimization, self-promotion, surveillance/self-surveillance, and transformation. As cultural studies scholar Juliette Ouellette explains, reality television works to “translate neoliberal policies and discourses as opportunities for individuals to empower themselves through their conduct and choices” (78). Where reality television works as an agent of neoliberal consumerist ideologies and modes of selfhood, it also simultaneously

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<sup>78</sup> In this project, reality television includes lifestyle programming such as shows found on Home & Garden Television (HGTV) (*Fixer Upper* (2013-2018), *Flip or Flop* (2013)), the Food Network (*Iron Chef America* (2005-2018), *Cutthroat Kitchen* (2013-2017)), and the E! Network (*Dating #NoFilter* (2019-), *Flip It Like Disick* (2019-)).

serves to normalize neoliberal imperatives; that is, it legitimizes neoliberalism in the eyes of ordinary<sup>79</sup> Americans who see themselves, their lives, and their aspirations depicted in the genre's protagonists and products. It creates an *American ordinary*, of sorts, through which viewers find both solace (in their present common condition of ordinariness) and optimism (for their bright future, as one who may transcend their ordinariness),<sup>80</sup> and, resultantly, willingly internalize and surrender to destructive neoliberal forces. It both evokes and provokes the precarious and momentarily suspends it. As American society becomes increasingly inundated (dominated) by reality television, our cultural identities, behaviors, and beliefs become perdurable neoliberal identities, neoliberal behaviors, and neoliberal beliefs. Reality television skews the way we understand ourselves and (O)thers.

According to British media scholar Nick Couldry, neoliberalism is “a system of cruelty” and “[e]very system of cruelty requires its own theater” (3). Couldry argues neoliberalism is cruel because it “requires of its participants continuous loyalty, submission to surveillance and

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<sup>79</sup> “Ordinary” here operates as a pretense for white “working-class” or “working poor” (lower class) and class exploitation. British media scholars Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood suggest reality television programming disproportionately casts ordinary people (working class, working poor) who eagerly participate in (and contribute to) class exploitation in hopes for a “better life” and even to celebrity,” which effectively works to “[reinvent] the myths of social mobility that abound in neoliberal political culture” (2).

<sup>80</sup> British media scholar Milly Williamson finds, however, that reality television circumscribes ordinariness and does not fulfil its promises of expanding representation to ordinary people (103). Rather, Williamson argues, reality television regularly denigrates ordinary people and their deficiencies for entertainment purposes, while glorifying the extraordinary (the winners) and “validat[ing] non-normative identities on the basis of the [promotion of] neoliberal individualistic selves” (103).

external direction even within the deepest recesses of private life, yet demands of those same individuals an acceptance of the fragility and impermanence of the opportunities it provides” (3). Because neoliberal truths (should be) wholly unacceptable if openly displayed and understood, Couldry argues, these truths must therefore be explained through ritual enacted as “play”; that is, acceptable translations and representations of beliefs and desires (compulsions), on which neoliberal cruelty relies—a playful reversal, of sorts, which obscures neoliberalism’s normalization and indoctrination of the masses (3). Reality television epitomizes neoliberal subjugation and exploitation of the ordinary and creates a theater of cruelty—a theater of neoliberalism.

The types of reality television performed in this theater of neoliberalism vary widely from makeover shows to soap operas, from survival/endurance to gameshows, from law enforcement to historical re-creations, from documentary to talent shows, from talk shows to melodramas, from sports to dating shows, from travel to home makeovers, and from agrarian life to paranormal. Swedish media scholar Annette Hill broadly divides reality television into two distinctive spaces: world spaces and television spaces (9-10). World spaces are real-world environments such as homes, fitness centers/gyms, restaurants, hospitals, airports, and farms/ranches. Shows like *Cops* (FOX, 1989-2020), *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E! Network, 2007-), *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009-2012), *Man vs. Wild* (Discovery Channel, 2006-2011), and *Naked and Afraid* (Discovery Channel, 2013-) are representative of world spaces. Television spaces are designed spaces such as television studios, sound studios, performance halls, studio kitchens, and shooting locations. Shows like *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-), *American Idol*

(ABC, 2003-), *Project Runway* (Bravo, 2004-), *Dancing with The Stars* (ABC, 2005-), and *Queer Eye* (Netflix, 2018-) are representative of television spaces.

Drilling down on reality makeover shows as neoliberal projects, personal makeover (intervention) shows like *Extreme Makeover* (ABC, 2002–2007) and *The Biggest Loser* (NBC, 2004-), we see ordinary people (participants) displaying what they perceive to be their worst attributes (flaws), or what gender scholar Brenda Weber calls “failed or imperiled selfhood... stalled or stagnated,” across the viewing world, materializing and mobilizing existential neoliberal fears and insecurities about inflexibility, (non)competitiveness, (non)existence, obsolescence, worthlessness, and unworthiness, while embracing neoliberal promises of post-makeover celebrity, esteem, happiness, flexible, material security, potentiality, power, redemption, and triumph (5). In close collaboration with corporate sponsors<sup>81</sup> and, at times, even nonprofit organizations and government agencies,<sup>82</sup> reality television “shape[s] and guide[s] the conduct of individuals and populations... and situate[s] the privatized and personalized templates

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<sup>81</sup> For example, “*The Biggest Loser* generates enormous profit for NBC and advertisers (Jello, Subway, Planet Fitness, Jennie-O, General Mills) whose brands are integrated into the competition” while “also billed as a gesture of corporate goodwill—an attempt by the TV industry and the corporate sector to help solve the ‘obesity epidemic’” (Ouellette 76).

<sup>82</sup> Though many “reality programs align with strategies of governing rooted in neoliberal rationalities of privatization, personal responsibility and self-enterprise, without making any reference to public authorities,” Michelle Obama’s appearance on *The Biggest Loser* in 2012 to promote her Let’s Move! initiative, addressing the nation’s “obesity epidemic,” signals clear alignment with official government institutions and governmentality (Ouellette 73). To the *biggest losers*, Obama said, “You are all showing millions of Americans that each of us can make positive changes in our lives and these changes won’t just make a difference for ourselves, they can make an impact on our families and children as well” (qtd. in Ouellette 73).

for citizenship it enacts within a context of neoliberal policies, discourses and reforms,” and very effectively “steer[s] self-governing individuals [and populations] toward the desired outcomes of experts and authorities” (Ouellette 76).

According to Julie Wilson, more broadly, makeover media, which ranges from reality television shows to *YouTube* beauty how-to videos and the like, communicates and circulates “specific and practical strategies for navigating the precarious workplace” and “engages viewers in the work of strategic self-fashioning” (136). Ouellette and Hay further explain this strategic neoliberal self-fashioning—the swiftest route to personal success—as “remaking one’s body, personality, and image in a calculated way to bring about personal advantage in a competitive marketplace” (103). The consumption, or internalization, of makeover media’s neoliberal messaging helps viewers attempt to “[master] the uncertainty of everyday life”; that is, work to achieve self-renovation, impression-management, marketability, and total transformation (Ouellette and Hay 103). Weber suggests this self-transformation project is a project of citizenship; that is, a project in which “the neoliberal mandate for care of the self in service of the market fuses with the values of a mythic, egalitarian America to create a new, imagined territory,” a project she calls *makeover nation* (38). *Makeover nation*, communicated through makeover media, “articulates a new imagined nation of beautiful, self-assured, and self-confident people whose lifestyles, appearances, domiciles, relationships, and cars signify happiness and material security that leads ultimately to widespread confident visibility” and celebrates those who participate (or capitulate) and eschews those who do not through denaturalization; that is, they are deemed unworthy citizen-subjects (Weber 38).

In light of our current political conditions, and what some term *a reality TV presidency*,<sup>83</sup> it is important to take a closer look at Donald Trump’s *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-2017),<sup>84</sup> a reality competition show, globally franchised with 17 different international versions, through which candidates (real people, purportedly from all walks of life) compete to become Trump’s apprentice, as decided upon by Trump and his associates. Cultural geographers Tamar Mayer et al. suggest the success of *The Apprentice*, with its crass exploitation of economic and employment precarity, “can be attributed to its ability to capture an emergent structure of feeling” (per the thinking of Raymond Williams) (16).

In addition to transforming “the Donald Trump of the late nineties—the disgraced huckster who had trashed Atlantic City; a tabloid pariah to whom no bank would lend—into a titan of industry, nationally admired for being, in his own words, ‘the highest-quality brand’” into a successful presidential candidate,<sup>85</sup> *The Apprentice* embodies and communicates neoliberal logic and norms to the masses—especially the glorification of vulture capitalism along with its

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<sup>83</sup> Liane Tanguay suggests “to call Trump a ‘reality TV president’ has less to do with his 13-season stint on *The Apprentice*, or the fact that, with an initial 17 candidates, the [2016] Republican primaries played out like a particularly dispiriting season of *American Idol*, that it does with the format of the coverage itself... how Trump ‘gamed’ the system and drove the media coverage” (27). For example, “[as] Trump abandoned his dog whistle for a bullhorn, the reality television spectacle generated around him effectively neutralized what should have been downright alarming, serving it up in the form of entertainment rather than subjecting it to any serious critical scrutiny” (Tanguay 30).

<sup>84</sup> Trump also hosted *The Celebrity Apprentice* (NBC, 2008-2017) from 2008 to 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Communication scholar Sharon Lauricella aptly states, “Trump’s background as real estate magnate, host and star of [Mark] Burnett’s *The Apprentice*, and eventual United States president, is nothing short of a neoliberal fairy tale” (173).

attendant anxieties (Nussbaum; Mayer et al. 1). The show proffers essential lessons on race, class, gender, and the like, while giving “voice to the precariousness and contingency of work patterns in neoliberal societies” effectively foregrounding social Darwinism; that is, the survival of the fittest (Mayer et al. 16).

Trump’s co-star Carolyn Kepcher explains “the premise of *The Apprentice*” as “a process of Darwinian elimination, survival of the fittest” in pursuit of a “good employee” who is the “master of his or her domain” (104-05). The survival of the fittest (competition for survival and competition for power) as the driving principle of *The Apprentice* is particularly well-evidenced in the Season 2 opener, “Toying with Disaster” (Episode/Week 1). In this episode, the two teams compete to develop a new toy for the multinational toy manufacturing company Mattel, Inc. The competition is fierce, as the teams are not just competing against each other to develop the best new toy, even the teammates are competing against each other to impress Trump and the other judges and stay on the show. As the contestants bully and back-stab, they model neoliberal hyper-competitiveness and power(profit) over people. Of his co-contestants, Rob Flanagan, who is “fired” on this episode for his lack of assertiveness and competitiveness, articulates the show’s Darwinian premise: “These people are sharks in every way shape and form. ... It’s gonna come down... to survival of the fittest” (“Toying with Disaster”). In another example from the episode, contestant Maria Boren, furious with fellow contestant and team leader Bradford Cohen’s egoistic executive decision making, says “I thought to myself, if I could just get my hands around his throat, his jugular, I would absolutely take him out right now” (“Toying with Disaster”). The episode serves as a microcosm of neoliberal imperatives, with emphasis on competition and elimination.

As the neoliberal spectacle at the center of *The Apprentice*, and now the U.S. government, Trump embodies the core neoliberal tenets of individualism, competition, self-promotion, and entrepreneurialism. The teamwork modeled on the show is merely a “temporary means to an individualistic end” (Littler 59). The zero-sum game, where one gains, the other loses, is straight out of the neoliberal playbook; that is, competition as the defining characteristic of all human interaction.<sup>86</sup> The unapologetic, blatant self-promotion of the show’s host and its contestants is trumpeted as the only means to success on the show and beyond. As media scholar Alison Hearn points out, Trump’s brazen self-promotion has become a trait to be admired and emulated. (Good’ol American-style Christian humility, be damned.)

Against the backdrop of growing economic insecurity, most people must now assiduously self-promote and hustle in order to find or protect their jobs. Trump supporters are not “dupes” buying the hype then; they recognize that Trump’s brand is his skill set, admire it, and see it as all the qualification he needs to become president (Hearn 656).

Lastly, the show promotes entrepreneurialism as not only accessible to all, but as the most respectable means for attaining the American dream; the new American dream, that is: achieving wealth, celebrity, social status, followers, and the like. *The Apprentice* “provides a popular

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<sup>86</sup> Mark Burnett, creator and producer of *The Apprentice*, says of Trump, he “takes no prisoners. If you’re Donald’s friend, he’ll defend you all day long. If you’re not, he’s going to kill you. And that’s very American. He’s like the guys who built the West. America is the one country that supports the entire world—because of guys like Donald, who create jobs and a tax base that can support the entire planet. [That’s what] *The Apprentice* [is; it’s] a love letter... to America, [it’s] ... what makes America great” (qtd. in Nussbaum).

education in what it means to be a contemporary entrepreneurial worker”—a supposed *great service* to the nation (Couldry and Littler 260).

Not be excluded, there are also American reality television shows focusing on agrarian(rural) life<sup>87</sup>—shows such as *The Simple Life* (Fox, 2003-05; E! 2006-07), a documentary-style reality show, where Paris Hilton (Hilton hotel heiress) and Nicole Richie (socialite and daughter of Lionel Richie) attempt rural life in varying locations, *Filthy Rich: Cattle Drive* (E!, 2005), a competition-style reality show filmed in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where the young adult children of rich celebrity parents attempt a cattle drive, *Texas Ranch House* (PBS, 2006), a reenactment documentary-style reality show filmed in Waco, Texas, where contestants attempt living in the context of Texas in 1867, *Farmer Wants a Wife* (CW, 2008), a dating competition-style reality show, based upon a British reality show of the same name and format, where female contestants vie for the attention of a bachelor farmer, *Vanilla Ice Goes Amish* (DIY Network, 2010-), a renovation-style reality show, filmed in agrarian(rural) Holmes County, Ohio, where rapper Vanilla Ice (Robert Matthew Van Winkle) apprentices with Amish farmers, *Farm Kings* (Great American Country, 2012), a documentary-style reality show filmed

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<sup>87</sup> There are also several international reality television shows focused on agrarian life such as *Farmen (The Farm)* (Nordic Entertainment Group, 2001-), a Swedish competition reality television franchise (28 franchises total, 10 currently active in such countries as Algeria, Brazil, Denmark, Norway, Romania, and Sweden), where contestants live together on a farm, and work and live as farmers, or *Pioneer Quest: A Year in the Real West* (PBS, 2001-02), a Canadian reenactment documentary reality show where couples reenact late-1800s Canadian settler-life on the Manitoba prairie, or *Raising Millionaire Farmers* (2020-) a Nigerian documentary reality show in development, designed to attract young Nigerians to agrarian life.

in Pennsylvania but aired in the United Kingdom, following the King family: a divorced single mother and her 10 offspring (9 boys and a girl) on their farm (Freedom Farms), *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (TLC, 2012-14), a documentary-style reality show following the Shannon family, in rural McIntyre, Georgia, which epitomizes the “redneck” working-class, Southern white dysfunctional family, *Duck Dynasty* (A&E, 2012-17), a documentary-style reality show filmed in Monroe and West Monroe, Louisiana, portraying the Robertson family as wealthy “rednecks,” and *Cash Cowboys* (PopTV, 2017-), a documentary-style reality show set in agrarian(rural) Keenesburg, Colorado, which follows four generations of the Huwa family, an entrepreneurial farm family, with the taglines presenting the family as “modern-day cowboys who are backed by a strong family code of honor,” and the show as embodying “cowboy culture and the spirit of the West” (*Cash Cowboys*).

Where, broadly speaking, reality television is a largely raced cultural product—that is, a vast majority of the participants and viewers are white,<sup>88</sup> the shows generally present white

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<sup>88</sup> While statistics specific to reality television are not available, a 2016 Media, Diversity & Social Change (MDSC) Initiative study from University of Southern California’s Annenberg School for Communications examined one year of television programming (ending August 31, 2015). The Initiative found “only 28.3% of all speaking characters across 414 films, television and digital episodes in 2014-15 were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. This is 9.6% below the U.S. population norm of 37.9%. One-third (33.5%) of speaking characters were female. Behind the camera, a mere 15.2% of all directors and 28.9% of writers across film and every episode of television and digital series were female. Less than one-quarter (22.6%) of series creators were women across broadcast, cable and streaming content” (“From C-Suite”). Nearly 72% of all speaking characters were white; “28.3% of all speaking characters were from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, which is below (-9.6%) the proportion in the U.S. population (37.9%)” (“From C-Suite”). According to Stacy L. Smith, the study’s author and

dominant narratives, products are largely presented through a white lens, systemic racism is effectively ignored, whiteness is presented in a classic neoliberal color-blind context bereft of any inference of systemic racism. Race representation on agrarian(rural)-focused reality shows is nearly entirely presented through a white racial frame. Whiteness is the assumed and accepted norm along the lines of anthropologist John Hartigan’s description in which it “both names and critiques hegemonic beliefs and practices that designate White people as ‘normal’ and racially ‘unmarked’” (1). Envisaged neoliberal subjects are white and reality television narratives of are almost exclusively rooted in a whiteness. Neoliberal reality mediascapes presume whiteness. Agrarian(rural)-focused reality shows, in particular, work to reinforce and further normalize whiteness.

*Cash Cowboys* Focusing in on *Cash Cowboys*, the show proudly depicts the white straight Christian patriarchal Huwa family as what I have termed Manifest Americans: neoyeomans, idealized product(persons) of the agrarian myth, the backbone of American society, the embodiment of American democracy, and representative of the nation’s *most valuable citizens*. The family’s story of remarkable personal/family and business success is thoroughly entrenched with the principles of agrarian and other American success myths concerning rugged individualism, self-reliance, virtuousness, independence, integrity, innovation, and the like, which, according to the agrarian myth, can only be fully developed in agrarian(rural) settings.

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Founding Director of the MDSC Initiative, “This is no mere diversity problem. This is an inclusion crisis” (qtd. in “From C-Suite”).

They also believe themselves to have intimate knowledge of and appreciation for agrarian(rural) lands far beyond that of nonagrarian(rural) peoples, and to be the best stewards of these spaces. These neoyeomans, these great American “modern-day cowboys,” as the Huwas refer to themselves, in addition to being highly successful farmer-ranchers, have built a massive corporate structure: Huwa Enterprises, LLC. Through their embodiment of core yeoman tenets—authenticity, democracy, individualism, and faithfulness—the Huwas can and do claim being among the nation’s *most faithful* citizens; citizens well-rewarded for their cowboy/neoyeoman service to the nation.

In addition to focusing on *modern-day cowboy* family activities (rodeoing, shooting guns), the show focuses on the family’s agricultural and land rehabilitation business operations. “These cowboys are just as likely to be riding a five-ton bulldozer as a one-ton rodeo bull, a 200-horsepower excavator as a horse on the range” (*Cash Cowboys*). Specifically, *Cash Cowboys* showcases H-2 Enterprises (one of 14 different companies under Huwa Enterprises, LLC), which the Huwas describe as a land reclamation operation, though it is better understood (partially) as a land rehabilitation operation, through which they attempt to return damaged land to its former pre-damaged condition; that is, before it incurred damage through harmful industrial practices (mining, gas and oil production, logging) or natural disasters. According to the H-2 Enterprises website and promotional videos, H-2 Enterprises also does a great deal of frontend work for oil and gas, pipeline, mining, and other production operations; that is, the destructive practices which damage agrarian(rural) lands in the first place. For example, in addition to its land rehabilitation work, H-2 Enterprises also builds oil and gas production locations and perform trenching, excavation, and tree clearing/clear cutting services.

Also under Huwa Enterprises, LLC is Milestone, an oil and gas and civil construction operation, whose services include oil and natural gas pipeline construction, oil and gas facilities work/natural gas compressor station construction, pipeline repair and maintenance, pipeline anomaly digs, smart pigging inspections, and pipeline lowering. Hanging H, another Huwa Enterprises, LLC company, is a pipeline construction operation, whose services include pipeline construction and installation, gas distribution, and other construction services: compressor stations, meter stations, pump stations, transfer and fuel loading facilities, chemical processing plants, water treatment plants, cogeneration facilities, tank farms, natural gas gathering systems, and natural gas storage facilities. *Cash Cowboys* greatly skews the true and full nature of the Huwa family's work. Despite their extensive participation in destructive energy production activities, the Huwas unabashedly refer to themselves as "stewards of the land and environmentalists," as stated by Brent Huwa, star of *Cash Cowboys* and CEO of Huwa Enterprises, LLC (qtd. in Berman).

While the above agrarian(rural)-focused reality shows exist in the modern neoliberal zeitgeist, apart from *Farm Kings*, which focuses on sustainable farming through pasture raising antibiotics-and hormones-free livestock, growing diverse crops, and participating in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), and *Vanilla Ice Goes Amish*, which focuses on imparting Amish craftsmanship mores, they convey neoliberal narratives. *Cash Cowboys* in particular adheres to and models current neoliberal narratives of autonomy/individualism (self-reliant; no government support), entrepreneurialism (self-made), ownership (accumulation of property and possessions; ownership as a path to greater opportunities, freedom, and control/power), competition (as the defining feature of human relations—including family relations), and personal responsibility

(accountability, especially within the bounds of a tradition, unified, and financially successful nuclear family).<sup>89</sup> This, of course, follows closely along the lines of the agrarian myth in which these neoyeoman “cowboys” believe themselves and present themselves to be “the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous” Americans; that is, Manifest Americans: the nation’s “most valuable citizens” (Jefferson 217).

The show, with its overt focus on traditional family unity, Christian faith, and codes of honor,<sup>90</sup> evidences the integral position of the nuclear family under neoliberalism; that is, neoliberal primacy of and staunch advocacy for the traditional patriarchal family and its attendant *family values* (Brecher 159). *Cash Cowboys* embodies this through presenting the men as patriarchal heads of household (managing their families, working for family, God, and country), women as supportive wives (standing by their men), and hardworking children (supporting and carrying on the family name and codes of honor). This primacy and advocacy of the traditional family may seem counterintuitive to the neoliberal notion of the *homo oeconomicus* and the neoliberal ethos of personal responsibility; however, when the nuclear family is fundamentally understood to be a system of ownership (with its all its problematic (not

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<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, while *Cash Cowboys* embraces cowboy culture, the Huwa family does not appear to embrace redneck culture, as in other agrarian(rural) reality shows such as *Duck Dynasty*, which “serves to uphold true ‘redneck’ identity as a powerful, culturally dominant depiction of rural, working-class whiteness” (Holladay 266). Though both families are very wealthy and hardly working-class, The Huwa family’s *cowboyness* is much more toned down than the Robertson family’s *redneckness*.

<sup>90</sup> The show’s website states the Huwas “live as modern-day ambassadors for strong, American values”; read morally conservative, traditional (core) family values (*Cash Cowboys*).

so) historic connotations: women as chattel, children as possessions), it aligns with glorified neoliberal notions of autonomy (Brecher 163). The autonomous family has no need for welfare, no need for government hand-outs. The neoliberal ideal of the successful autonomous individual is integrated into the broader notion of the self-sufficient family, held together by traditional family values (moral conservatism)—family as the foundation of social organization and order.

*Cash Cowboys* also particularly embodies the valorized neoliberal tenets of personal responsibility and entrepreneurialism. “The Huwas are a self-made success story, as salt of the earth people, who want to improve the world” (*Cash Cowboys*). Integral to neoliberal ethos, the rhetoric of personal responsibility and its connotations (duty to self and family, and more broadly to community and nation, by not being a burden to society) accomplishes the neoliberal crusade for privatization. The neoliberal function of the state to dismantle social safety nets would be impossible without the complete acceptance of personal responsibility. “Neoliberalism works to construct not only private markets, but also a culture of personal responsibility, where *individuals* feel compelled to take on more *social* responsibility for their lives”; that is, “social responsibility for the conditions of our lives, from our health to our education to our safety and security” (J. Wilson 60; emphasis in the original). In *Cash Cowboys*, the Huwa family is depicted as proudly independent, able to take care of themselves by strictly adhering to the neoliberal principles of potentiality, productivity, and profitability.

The proud adherence of the Huwa family to neoliberal principles is well-evidenced in the first episode of the first season. The episode, “This is Huwa We Are,” effectively works as a promotional 21-minute long promotional video for neoyeomanship. The men of the family work hard and play hard. They have the means to play hard (shooting, rodeoing.) because they are

highly productive and highly profitable entrepreneurial/commercial “farmers” and “cowboys.” The episode, which revolves around the family’s determined response to an emergency land-reclamation job out-of-state, also strongly affirms self-reliance and the self-sufficient neoliberal family. The Huwas need look no further than their family and inner circle to meet their enterprising needs and fulfil their business promises: “family is one of our core values” (“This is Huwa We Are”).

The show’s website explicitly identifies the basis of the Huwa family’s great success as their combined Christian faith and “entrepreneurial spirit” (*Cash Cowboys*). The Huwas’ exploitation of their potentiality, productivity, and profitability through entrepreneurialism follows foundational neoliberal market logic; logic which permeates human subjectivity, forcing self-governance and the activation of *homo oeconomicus* (the entrepreneurial self) to maximize personal potential in order to assume personal responsibility. In a circular nature, the entrepreneurial self informs an ascendant sensibility which provides and provokes personal responsibility in order to exploit economic opportunities, effectively stepping in line with what British sociologist Rosalind Gill describes as a central organizing ethic of neoliberal society (608). As neoliberal subjects (human capital), the Huwa family models enacting entrepreneurial potentiality (agency, self-efficacy, self-governmentality) through business creation and self-employment, which serves not only the family, but the community and the country. Through successful entrepreneurial activity, the neoliberal citizen enhances personal and national prosperity. To be a successful entrepreneur is to be a valuable citizen (a job creator!). Under today’s neoliberal regime of subjectification, the entrepreneurial self, as human capital, becomes

hegemonic—bearing full responsibility for all the glory and all the failures, while reaping full rewards (should there be any).

### Conclusion

Neoliberal dominion over American society and culture is so well-entrenched it is near impossible to discern its boundaries (if any yet remain). Neoliberalism normalizes what gender scholar AnaLouise Keating calls “status-quo stories,”; that is, stories which “contain ‘core beliefs’ about reality” (35). According Keating, status-quo stories “inoculate us into believing that the way things are is the way they always have been and the way they must be” and “trap us in our current circumstances and conditions; they limit our imaginations because they prevent us from envisioning alternate possibilities” (35, 170). “Because we believe that our status-quo stories represent accurate factual statements about ourselves, other people, and the world, we view them as permanent, unchanging facts. This belief in the status-quo’s permanence becomes self-fulfilling” (Keating 170).

Not participating in the neoliberal agenda is simply not a realistic option in today’s America. It is a “fate, not a choice” (Bauman 34). As explained above, all human life, all biology, are regulated under neoliberalism and all aspects of human existence are quantifiable and thus subject to and controlled by the free market—the capitalization of humans (Breu 16). Under the neoliberal regime (of power), all Americans are American customers and American consumers and American commodities. Under the neoliberal regime, “the market” is all powerful. Under the neoliberal regime, hyper-production, hyper-consumption, and hyper-commodification inundates and contaminates all aspects of American society and culture and is most profoundly evidenced in its neoliberal cultural logics and neoliberal cultural production.

The result is a precarious society in which inequality is intensified, commercialization is more than not unethical, human and non-human suffering is increased, and sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical conditions are increasingly in chaos. It creates a society which affirms neoliberalism as the exclusive means for shaping and understanding culture and cultural production—a society which is effectively destroying itself.

In the next chapter, I introduce my theoretical concept “perverse nostalgia,” which explains how simple nostalgia, itself a powerful instrument of national mythologies, can become perverted by neoliberal realities when disturbances to an individual’s core human needs, such as one’s sense of self or sense of belonging and other ontological casualties of living under neoliberalism, cannot be resolved, resulting in profound discontinuity and heightened feelings of existential fear towards embracing an idealized(mythical) past out of sync with reality and in conflict with progressive/inclusive societal norms. I also describe perverse nostalgia’s undeniable dynamics of inequality and its ability to transfer false information, which creates space for either identity consolidation (for those it supports/benefits) or identity disruption (for those it attacks/uses). Racism, sexism, antiqueerism, ableism, and other problematic *isms* reify a neoliberal society in which the targeted are made to feel emotionally and economically insecure, while simultaneously eliminating possibilities for or denying reciprocity (a vital function of a cohesive, egalitarian democratic society). My thinking on perverse nostalgia provides additional perspective for understanding neoliberalism as a cultural structure—the entrenchment of neoliberalism in American society and culture and its staggering impact on the nation’s cultural production.

## CHAPTER THREE

## PERVERSE NOSTALGIA

*The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future.* —Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents” (2007)

*Nostalgia is a product of dissatisfaction and rage. It’s a settling of grievances between the present and the past.* —Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1999)

*The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee. Encountering silence, he looks for memorable signs, desperately misreading them.* —Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001)

*Nostalgia... ain’t what it used to be.* —Peter De Vries, *The Tents of Wickedness* (1959)

*Nostalgia is a weapon.* —Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991)

In this chapter, I introduce “perverse nostalgia,”<sup>91</sup> a theoretical concept I conceived to explain the process through which simple nostalgia becomes perverted by today’s neoliberal realities. Perverse nostalgia emerges as a recourse when an individual’s core human needs are

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<sup>91</sup> As stated in this project’s Introduction, in her chapter titled “Perverse Nostalgia Child Sex Abuse as Trauma Commodity in Neo-Victorian Fiction,” in Elisabeth Wesseling’s *Reinventing Childhood Nostalgia: Books, Toys, and Contemporary Media Culture* (2017), literary scholar Marie-Luise Kohlke utilizes the term “perverse nostalgia” to describe the “desire for the knowledge/experience of sexual horrors, real and imagined” in neo-Victorian fictions of 19<sup>th</sup> century child sexual abuse (185). Kohlke’s use of this term is very different from my concept of perverse nostalgia which concerns the modern-day neoliberal perversion of simple nostalgia, along with its highly raced, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed dynamics.

severely disrupted—core human needs such as one’s sense of self or sense of belonging—which cannot be easily mitigated or resolved, resulting in profound feelings of discontinuity and heightened existential anxiety, which forces a specific turn towards an idealized(mythical) past that is in conflict with reality and in clear contradiction with progressive/inclusive societal norms. The impetus for perverse nostalgia is initiated through invented (perverted) retrospection and reified through neoliberal cultural logic. Perverse nostalgia works to destabilize. It rewrites reality and forces acceptance a new “truth.”

Understanding neoliberalism as a cultural structure is fundamental to my analysis in this project; that is, the entrenchment of neoliberalism in American society and culture and its enormous influence on American cultural production—what literary scholar Mitchum Huehls aptly refers to as “a soul-sucking, brain-consuming zombie plague”<sup>92</sup> (6). Perverse nostalgia further exacerbates the damaging effects of neoliberalism on American society and culture by

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<sup>92</sup> Huels goes on to suggest neoliberalism may be “just an ad hoc and ever-shifting assemblage of being, a perpetually improvised (re)configuring of the connections and contradictions that define life in the [21<sup>st</sup>] century” and further suggesting that neoliberalism both does exist, “as a normative force that motivates and defines the contemporary production of meaning and value” and does not exist, “if we can fully appreciate its post-normativity” (6-7). I disagree with Huels that neoliberalism could merely be an unpredictable ad hoc *assemblage of being*. Neoliberalism it is a very real actuality that has far exceeded its original particular (market fundamentalist) purpose, and has insinuated itself into all aspects of American society and culture—with its many detrimental impacts well-evidenced through disappearing safety nets, deindustrialization, political corruption, immense capital accumulation (of a very few), sociopolitical polarization, higher health and wealth inequality, reduced upward social mobility, reduced average life expectancy, stagnated wages, a decimated middle class, elimination of environmental regulations and safeguards, and environmental degradation.

creating avenues for the consolidation of wrongmindedness and wrong actions, which are powerfully reinforced (or pushed back against/dispelled) through neoliberal cultural production. Perverse nostalgia does not merely insinuate or persuade. It exerts psychological dominance over wrongness so that the neoliberal paradigm may thrive.

In addition to providing context for perverse nostalgia within nostalgia and other studies, I explain how perverse nostalgia dynamics of inequality are highly raced, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed and how perverse nostalgia facilitates the transfer and acceptance of false information(reality), which creates space for consolidating or disrupting identity: identity consolidation for those it supports/benefits; or, identity disruption for those it targets/attacks/uses. Racism, sexism, antiqueerism, ableism, faithism, and all the other biased *isms* work to consolidate American neoliberal society into a space which induces profound insecurities in the targeted/attacked/used (emotional, economic, and/or social insecurities), while also denying reciprocity: a (the!) vital function of a unified, egalitarian democratic society. Think rabid Trump supporters, think white nationalists, think white supremacists. Yes, even think neoyeomen: Manifest Americans.

### Introduction

Nostalgia, or *simple* nostalgia for the purposes of this project, “triggered by dysphoric states such as negative mood and loneliness,” broadly concerns sentimental longing for the past, the loss of the revered and the familiar (Sedikides et al. 304). But what if the past that is longed for is an illusion, a fantasy, something that never existed to begin with? As a process of transformation, simple nostalgia encompasses complex interplay between the past (retrospections), the present (retrospection-based rehabilitation of the past), and the future

(forward positive projection of retrospections) (Sedikides et al. 306). I argue perverse nostalgia perverts this process so that transformation towards the future/forward positive is ultimately impossible because interaction between past, present, and future is based in fantasy—falsehoods conjured through invented retrospection and reified through neoliberal cultural logic.

### Nostalgia

Derived from the Greek *nostos* (home or homecoming) and *algos* (pain or longing), the term “nostalgia” is defined as the longing to return home or homesickness. Nostalgia was first used as a medical term in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to describe an extreme, though presumed to be curable, sickness (physical pain, gastrointestinal disorders, lethargy) experienced by Swiss mercenaries serving abroad: longing for the past, sickness for home—“a disorder of the imagination” in which those who suffered from it “fantasized about home, leaving no psychological space for thoughts about the present world” (J.L. Wilson 21-22). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, nostalgia was largely understood as an incurable mental disorder related to melancholia and identity disassociation, as well as a predisposing psychological condition related to suicidal thoughts, tendencies, and behaviors.

Nostalgia eventually transitioned “from a pathology to an emotion of wistful longing for the past,” with strong aesthetic ties to late-18<sup>th</sup> and early-19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism, as evidenced in the works of William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelly, Washington Irving, and James Fenimore Cooper, and through the permeation of nostalgism in public and private spheres from the pre-modern era prior to the urbanization turn (J.L. Wilson 22). In the American lexicon, the meaning of nostalgia firmly shifted after the Civil War from a medical diagnosis towards sentimental longing.

Until roughly a century ago, the words “nostalgia” and “homesickness” meant the same thing, although physicians tended to use the former, laypeople the latter. By the early twentieth century, the words began to diverge in meaning. While some doctors continued to use “nostalgia” to denote homesickness, a second meaning of “nostalgia” emerged—a bittersweet yearning for a lost time (Matt 470).

At the turn of the last century, for many white Americans, this *yearning for a lost time* was wholly associated with notions of home, homeland, and national belonging. This was a time of great debates in the U.S. over belonging: about who was and who was not American; about who gets to enjoy American rights and protections, such as Black suffrage, women’s suffrage, and citizenship for free/freed Blacks, American Indians, and people of Asian descent.

According to literary scholar Linda Hutcheon, nostalgia’s transition from body to mind, or nostalgia as “psychically internalized,” corresponds with a Kantian shift from the spatial (return to a *place*) to a Proustian-like temporal (return to a *time*)—temporal dislocation and spatial displacement (19). “Time, unlike space, cannot be returned to—ever; time is irreversible”—nostalgia may then “depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal” (Hutcheon and Valdés 19-20). Hutcheon suggests nostalgia concerns the imagined past, “as idealized through memory and desire,” though “nostalgia is less about the past than about the present” and operates through a Bakhtinian “historical inversion”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Hutcheon is referring here to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s thinking on chronotope (“literally, ‘time space’”); that is, how formations of time and space are signified in language and discourse, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (a central Bakhtinian theory of meaning in language and literature), with “historical inversion” effectively working as a chronotopic backward glance (Bakhtin 84). See Mikhail Bakhtin’s essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” in *The Dialogic*

in which “the ideal that is *not* being lived now is projected into the past” where it “is ‘memorialized’ as past, crystallized into precious moments selected by memory, but also by forgetting, and by desire’s distortions and reorganizations” (20; emphasis in the original).

Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe from [as historian David Lowenthal explains in *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (1985)] “the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal”...—in other words, making it so very unlike the present (Hutcheon 20).

Consequently, Hutcheon suggests nostalgia may “be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present” (20).

### Perverse Nostalgia

The concept of perverse nostalgia explains how simple nostalgia, which ordinarily works to mitigate disruptions in the meeting of core human needs, such as one’s sense of self or sense of belonging, is instead perverted by neoliberal realities, which in turn creates discontinuity and exacerbates existential fears, thus triggering perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past. Crucial to understanding my concept of perverse nostalgia is cultural anthropologist Renato

Rosaldo's important and influential thinking on imperialist nostalgia. Grounded in colonization sentimentality, imperialist nostalgia is the wistful mourning by colonizers for the idealized pristine, but lost (destroyed), past of the colonized, which allows colonizers to view and understand present circumstances through a lens of advancement and fateful, if not divinely ordained, transformation, while simultaneously denying the colonized the same opportunity. Though overtly complicit, feigning innocence, colonizers lament that which has been destroyed. According to Rosaldo, the clear contradiction of "imperialist nostalgia revolves around a paradox," in that if a "person kills somebody and then mourns the victim," or in a "more attenuated form, someone deliberately alters a form of life, and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention. At one more remove, people destroy their environment, and then they worship nature" (69-70). He also directly links imperialist nostalgia with domination, using it as "a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination" (Rosaldo 70). Imperialist nostalgia effectively "makes racial domination appear innocent and pure" and erases of colonized bodies from modern society (Rosaldo 68).

The type of nostalgia of interest to Russian literary scholar Svetlana Boym, and to this project, "is not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, an historical emotion" ("Nostalgia" 8). In her argument, Boym identifies three crucial related points.

First, nostalgia is not "antimodern"; it is not necessarily opposed to modernity but coeval with it. Nostalgia and progress are like Jekyll and Hyde: doubles and mirror images of one another. Nostalgia is not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that makes the division into "local" and "universal" possible ("Nostalgia" 8).

Particularly interesting is her bisecting of nostalgia into the restorative and the reflective.

(Boym's reflective nostalgia is very much in line with what many critics refer to as critical

nostalgia: destabilizing and decentering the present; rejection of the past as a means for stabilizing/sustaining the present.) Though apparent reversals, these two types of nostalgia are not absolute binaries. Reflective nostalgia: “thrives in *álgos*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately,” it “dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging,” it “does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity,” it “calls truth into doubt,” it “does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones,” it “loves details, not symbols,” it presents “an ethical and creative challenge, not merely a pretext for midnight melancholies,” it “can be ironic and humorous,” and it “reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, just as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xviii, 49-50). Restorative nostalgia: stresses *nostos*/home, it “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” it “does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition,” it “protects the absolute truth,” it “is at the core of recent national and religious revivals,” it “knows two main plots: the return to origins and the conspiracy,” it “reconstructs emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize time,” and it “takes itself dead seriously” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xviii, 49).

Like Boym’s restorative nostalgia, perverse nostalgia considers itself as the embodiment and protector of absolute truth and tradition (not mere simple nostalgia), centers itself in the renewal of exceptionalist national norms and values and is serious in the extreme about its purpose (*The Future of Nostalgia* xviii, 49). Like psychologist Stacy Novack’s political nostalgia, which “involves a repudiation of present day social, economics, and cultural realities,”

perverse nostalgia currently (and quite loudly) rejects progressive/inclusive sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical realities concerning diversity, immigration and citizenship, economic insecurity, racial justice, social justice, and gender and sexuality equality issues, to name but a few (“Perils and Untapped Potentials” 2). Not only can perverse nostalgia be considered a consequence of neoliberalism—along the lines of, and in full agreement with, feminist theorist Lauren Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism—but also as a highly effectual and harmful neoliberal device.

Lauren Berlant’s affective positioning of cruel optimism as “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *impossible*, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (24; emphasis in the original). In this affective orientation, optimism is not inherently cruel, but becomes so when that which induces attachment actively prevents its original purpose (Berlant 1). Berlant describes attachment as optimistic and optimism as ambitious but warns “at any moment [optimism] might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of ‘the change that’s gonna come’” (2). Ambitious optimistic attachment may manifest as simplicity or stupidity but especially as irrationality. “[T]he affective structure of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (Berlant 2). Cruel optimism exists when the circumstances that generate hopefulness and the possibility of expansive transformation, and for which risk is undertaken, destroys its achievement, or has disastrous results (Berlant 2). Optimism is cruel because “as the very pleasures of being inside a

relation [of attachment] have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (Berlant 2).

As a device of neoliberalism, perverse nostalgia distorts and/or reconstructs the idealized past in order to accommodate a neoliberal present which relies upon radical consent (along the lines of British economic geographer David Harvey’s political consent, and including British cultural studies scholar Jeremy Gilbert’s disaffected consent); that is, the ongoing process of gaining/sustaining consent of the (governed, discontented, and duped) masses in order to maintain/deepen its clutch on the world.<sup>94</sup> This necessary radical consent is closely associated with identity and nostalgia and is vital to understanding the phenomenon of perverse nostalgia.

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<sup>94</sup> Consent for neoliberal hegemony is largely won and maintained through the fabrication and/or escalation of sociocultural and -political crises, such as the racialized crime and welfare crises of the 1980s (racializing and criminalizing the poor, Ronald Reagan’s “welfare queen,” the War on Drugs), the 1990s continuation racialized crime and welfare crises, though from a left neoliberal position (globalizing marketization, Bill Clinton’s cosmopolitan left/progressive neoliberalization: passing the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994: which significantly increased incarceration (the three strikes provision) which led to prison overcrowding and disproportionate incarceration of people of color; Hillary Clinton’s “super-predators”; Clinton’s signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (1994): which sparked mass deindustrialization in the United States in response to globalization; repealing the Glass-Steagall Act (1999; through the Gramm–Leach–Bliley Act): deregulation of the financial industry allowed for mergers between commercial and investment banks eventuating the subprime mortgage financial crisis of 2007 and the creation of superbanking institution that are *too big to fail*), the beginning of the War on Terror during the George W. Bush administration, the economic shocks of the Barack Obama administration (the \$700 billion Wall Street bailout), or the current immigration crisis of the Trump era.

Self-continuity is a core human need concerning maintaining identity/a continuous sense of self, which greatly impacts both psychological and physical health and wellbeing (Routledge 34). In psychology, nostalgia plays an important role in cultivating or reestablishing self-continuity (“a sense of connection between one’s past self and present self”) and discouraging self-discontinuity (“a sense that one’s past and present self are disjointed”; a condition associated with anxiety and negative affect) (Routledge 76, 34). Self-discontinuity triggers nostalgia: in turn, nostalgia attempts to restore self-continuity (Routledge 76). The concept of self-continuity can be expanded beyond the individual to include the social and matters of social interaction and connectiveness.

Closely related to the need for a sense of self is the need for a sense of belonging. Nostalgia meets belongingness needs by recalling real or imagined past social connectiveness and competencies (Routledge 53, 55). The powerful need to belong both guides and drives matters of social interaction and connectiveness (Lavigne et al. 1186). As with self-discontinuity, threats to belongingness trigger nostalgia<sup>95</sup> (Routledge 30). While simple nostalgia concerns sentimental longing, in order to manage perceived various ongoing threats to self-continuity and belongingness in this neoliberal age, perverse nostalgia, set in motion through precarity and

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<sup>95</sup> Those with higher needs for belonging are more prone to nostalgia, per the Belongingness Orientation Scale (Routledge 30, 53). “[T]hose who are highly sensitive to [belongingness] needs tend to be highly nostalgic” (Routledge 53). Incidentally, those the need for belonging, along with being associated with nostalgia proneness, correlates with neuroticism (Routledge 104). “[T]he relationship between neuroticism and nostalgia proneness appears to be explained by the need to belong” (Routledge 104).

precarization, goes beyond simple sentimental longing in effort to right current (perceived sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural) wrongs through the restoration an idealized past: the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, “Make America Great Again.” In its desperate effort to reestablish *appropriate* social circumstances and connections—especially those that are gendered and/or racialized—perverse nostalgia embraces an essentially invented past, buoyed by already deeply entrenched national metanarratives, which, as it happens, mightily support neoliberal hegemony.

Belongingness needs are complicated by vulnerabilities created through neoliberal machinations; vulnerabilities shaped by the normalization of precarity and precariousness. The ontological condition of (inter)dependence that innately drives people together is undone by the extreme individualism of neoliberalism: self-enclosed individuals with rigid boundaries between themselves and (O)thers—*build the wall*.

Self-enclosed individualism relies on dichotomous framework that positions the individual in opposition to all other human and nonhuman beings. (i.e., *it's me against the world thinking*). In this binary-oppositional structure, each individual is entirely separate from the external world. Self and society are mutually exclusive; to survive and thrive, each person must focus almost entirely on herself, evaluating all actions in ego-centric terms (Keating 171; emphasis in the original).

Extreme individualism, or what Keating calls “hyper-individualism” creates profound discontinuity which triggers nostalgic longing. This longing, however, is perverted by neoliberal realities which do not allow continuity to be achieved. Rather, it exacerbates existential fears<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> In neoliberal America, mandates for competitiveness (self-enclosure, self-transformation, hyper-flexibility) create anxiety and existential fear concerning feelings of worthlessness,

which cannot be relieved in the modern (neoliberal) world, resultantly triggering perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past. In this way, perverse nostalgia inhabits and propagates crisis and chaos. The normalization of precarity and precariousness to protect self-enclosed individuals (from other self-enclosed individuals) not only sets up the destruction of self and (inter)dependence on others, but also, through devolution of protections and acceleration of capitalization, and the further destruction of the environment.

### Dynamics of Inequality

Perverse nostalgia has undeniable racialized, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed dynamics of inequality, which set up barriers to interaction and understanding between those under its thrall and those under its wheels. Through perverse nostalgia, false information is transferred, which creates space for either identity consolidation for those it supports/benefits, such as white straight men, or identity disruption for those it attacks/uses, such as people of color, poor people, women, those who identify as LGBTQ+, differently abled people, and (O)thers. This racism, sexism, antiqueerism, ableism, faithism, and the like reifies a neoliberal society in which the targeted are made to feel emotionally and economically insecure, while simultaneously eliminating possibilities for or denying reciprocity—a vital function of a cohesive, egalitarian democratic society. For those whose identity is consolidated under perverse

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insecurity, indebtedness, and existence. Under neoliberalism, individuals are solely responsible for all aspects of their lives, what governmentality theorists refer to as responsabilization, and are duped into believing they are not entitled to state or other organized collective assistance.

nostalgia, their insecurities are temporarily suaved, and they feel secure in their common position; that is, their hatred for *fill in the blank* held in common. Further, as a byproduct of cultural alienation and isolation (segregation), driven by neoliberal instruments (hyper-individualism, hyper-consumption, hyper-consumerism), perverse nostalgia sustains and exacerbates and celebrates a hyper-segregated society. It consolidates historical social hierarchies with physical/geographical boundaries (gated communities, intercity public transportation islands), which prevents diverse peoples coming together literally and figuratively. Perverse nostalgia thus both works to stabilize those it supports/benefits and destabilize those it targets/attacks/uses, as it rewrites reality and forces others to accept this new reality.

It is important to understand, perverse nostalgia is the vector through which the discourse of the superiority of whiteness, masculinity, straightness, and Christianity is expressed. It signals supremacy and entitlement to destroy perceived wrongness, such as weakness or Otherness, with impunity, while simultaneously assigning blame to this wrongness. In this resurgent white nationalist, white supremacist, misogynistic, antiqueer, and anti-immigrant moment—in which *woman are whores, Black men are dangerous, queers are sinners, and immigrants are criminals*—perverse nostalgia is the neoliberal rhetorical device which empowers and propels it. Rather sadistically, it also has profound spiraling effect. Stereotypical labeling creates additional distance between those for whom perverse nostalgia aids and those it hurts, yet further distancing and disallowing corrective narratives, such as dispelled stereotypes, historical perspective, and rational points of view.

Perverse nostalgia also works as a neoliberal instrument for gaining or retaining economic, political, social, and psychological power while masking or denying responsibility

and accountability. In this way, perverse nostalgia justifies fundamentally regressive (harmful) social, political, and economic policies. The participatory restrictions evidenced in neoliberal sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical discourse further empower perverse nostalgia and deepen precarity and precariousness. Perverse nostalgia does not merely work to persuade; rather, it exerts psychological dominance over wrongness (all the harmful *isms*) so that the neoliberal agenda may thrive.

### Critical Analysis Using a Perverse Nostalgia Approach

As discussed above, neoliberalism creates profound discontinuity, which sets in motion precarity and precarization and creates threats to self-continuity and belongingness, which in turn deepens the desire to correct perceived societal wrongs and reestablish *appropriate* social circumstances and connections. This set of negative actions initiates nostalgic longing. Nostalgic longing is perverted, however, by modern-day neoliberal realities, which do not allow continuity to be achieved because neoliberal realities further exacerbate existential fears which cannot be relieved. This resultantly triggers perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past buoyed by deeply entrenched national metanarratives, in service of neoliberalism: American global hegemony; and, American exceptionalism, under which key American myths were/are (re)formed.

Perverse nostalgia is a highly racialized, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed neoliberal device underwriting the current destructive fantasy of an America *made great again* through economic prosperity (for some) and erasure of O(thers). “Make America Great Again” as a movement has absorbed earlier white supremacist destructive fantasies including the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. For some supporters, “Make America Great Again” attracts them through

entrenched (supposedly coded) racist messaging, which appeals to their zero-sum thinking; that is their perceived loss of white resources, status, and/or access as (O)thers have gained resources, status, and/or access and have thus become more empowered.

Imbedded in perverse nostalgia is white nostalgia<sup>97</sup> and the yearning for hyper-white, hyper-male public and private spaces in which nonnormative histories, cultures, and bodies have (yet again) been erased. In perverse nostalgia, there is a deep longing for antebellum-esque norms: racial hierarchies, female subservience, and the expurgation of queers. Perverse nostalgia works to remarginalize people of color, women, and LGBTQ+ peoples, and abhors sociopolitical agitation and social justice movements. It works to whitewash an uncomfortable past and expunge the necessity, work, and achievements of social and political movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, feminism, Latinx struggles, student movements, anti-war movements, and marginalized gender queer movements. Perverse nostalgia (re)orients the white self towards the nation as property: a sovereign space owned/controlled by white

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<sup>97</sup> In recent years, the term “white nostalgia” has been used by academics to explore the constructed memories of whites around idealized racial pasts (either the exclusion or inclusion of people of color). Winifred Breines uses the term “white nostalgia” to encompass “idealistic notions of racial togetherness and community” and gender universality on the part of white feminists in the second wave feminist movement (17). Alison Winch uses the term to describe representations of racist stereotypes in contemporary media, such as Black women as servants in works like *Mad Men* (2007–15) and *The Help* (2011)) (117). For Michael Maly, et al., the term “white nostalgia” concerns “the ways whites use nostalgia narratives and storytelling to construct positive white racial identities as well as to normalize racial segregation” (765). Ewa Adamkiewicz uses the term to describe the “simplified images and representations” employed by plantation tourism in the “[performance of] memories that deny the terror of slavery in order to make a profit” (14, 15).

people—a nation in which white people own the land and the natural resources and control the nation’s stories (myths) about itself.

### Perverse Nostalgia in Practice

Though Part 2: Cultural Production (Chapters 4-6) of this project focuses on cultural production context and analysis, it is beneficial to pause here to consider perverse nostalgia in practice, primarily through the instrumentation (weaponization) of contemporary cultural products. I use selected contemporary public education policy on Social Studies curricula and textbooks, deregulating U.S. federal law and policy, and Confederate flags and monuments as evidence of perverse nostalgia’s ability to permeate American public purposes and spaces and negatively influence behaviors.

Social Studies Curricula and Textbooks As cultural scholar Henry Giroux explains in *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism* (2008),

The history of the changing economic and ideological conditions that gave rise to neoliberalism must be understood in relation to the corresponding history of race relations in the United States and abroad. Most importantly, since the history of race is either left out or misrepresented by the official channels of power in the United States, it is crucial that the history of slavery, civil rights, racial politics, and ongoing modes of struggle at the level of everyday life be remembered and used pedagogically to challenge the historical amnesia that feeds neoliberalism’s ahistorical claim to power and the continuity of its claims to common sense. The struggle against racial injustice cannot be separated from larger questions about what kind of culture and society is emerging under the imperatives of neoliberalism, what kind of history it ignores, and what alternatives might point to a substantive democratic future (79).

A poignant example of real and attempted racial injustice and erasure as a tool of perverse nostalgia is the controversy of the representation of race and power in public school social

studies curricula and textbooks—what historian James W. Loewen refers to as the tyranny of textbooks.<sup>98</sup>

For decades, far-right wing, religious social conservatives have “claimed that history books excessively emphasized cruelty to slaves, and that coverage of slavery, civil rights struggles, and discrimination was unpatriotic and unchristian”—especially in places like Texas (Dossey 203).

Since the 1960s, the selection of schoolbooks in Texas has been a target for the religious right, which worried that schoolchildren were being indoctrinated in godless secularism, and political conservatives who felt that their kids were being given way too much propaganda about the positive aspects of the federal government (G. Collins).

Due to Texas’ massive K-12 public school student population—in the U.S., one public school student out of ten is educated in Texas; some 4.8 million students—the state wields enormous influence over the nation’s textbook publishing industry (Fortin; Dossey 203). This influence is further extended because textbooks that accommodate Texas public education standards are purchased by other school systems across the nation (Fortin).

In 2010, the Texas Board of Education adopted public school social studies curricula and textbooks that promoted neoliberal and Republican rhetoric and significantly downplayed slavery as the cause of the Civil War. The 2010 curricula and textbooks identified slavery as one of several causes for the war, following sectionalism and states’ rights in order of significance.

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<sup>98</sup> See James W. Loewen’s *Teaching What Really Happened: How to Avoid the Tyranny of Textbooks and Get Students Excited about Doing History* (2018, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

The result was public education practices that egregiously misrepresented African slavery in the United States, as well as Latinx, American Indian, and other histories and struggles for representation and belonging in the accurate teaching of U.S. History. In 2018, the Texas State Board of Education further muddied the issue by preliminarily voting, under the guise of streamlining public school social studies curriculum standards, to remove important historical and contemporary figures (non-Republican and/or politically progressive individuals (and favorite Trump-base targets), such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) and further erase problematic aspects of the nation's history. After public uproar and unwanted national attention, the Texas State Board of Education wisely reversed its decision later that year (Hess). Regarding the role of slavery in the cause of the Civil War, the Board revised its 2019-2020 academic standards to state middle school students should be able to “explain the central role of the expansion of slavery in causing sectionalism, disagreement over states’ rights, and the Civil War” (“19 TAC Chapter 113”).<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Another example of (promised) racial injustice and erasure as a tool of perverse nostalgia, is Trump’s “national commission to promote patriotic education” (“Remarks.. Conference on American History”). In September 2020, as I was revising the final draft of this project, Trump promised the creation of the “1776 Commission” to promote “pro-American curriculum that celebrates the truth about our nation’s great history,” to teach students about the “miracle of American history” (“Remarks.. Conference on American History”). Trump’s remarks were in response to ongoing racial justice demonstrations occurring across the nation, which he describes as “left-wing rioting and mayhem,” which “are the direct result of decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools. It’s gone on far too long. Our children are instructed from propaganda... that try to make students ashamed of their own history” (“Remarks.. Conference on American History”). Trump went on to say, “The left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies” (“Remarks.. Conference on American

Perverse nostalgia justifies fundamentally archconservative regressive public education policy. The public education crisis perpetuates deficient learning, such as diminishing critical thinking skills. The disciplines which are most needed to counteract perverse nostalgia—social sciences, humanities, and the fine arts—are those that are the most despised and devalued (and defunded) by neoliberals. These disciplines—humanities, in particular—develop intellectual means for confronting oneself and resisting the dictates of neoliberalism. It is in the sphere of the social sciences, where the critical statistical data necessary for understanding how dominance and dominion function at the structural level can be found.

Deregulation and Whitelash In MAGA (“Make America Great Again”) America, perverse nostalgia is being mobilized to drive injurious policy making, such as dismissed civil and human rights, sustained assaults on voting rights, and decreased access to family planning services. Perverse nostalgia is also being used to prioritize the elimination of federal environmental rules and regulations and legitimize the public resurgence of neo-Nazism and overt displays of white supremacy. At the time of this writing, the Trump administration has implemented a “zero tolerance” policy forcing all migrants who enter the United States without authorization (with inflated focus on the U.S.-Mexico border), including asylum seekers, to be referred to the U.S. Department of Justice for prosecution. The Trump administration has also

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History”). Neither the Trump administration nor the U.S. government has authority over state and local public-school curricula.

increased stipulations on Title X safety-net family planning program funding.<sup>100</sup> In March 2019, the administration concluded its dismantling of Title X regulations, resulting in drastic changes, which reduce access to affordable healthcare, inflict coercive and officious standards of care on patients, and undermine the federally supported family planning providers.

By the end of 2019, the Trump administration had rolled back or reversed 85 federal environmental rules and regulations (Popovich et al). On the eve of the 2020 general election, according to *Washington Post* reporting, Trump has “weakened or wiped out more than 125 rules and policies aimed at protecting the nation’s air, water and land, with 40 more rollbacks underway (Eilperin et al.) In “*AnthropoTrumpism: Trump and the Politics of Environmental Disruption*” (2018), environmental scientist Monty Hempel outlines just some of the few more egregious environmental-related statements and actions of Trump during the election and in his first year in office. For example, during the March 3, 2016 presidential debate, held in Flint, Michigan, of all places,<sup>101</sup> Trump called for the elimination of the Environmental Protection

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<sup>100</sup> “Title X family planning clinics play a critical role in ensuring access to a broad range of family planning and related preventive health services for millions of low-income or uninsured individuals and others. Title X is the only federal grant program dedicated solely to providing individuals with comprehensive family planning and related preventive health services” (“Title X Family Planning”).

<sup>101</sup> The Flint water (public health/environmental injustice) crisis began in April 2014 when, in a cost-saving move, the City Council of Flint, Michigan, a deindustrialized majority-Black city, changed the city’s water source from treated water sourced from Lake Huron and the Detroit River to water sourced from the Flint River without applying necessary corrosion inhibitors (another cost-saving move), which allowed lead from aging pipes to leach into the city’s water supply, exposing over 100,000 residents to dangerous levels of lead. While it is still considered

Agency (EPA). “During the campaign, he pledged to stop all federal funding for clean energy programs and throttle regulation by requiring any new regulation to require the elimination of two existing regulations.<sup>102</sup> He also said that he would cancel USA funding of all domestic and international climate programs” (Hempel 185-86). In addition to rescinding the coal mining moratorium on federal lands,

Trump made good on his threat to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement and to scrap the Clean Power Plan. And his appointments of Scott Pruitt [as Administrator of the EPA], Rick Perry [as Secretary of Energy], Ryan Zinke [as Secretary of the Interior], and Sonny Perdue [as Secretary of Agriculture] all suggest that a strategic retreat from past environmental policy achievements is now taking place<sup>103</sup>. The fact that one of his very first [presidential memoranda] (January 24, 2017) was to revive the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipeline projects speaks strongly to the anti-environmental rhetoric he embraces to reassure his base (Hempel 185-86).

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an active crisis at the time of this writing, the crisis exposed corruption and a coverup by former Michigan governor Rick Snyder and has resulted in numerous criminal and civil actions.

<sup>102</sup> Just nine days after he was inaugurated, Trump signed Executive Order (E.O.) 13771, “Reducing Regulation and Controlling Regulatory Costs,” “which requires federal departments and agencies to: (1) eliminate two regulatory actions for each new regulatory action; and (2) not exceed a regulatory cost allowance” and, a month later, E.O. 13777, “Enforcing the Regulatory Reform Agenda,” which mandated that agencies establish a task force to implement E.O. 13771 (E.O. 13771).

<sup>103</sup> At the time of this writing, Scott Pruitt is no longer Administrator of the EPA. He resigned amid numerous and assorted management and ethics scandals. Pruitt served the Trump administration from February 17, 2017 to July 6, 2018. After assuming office on March 2, 2017, Rick Perry resigned as Secretary of Energy at the end of 2019. Ryan Zinke is no longer Secretary of the Interior. He resigned amid numerous scandals concerning using his position for personal gain. Zinke served as Secretary of the Interior in the Trump Administration from March 1, 2017 to January 2, 2019. Sonny Perdue is currently still serving as the Secretary of Agriculture. He assumed the office on April 25, 2017.

In *Crimes against Humanity: Climate Change and Trump's Legacy of Planetary Destruction*

(2019), sociologist Judith Blau picks up where Hempel left off.

The web pages of the Environmental Protection Agency that mentioned “climate change” were removed; laws regulating air pollution were weakened; and various steps were taken to allow oil companies to drill offshore... Scientists were told they could not attend science meetings or present their research at meetings... In January 2018 Trump announced that solar cells and panels from overseas would be subject to a 30% tariff, but it was widely reported that the tariffs could drive increases in pollution and endanger jobs in America’s \$29 billion solar industry. Then, in Trump’s 2018 budget he made drastic cuts to science programs and federal science projects (Blau 101).

Blau and others consider these actions, especially Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, *crimes against humanity*.

While the Trump presidency has created a caustic disruption to American political and societal norms, culture and identity wars have been raging for quite some time. “Although Trump’s election was not a referendum on environmental protection” or other federal protections,

It did reflect deep divisions in public attitudes toward federal regulation and elite, science-driven models of policy making. Trump’s reliance on strategic distraction, normalization of bad behavior, and “alternative facts” has kept his base energized, but it has also produced a growing crisis of legitimacy that calls into question the future of both democracy and sustainability (Hempel 183).

His election also significantly increased already growing destructive ideological divisions among the nation’s citizenry.

As cultural studies scholar Douglas Kellner explains in *American Horror Show: Election 2016 and the Ascent of Donald J. Trump* (2017), the election of Trump to the presidency was “in part a ‘whitelash’ against ‘P.C. culture’ (i.e. political correctness which criticizes racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bias while advocating a more open, inclusive, and tolerant culture). Trump’s anti-P.C. brigades saw their... white privileges”—particularly, white Christian

male privileges—“under assault during the Obama years” during which “whites were no longer necessarily seen as superior to blacks and people of color, men were challenged by uppity women, gay and lesbian marriage and rights were allowed, and immigrants were allegedly permitted to pour into the country and take over ‘American’ jobs” (44). This is similar to sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s toned down and apologetic findings in *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2017), in which she reports millions of white Christian Americans have come to believe not only have they lost their privileged status in American society, but that their coveted white Christian identity has become stigmatized and persecuted.

In *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party* (2014), sociologist Matthew Windust Hughey and attorney Gregory Parks, detail how white anxiety, particularly in response to the Obama presidency, was inflamed by the histrionic, highly racialized discourse of rightist and archconservative news and opinion media outlets, which quite effectively encouraged “nativism, xenophobia, racial fatigue, and white backlash” (2). According to Hughey and Parks, such subtle and overt racialized discourse “generally reproduce[es] a dangerous and white-supremacist ideology and practice” (7) They describe this occurrence as a four-dimension process. In the first process,

People of color, especially African Americans in general and Barack Obama in specific, are reconstructed as dysfunctional, pathological, social pariahs that threaten the very foundations of Western democracy and civilization. Second, specific performances of white racial identity are deemed manifestations of morality and are often conflated with authentic and moral forms of US citizenship and patriotism. Third, whites are constructed as the proper administrators and caretakers of an increasingly diverse society. Here, whiteness emerges as the paternalistic savior of the nation, if not the world, and whites should be left to their own devices to govern and decide what is best for others. Fourth, white people and white culture are framed as the embattled victims of a politically correct and

totalitarian society in which whites can't simply speak their mind of exercise basic human rights (Hughey and Parks 7).

Hughey and Parks further link this occurrence to the highly problematic hierarchical and racist Nazi ideology of *Herrenvolk*. “These dimensions of black dysfunction, white patriotism, white paternalism, and white victimhood together reveal the existence of a *Herrenvolk* (white master race) democracy” (7). Trump’s persistent stoking of racial panic—his involvement in the Birtherism movement, his anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies—evidences another *Herrenvolk* moment.

In *American Nightmare Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism* (2016), Kellner explains how, in this time of intensified white anxiety and highly racialized rhetoric,

Trump’s authoritarian populist supporters are driven by rage: they are really angry at the political establishment and system, the media, and economic and other elites. They are eager to support an anti-establishment candidate who claims to be an outsider... [and] provokes his followers rage with classic authoritarian propaganda techniques. Trump’s anti-immigrant and racist rhetoric, his Islamophobia, and his xenophobic nationalism plays into a violent racist tradition in the U.S. and activates atavistic fears of other races and anger among his white followers. Like European fascism, Trump draws on restorative nostalgia and promises to “Make America Great Again”—a regressive return to an earlier never specified time. To mobilize his followers, Trump both appeals to nostalgia and manipulates racism and nationalism, while playing to the vile side of the American psyche and the long tradition of nationalism, America First-ism, and xenophobia, wanting to keep minorities and people of color outside of the country and “in their place” (25-26).

In clear and appalling consequence, since the 2016 presidential election, right-wing extremism in the United States has significantly increased, and there has been a spike in far-right violence and hate crimes, as well as increased antigovernment, neo-Confederate, white nationalist, neo-Nazi organizing and demonstrations (Shanmugasundaram). According to a 2018 brief by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, “The number of terrorist attacks [in the U.S.] by far-right

perpetrators rose over the past decade, more than quadrupling between 2016 and 2017” (S. Jones). This while the U.S. Department of Homeland Security endures further staff and funding cuts due to ongoing neoliberal austerity efforts.

Confederate Flags and Monuments Perverse nostalgia is evidenced in abundance in the rabid defense by white Americans of modern displays of Confederate symbolism and the protection and preservation of monuments honoring Confederate war heroes. This in a time when most Americans believe their removal from modern society is long overdue due to their highly problematic historic associations with white nationalism, white supremacy, and modern-day overt racist signaling. The Confederate flag and Confederate monuments have always been steeped in nostalgia, and connected not with immediate post-Civil War remembrances but rather with contemporary uses and abuses. The modern neoliberal era has perverted this already highly problematic nostalgia for racist times and its symbols, especially in agrarian(rural) spaces. It is rare to visit rural/small town America (regardless of “red state” or “blue state” status) and not see the Confederate flag proudly and prominently displayed on businesses, homes, and peoples.<sup>104</sup> Rather than reflect shared history and heritage as is usually professed, Confederate symbolism instead largely appeals to those with shared demographics (whiteness, rural, poor/working class) and shared social values and sociopolitical affinities (afflictions). Perverse nostalgia results from

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<sup>104</sup> I have traveled the backroads of nearly every state in the United States. The only state I have not seen the Confederate flag or some semblance of it overtly displayed is Hawaii.

contemporary economic, political, and social precarity rather than historical and regional loyalties.

Perverse nostalgia dynamics of inequality are highly racialized and exist in this zero-sum moment when gains by people of color—economic, political, and/or social—are perceived as threats to white America/ns and their privileged status quo. Perverse nostalgia exists in a neoliberal framework, which characterizes people of color and poor people of any ilk (think “welfare queens,” “nasty women,” “absent Black fathers,” “super-predators”) as incapable and undeserving of participation in the American project—its exceptionalist economic, political, and social spheres. As Henry Giroux explains, “racism survives through the guise of neoliberalism, a kind of repartee that imagines human agency as simply a matter of individualized choices, the only obstacle to effective citizenship and agency being the lack of principled self-help and moral responsibility” (“Spectacles of Race” 191). Race as a construct has always been a product of capitalism. Under predatory neoliberal capitalism, strategic racism is aggravated and accelerated. “Racist violence cannot be separated from the violence imposed by neoliberal capitalism” (Giroux, “Neoliberal Capitalism”).

The Confederate States of America battle emblem (aka: “Confederate flag”), originally designed in 1863 as the Army of Northern Virginia’s battle flag by to support General Robert E. Lee and the Confederate effort to “maintain the Heaven-ordained supremacy of the white man over the inferior or colored race,” appeared as a “potent political symbol,” not in the years immediately after the Civil War but rather as a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century response to “Harry Truman’s modest civil rights initiatives in the late 1940s,” which Southern Democrats perceived “as an infringement upon their state rights, which ultimately led to the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948”

(Thompson qtd. in Strother et al. 298; Strother et al. 298). The States' Rights Democratic Party (aka: Dixiecrats) adopted the Confederate flag as their political symbol, “forg[ing] a strong link between the flag and racism” (Strother et al. 298). The Confederate flag has long since permeated American society and culture—far beyond the innocuous celebrating of Southern heritage and pride and Confederate bravery and rebellion and the geographic South, towards being represented on everything from state license plates to beer koozies—to be taken up by white nationalists and white supremacists—hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, and antigovernment militias. Simply, Confederate symbols represent African slavery, racism, and the U.S.'s long terrible history of tyranny over and oppression of Black Americans. Many white Americans who display the Confederate flag probably (surely!) do not align themselves with white hate groups. They do, however, apparently embrace perverse nostalgia for white hegemony.

High-profile racially motivated incidents, such as the June 2015 mass shooting(massacre) of nine African Americans at the landmark Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina,<sup>105</sup> the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally/(white pride) protest in Charlottesville, Virginia (against the removal a Confederate monument (Robert E. Lee) from

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<sup>105</sup> The mass shooting was perpetrated by Dylann Roof, a 21-year old white supremacist. Roof “left a racist manifesto targeting blacks, Jews and Hispanics on his Web site, a white supremacist broadside that also appears to offer a rationale for the shootings” (Bernstein et al). The site also shows Roof posing with a Confederate flag. In December 2016, Roof was convicted of 33 federal hate crime and murder charges and was sentenced to death in January 2017.

Emancipation Park (previously Lee Park just two months prior to the protest) in which a counterdemonstrator was killed), and the May 2020 police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed by a white police officer during an arrest, in Minneapolis, Minnesota,<sup>106</sup> have revived calls to remove Confederate symbols from public display. Since 2015, as largely the result of efforts of Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and its supporters, several institutions have worked to remove the symbol, such as removing the Confederate flag from South Carolina State House grounds in July 2015. As former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley stated at the time, “it should have never been there” (qtd. in SPLC). In June 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps implemented a ban on displaying any Confederate symbols and the U.S. Navy banned the Confederate flag from its military installations. Also, in June 2020, NASCAR—events which are bastions of white working class displays of the Confederate flag—wholesale banned displaying the flag at all races. On June 30, 2020, the governor of Mississippi signed a bill “abandoning the state’s flag and stripping the Confederate battle flag symbol from it” (Berman and Guarino).

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<sup>106</sup> Floyd’s killing is perceived as representative of epidemic police violence against Black men. According to *Statista*, “the trend of fatal police shootings in the United States seems to only be increasing, with a total 429 civilians having been shot, 88 of whom were Black, as of June 4, 2020. In 2018, there were 996 fatal police shootings, and in 2019 this figure increased to 1,004. Additionally, the rate of fatal police shootings among Black Americans was much higher than that for any other ethnicity, standing at 30 fatal shootings per million of the population as of June 2020” (“Number of People”). According to *Los Angeles Times* reporting (2019), a leading cause of death for young Black men in America is the police. “About 1 in 1,000 black men and boys in America can expect to die at the hands of police, according to a new [Rutgers University] analysis of deaths involving law enforcement officers” (Khan).

The removal and banning of Confederate flags has caused considerable white backlash, or “whitelash”—resentment that has expanded beyond the episodic and the regional to become embedded in national and even global sociopolitical demonstrations, as evidenced by Confederate flag rallies, Confederate flags displayed at Trump rallies<sup>107</sup> and his domestic and international appearances, Confederate flags displayed at rightist pro-gun rallies, anti-lockdown (COVID-19 pandemic) protests, and other similar conservative, pro-Trump, anti-government, states’ rights, pro-gun, anti-BLM, and the like activist/protest/militant gatherings. This is in addition, of course, to the many overt displays of Confederate symbols on private property, businesses, and persons across the country.

Like the Confederate flag, Confederate monuments honoring Confederate leaders and soldiers—those who defended the legal enslavement of Black men, women, and children—did not appear immediately after the end of the Civil War. Rather, they became part of the American landscape when white Americans began to feel threatened by Black opportunity and advancement and resultantly created state and local laws imposing racial subjugation and segregation. Confederate monuments work to reinforce white supremacy through racist symbolism.

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<sup>107</sup> I witnessed this firsthand at the November 2018 Trump rally in Belgrade, MT.

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), there have been two distinct periods in the history of the United States during which the number of new Confederate monuments spiked.

The first began around 1900 as Southern states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise African Americans and re-segregate society after several decades of integration that followed Reconstruction. It lasted well into the 1920s, a period that also saw a strong revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Many of these monuments were sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The second period began in the mid-1950s and lasted until the late 1960s, the period encompassing the modern civil rights movement (SPLC).

After the June 2015 Charleston shooting (massacre), BLM movement activists and others renewed calls for taking down Confederate monuments which, like the Confederate flag, are considered by many Americans to be symbols of white supremacy. The SPLC reports, since the 2015 Charleston attack, 114 public symbols of the Confederacy have been removed, with 1,747 still standing; however, as of July 2020, the number of Confederate monuments still standing is lower as Confederate and other monuments, including Christopher Columbus and Thomas Jefferson, have been pulled down by BLM and other protestors and activists in the wake of the George Floyd protests<sup>108</sup> (“Whose Heritage?”).

Whitelash against removing Confederate monuments has been considerable, again displaying perverse nostalgia for white hegemony. Through their nostalgic tribute, Confederate monuments, with their overt connections to structural racism, work to erase the sins of slavery—

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<sup>108</sup> The 2020 removal of problematic monuments, relating to white supremacy, genocide, and colonialism, expanded to Belgium, England, and New Zealand.

enslavement, subjugation, violence, rape, intimidation, torture, murder—towards an idealized white-centric, whitewashed past. Perverse nostalgia is evidenced in the modern-day negationist defending and persuading of the legitimacy of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy—a glorified Old South, a reified and deified antebellum South. As poet Caroline Randall Williams writes in her June 26, 2020 *New York Times* opinion piece,

Among the apologists for the Southern cause and for its monuments, there are those who dismiss the hardships of the past. They imagine a world of benevolent masters, and speak with misty eyes of gentility and honor and the land. They deny plantation rape, or explain it away, or question the degree of frequency with which it occurred... The dream version of the Old South never existed. Any manufactured monument to that time in that place tells half a truth at best. The ideas and ideals it purports to honor are not real (“You Want a Confederate Monument?”).

She also writes, “You want a confederate monument? My body is a confederate monument... I have rape-colored skin” (C. Williams).

Opponents of the long overdue removal of Confederate monuments actively ignore the nation’s historic and contemporary racialized realities. Like the Confederate flag, Confederate monuments have been instrumentalized and weaponized to obscure racially motivated violence, inequity, and injustice. Like the Confederate flag, Confederate monuments are embodiments of the nation’s persistent and prolonged history of white supremacy, genocide, colonialism, and imperialism, of enslavement, segregation, intimidation, and oppression.

### Conclusion

Julie Wilson argues neoliberalism has “constructed a new social ontology” which seeks to “radically reorient how we imagine and, thus, study society, including what we know about ourselves and others, how we think about politics and government, as well as the social fabric that threads our lives together,” resultantly, creating a neoliberal society where social protection

has been delegitimized and dismantled, and where competition and private enterprise is deeply entrenched, “[creating] an impoverished, unfree social world sorely lacking in resources for critical thinking, social interconnection, and political transformation” (51, 70). In such as society, neoliberal cultural logic dictates that cultural production within neoliberal society reject authenticity, reinforce the belief that there is nothing beyond mass commodification, while also reinforcing responsabilization, hyper-competitiveness (self-enclosure, self-transformation, self-mastery, hyper-flexibility), extreme individualism (self-enclosure), precarization, and social destabilization and disinvestment. Perverse nostalgia both accommodates and perpetuates these injurious effects and triggers a vicious downward spiral, all while imagining an *America made white again, made straight again, made Christian again, made great again*.

The next section, Part 2: Cultural Production, consists of three context and analysis chapters—each dedicated to a specific timeframe, particular neoliberal circumstances, and a cultural product (art, literature, or film). Each chapter in Part 2 provides important context followed by close reading of an American cultural product. In the next chapter, I focus on the 1980s and Ronald Reagan’s (nostalgic) mythical America. For context, I explore the agricultural recession and emergent neoliberal federal laws and policy, which set in motion profound precarity and precarization and established precedents for modern-day neoliberal agripolicymaking. I also analyze Reagan’s political use of idealized agrarian myth imagery in “Reagan Country,” a highly nostalgized painted mural used in his successful 1984 presidential reelection campaign.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## REAGAN COUNTRY

*The heritage of our past will bring forth the harvest of our future.* —Ronald Reagan, August 19, 1984, “Presidential Campaign Remarks at the Missouri State Fair”

*Ideas do have consequences, rhetoric is policy, and words are action.* —Ronald Reagan, April 22, 1986, “Remarks at the Heritage Foundation Anniversary Dinner”

*The final greatness of the American presidency lies in the truth that it is not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of indestructible myth.* —Clinton Rossiter, *The American Presidency*, 1956

In this first chapter in Part 2: Cultural Production, I look at Ronald Reagan’s nostalgic-minded mythical America, “Reagan Country,” the ascent of Reagan-style neoliberalism as he fundamentally shifted the national psyche toward embedded neoliberalism, his powerful and persuasive use of political symbolism, persistent agrarian myth rhetoric, and skewing of national metanarratives to his purpose—much of which endures to this day. For context, this chapter explores the 1980s farm crisis and emergent neoliberal federal laws and policy, which set in motion profound precarity and precarization in agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces and established precedents for modern-day neoliberal agripolicymaking (discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6). This chapter also further elucidates connections between national myth making and neoliberalism, as well as analyzes Reagan’s use of idealized agrarian myth imagery and discourse for political purposes through the highly nostalgic painted mural (cultural product), “Reagan Country,” used in his successful 1984 presidential reelection campaign.

Though a great deal has been written about Reagan, ranging broadly from his politics and two-term presidency to his filmography, including his use of national metanarratives and nostalgia to push his political aspirations and agenda, very little scholarly attention has been given specific to his agrarian myth-based rhetoric, especially in relation to his political rhetoric and symbolism. Though Reagan regularly conjures the classic notion of yeoman republicanism (Jeffersonian yeomanship towards neoyeomanship) in effort to present a utopian American agrarian vision—arguably in effort to obfuscate harsh neoliberal realities of the 1980s—scholars have largely overlooked his use of the agrarian myth. Case in point, a June 2020 keyword search in *GoogleScholar* using varying iterations of “Ronald Reagan,” “agrarian,” “agrarian myth,” “agrarianism,” and “pastoral” results in just 15-20 works on average each search with several of the identified works not specific to Reagan. A search on just “Ronald Reagan” and “agrarian myth” results in 125 works, but again, very few are specific to Reagan. There are no book-length treatments of Reagan and agrarianism/the agrarian myth, comprehensive or otherwise. A search of the *American Quarterly* journal, using the terms “Ronald Reagan,” “agrarian” and “farm,” results only Luis D. León’s article “Cesar Chavez in American Religious Politics: Mapping the New Global Spiritual Line” (2007) in which Reagan is mentioned just once as Chavez’s nemesis and fellow 2006 inductee into the California Hall of Fame. Only cultural scholar William Adams focuses on Reagan’s use of agrarian(rural) symbolism in his two 1985 journal articles “Natural Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis” and “American Gothic: Country, the River, Places in the Heart” in *The Georgia Review* and *The Antioch Review*, respectively—

both of which discuss the “Reagan Country” mural in relation to Reagan’s 1984 presidential reelection campaign.<sup>109</sup>

In addition to presenting important context, I provide a close reading of the “Reagan Country” mural depicting an idealized agrarian(rural) scene. In my analysis, I pay particular attention to points of erasure and Reagan’s enjoining of Christian conservatism, cultural nationalism, and agrarian(rural) whiteness, with Reaganian neoliberalism towards modern-day neoyeomanship. Not only does the highly nostalgic mural distance Reagan from the precariousness of the agricultural recession of the 1980s, but also the environmental degradation of agrarian(rural) spaces, both exacerbated by Reagan’s encouragement of the neoliberalization of America.

### Introduction

Ronald Reagan, the “Great Communicator,” narrated into existence a mythical America of his own nostalgic making—an America which never, of course, actually existed. Reagan’s mythical America, deeply infused with highly problematic emergent neoliberal ideology, builds upon and skews established national metanarratives—the myths of the New World, the promised land, the melting pot, American progress, the (endless) frontier, the self-made man, the American Dream—and utilizes powerful and persuasive political symbolism, towards the realization of the

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<sup>109</sup> Nicholas J. O’Shaughnessy also discusses the mural in *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (2004), but references William Adams’ work rather than provide much new or additional critical analysis.

neoliberal project: austerity politics, economic liberalization and exaltation of the market economy, government responsabilization, and globalization. While his perception and communication of the nation's highly complicated and problematic past has been interpreted as simplistic, overly nostalgic, and almost completely in mythical terms, largely due to his highly effective mythmaking, his impact on modern American economics, politics, and culture is immense. Despite, political scientist Wilbur Edel's quite reasonable description of Reagan's "abysmal ignorance of history, habit of confusing fact and fiction, and an inability to examine introspectively his own reasoning and conclusions," Reagan's mythical America was, and stubbornly remains, embraced, believed, and beloved by many Americans (xii).

Reagan's rhetoric and beliefs, political ideologies and successes, and, arguably, even his persistent relevance to and representation in contemporary America society and culture, are defined by, and saturated with, myth and nostalgia.<sup>110</sup> Reagan habitually employed the tools of

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<sup>110</sup> Arguably, Reagan's mythized representations of America are as abundant as mythized representations of Reagan himself. The man is a national icon and near demigod to conservatives and neoconservatives. Veteran political journalist Will Bunch describes the "bold, crudely calculated, and ideologically driven legend-manufacturing" of Reagan (and Reaganism) as "spectacularly successful... myth machine... launched in the mid-1990s when the conservative brand was at low ebb" and which was "successfully sold to the American public... in order to fit the modern conservative agenda and cover up its flaws" (18-19). Reagan continues to serve as highly divisive symbol of persistent partisan politics and political division. Such partisanship (and conflation of conservative/neoconservative and national identities) is well-evidenced in conservative media pundit Ann Coulter's claim that "only authentic Americans love Reagan" ("So Now They Think He Was Charming"). Concerning his distaste over Donald Trump's rampant use of his father's legacy, Ron Reagan said, "It just gets old. It seems to me to be kind of an obvious angle to take, because the Republicans keep bringing up my father and they have for a long time. It's for pretty obvious reasons. Who else do the Republicans have who they can

nostalgia, myth, and political symbolism to fortify his cult of personality and garner support for his destructive archconservative<sup>111</sup> positions and neoliberal policies at home and abroad. This includes the agrarian myth and related political symbolism towards the neoyeomanization of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces. Resultantly, and as a defining aspect of his presidency, any scholarly inquiry into Reagan and his politics must engage with nostalgia, myth, and political symbolism. As stated above, rarely has this been substantively done specifically through an agrarian myth lens.

### Reagan-style Nostalgia, Myth, and Political Symbolism

#### Nostalgia

As Russian literary scholar Svetlana Boym explains, nostalgia “is a yearning for a different time” and a “rebellion against the modern idea of time” (*The Future of Nostalgia* xv). “The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human

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hold up as a hero? I mean, unless you want to go back to Abraham Lincoln. And they may not have that much affinity for him! It’s not going to be Nixon. It’s not going to be H.W. Bush. It’s not going to be W either, for various reasons. So it’s my father. He’s their touchstone. He’s their fetish. They’ve all got to sort of genuflect to him” (qtd. in Ralph).

<sup>111</sup> Reagan’s prototype conservatism is marked by his advocacy for laissez-faire economics, support for tax cuts for wealthy (trickle-down/supply-side economics/voodoo economics or Reaganomics), hyper-militarism, devotion to American exceptionalism, hostility towards multiculturalism, the feminist movement, the Equal Rights Amendment, and gay rights, adamant opposition to busing, affirmative action, illegal immigration, and welfare, “support of a constitutional amendment banning abortion,... desire to return prayer to public schools,” and many antigovernment stances (Brewer and Maisel 56).

condition” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xv). She warns that nostalgia is paradoxical in that “longing can make us more empathetic toward fellow humans, yet the moment we try to repair longing with belonging [returning to a longed for or even mythical past], the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xv). Simply, the longing brings us together, while the envisioned return, divides us (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xv-xvi). It is the promise of returning/rebuilding—*making America great again*—that is at the center of “many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xvi). The innate danger of nostalgia is that it can easily confuse and conflate the real and the imaginary (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xvi). “In extreme cases it can create a phantom” past/place/promised land to return to, “for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters. Yet the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition” (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xvi). (See Chapter 3 for a deeper discussion on nostalgia and perverse nostalgia.)

There are countless examples of Reagan’s use of nostalgia to support his political aspirations and agenda. In example, Reagan’s “Morning in America,” a one-minute political advertisement used during his 1984 presidential reelection campaign, epitomizes his use of nostalgia (towards perverse nostalgia) and is considered one of the most successful campaign ads in modern political history. The commercial is infused with nostalgia for a 1950s-television-esque white straight Christian America and optimism that the nation could go back to a strictly white straight Christian America. With its sentimental music and continual rolling America

symbols—a (white) farmer working his field, a (white) boy on his paper route, a (white) father leaving for work, a (white) family moving into their new home, a (white) heterosexual couple getting married in a church, a (white) fireman raising the American flag)—the commercial clearly communicates Reagan’s (white straight Christian) mythical America. Written and narrated by political advertising trailblazer Hal Riney, the commercial’s script reads:

It’s morning again in America. Today, more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country’s history, with interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980. Nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon, 6,500 young men and women will be married. And with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It’s morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago? (“Political Ad”).

This highly effective political commercial clearly communicates Reagan-backlash against feminism and civil rights,<sup>112</sup> while also overtly working as a point of erasure. It is clear who is important (and who is not) in Reagan’s mythical America. The commercial is also a callback to Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign slogan “Let’s Make America Great Again”—a phrase he used repeatedly in speeches and remarks throughout his candidacies and two-term presidency.

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<sup>112</sup> This was proven during his eight years in office, through opposing women’s rights (opposing the Equal Rights Amendment, opposing women’s health and abortion rights (while appointing anti-choice judges), closing down federal agencies that aided women such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Office on Domestic Violence) and through his administration’s disinterest in addressing racial and other discrimination (Reagan’s successful nomination of William Rehnquist, a staunch opponent of civil rights legislation, to be Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Reagan’s failure to address the AIDS epidemic).

## Myth

Nostalgia is empowered by myth and, arguably, myth empowers and encourages nostalgia. Myth validates abstract and complex sociopolitical ideologies and positions (and nostalgias) and facilitates capitulation to complex sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical circumstances through simplification and recognition and identification with national metanarratives and their romanticized tenets. Myth unites the nation's citizenry with its agreed upon history—its idealized exceptionalist national beginnings—and provides shelter for the consequences of/for its creation and ensuing conduct.

According to historian Mircea Eliade, myth “narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’... myth tells how... a reality came into existence” (5) “Myth... is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*... Myth tells only that which *really* happened, which manifested itself completely” (Eliade 5-6, emphasis in the original). As political scholar Roland Boer further explains (per the thinking of philosopher Walter Benjamin) “Myth constructs or postulates world(s) whose truth will have been upon its completion” (22). In describing political myth, Boer understands

Myth as a virtual power, one that is productive of political events rather than merely a reflective act, posterior to the event. For if the truth of the event remains to be, indeed will have been at some future point, then the anticipation of that truth becomes not so much a competition of an event that has already happened as an element in *producing the event that will give rise to that truth*. If the truth will have been, then so also will the event have been (22, emphasis in the original).

Myth effectively forces events to occur through the construction of world(s) where the events will have transpired (Boer 22; Hanska 144). The strength of the myth, thus, facilitates the realization of the myth. Further, “the virtual power of myth lies not merely in its motive force,

but directly in its relation to history”—effecting historical change (Boer 30). When this happens, “[m]yth and history come crashing back together” and subjectivity (per Danish existentialist philosopher Soren Kierkegaard’s thinking on escaping myth through radical inwardness) “gives way at every moment to its political economic situation, *and* that situation generates such a myth in response, a myth that becomes its deepest ideological expression” (Boer 30; emphasis in the original). “The myth of radical inwardness cannot but speak of its historical situation and that situation generates the myth”—effectively mythifying history, though this history is separated from time so that historic situations, including specific events, are perceived as having occurred outside of time and thus outside of history (Boer 30; Hanska 144). Resultantly, “myth, with all its promises and dangers, provides [a] way of imagining a very different future” (Boer 22).

This *imagining of a very different future* is both supported and complicated by nostalgia. For example, the raced, classed, gendered, and faithed notion of *making American great again* hinges on embracing an idealized(mythical) past (of erasure of the Other) towards an idealized(mythical) future (of commensurate erasure of the Other). Empowered by nostalgia, yearning for myth preservation towards actualization (towards the future/forward positive) radically informs dominant and emergent white-centric American sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical ideologies—persistent and problematic raced, classed, gendered, and faithed ideologies rising in the Trump era but rooted in Reagan era—arguably initiated and perpetuated by Trumpian/Reaganian nationalistic rhetoric.

According to rhetorical scholar William F. Lewis, Reagan's rhetoric is enormously informed by myth (282). Reagan's nationalistic archetypal exceptionalist, romantic, nostalgic, homogeneous, autotelic American Studies Myth and Symbol school<sup>113</sup> way of mythmaking

Applies not to the origin of the world, but to the origin of America; not to the destiny of humanity, but to the destiny of Americans. It is a simple and familiar story that is widely taught and widely believed. It is not exactly a true story in the sense that academic historians would want their descriptions and explanations to be true, but it is not exactly fiction either (W. Lewis 282).

This type of mythmaking creates a sense of purpose and importance and identifies core commonalities for understanding (creating) individual identity(ies) (W. Lewis 282).<sup>114</sup>

Reagan's mythmaking not only informs but suffuses his political rhetoric. Lewis summarizes Reagan's mythical story of American as

A chosen nation, grounded in its families and neighborhoods, and driven inevitably forward by its heroic working people toward a world of freedom and economic progress unless blocked by moral or military weakness. ... It is a story with great heroes—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt—with great villains—the monarchs of pre-Revolutionary Europe, the Depression, the Communists, the Democrats—and with a great theme—the rise of freedom and economic progress.

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<sup>113</sup> As discussed in this project's Introduction, the Myth and Symbol school is American Studies' original unifying method. It focuses primarily on particular (distinctively) American myths, symbols, and themes. Henry Nash Smith describes Myth and Symbol as "an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (*Virgin Land* v). For Smith, a "concept" equates with an understanding, or "an intellectual perception of reality," and "emotion" equates with "an attitude toward that understanding" (Jehlen 24). "Thus, a myth so defined is a conceptualization that can move people and, as well, an emotion with conceptual content. Smith's 'image,' then, emerges from, and is empowered by, an interaction—this dualism being more or less overtly recognized as the ground of its effectiveness" (Jehlen 24).

<sup>114</sup> This is very much in line with Trump's imbuing his supporters with a profound *sense of purpose and importance* (a call to arms) to take America back; that is, to no longer kowtow to political correctness; that is, to restore power to white straight Christian males; that is, to return to Reagan's(Trump's) mythic America.

It is a story that is sanctified by God and validated by the American experience (“Telling America’s Story” 282).

Reagan’s rhetorical manifestation of a mythical America encapsulates the themes of “America’s greatness, its commitment to freedom, the heroism of the American people, the moral imperative of work, the priority of economic advancement, the domestic evil of taxes and government regulation, and the necessity of maintaining military strength” (W. Lewis 283).

Historian Garry Wills describes Ronald Reagan’s myth-based vision of the nation and its founding as a state of “original sinlessness” (168). Following Reagan’s thinking, resultant of the nation’s idealized and idolized formation (through divine providence, no less), this mythical America was pure—washed clean of man’s original sin, which had tainted humankind since the fall of man and Adam and Eve’s consequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The notion, or myth, of “original sinlessness,” entitles Reagan’s mythical America to be rightfully a perfect and just society—where there was no flawed beginning, no justified pretext for an uncertain present, and no acceptable excuse for an unstable future.<sup>115</sup> Reagan’s mythical America is effectively paradise regained, reimagined and reentered.

Interestingly, and vital to mythmaking and myth perpetuation, Reagan did not locate himself in the ambiguous present—a time for decisions and subsequent action. Rather, he situated himself at the same time timelessly in the idealized past and in the glorified future. As Belgian anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss explains, “what gives the myth an operational value

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<sup>115</sup> Reagan’s mythical America very effectively fulfills the promise the America as the New Eden.

is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future”<sup>116</sup>—something of which Reagan was an astute communicator (mythmaker) (209). “We know that any myth represents a quest for the remembrance of things past” and anticipate a promised shining, golden, and hopeful future (Lévi-Strauss 209). Through Reagan’s mythmaking, the idealized past and ambiguous present become the glorified future.

To step out of the 1980s for a moment, understanding nostalgia and myth in these terms is as applicable to the current Trump era as it is for the Reagan era. Like Reagan, Donald Trump is highly attuned to mythmaking and his base’s (often perverse) nostalgic longings—valuable currency for showmen and politicians. As psychologist Stacey Novack explains, politicians who trade in politically motivated nostalgia, what she terms “political nostalgia,”<sup>117</sup> need to be “reader[s] of desires and an interpreter of nostalgias” (“The Psychoanalysis”). “[They] must read,

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<sup>116</sup> Concerning this time referent for myth, Lévi-Strauss explains, “myth uses a third referent which combines the properties of the first two”; that is “*langue* belonging to a reversible time” or its timeless referent, and “*parole* being nonreversible” or its time-bound referent (209). “On the one hand, a myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place long ago. But what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future... It is that double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical, which explains how myth, while pertaining to the realm of *parole* and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of *langue* in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute entity on a third level which, though it remains linguistic by nature, is nevertheless distinct from the other two” (Lévi-Strauss 209-10).

<sup>117</sup> Novack describes “political nostalgia” and Trump’s particular use of nostalgia as “involve[ing] a repudiation of present day social, economic, and cultural realities, and there is much in the present that has been rhetorically repudiated by the Trump campaign: immigration, globalization, feminism, and the growing multiculturalism of the U.S., to name just a few” (“The Psychoanalysis”).

animate, and activate the powerful desires and interests of the electorate, including past-directed fantasies, and then alchemize them into usable building blocks of political change” (Novack, “The Psychoanalysis”). She describes Trump’s newfound success as a politician, having merged it with his showmanship just as did Reagan, as being able to “capitalize on nostalgic yearning,” with his MAGA (“Make America Great Again”) moniker appealing “to the apparently powerful and ubiquitous desire to return to a simpler and more secure imagined past to a time that preceded losses of jobs, futures, homes, and identities” (Novack, “The Psychoanalysis”). According to Novack, such consequential losses are basic components for solidifying sentiments of nationalism and populism—sentiments that require scapegoats to succeed, and which “invariably [draw] upon and [stoke] resentment, racism, and xenophobia” to sustain them (“The Psychoanalysis”).

### Political Symbolism

Political symbolism concerns symbolic representations of political perspectives or positions used across innumerable forms of visual and other media. Political scientist Rozann Rothman describes symbols as “the artifacts or objectifications of [searches] for meaning; they are value and emotion laden” (285). Symbols are powerful mediums and motivators. They “possess the capacity to transform acts of violence and heroism, accidents and tragedy into landmarks of meaning for individuals and societies” (Rothman 286). It is hard to imagine any modern U.S. political campaign not utilizing American symbols and symbolism to drive and reinforce the endeavor. “Politics, especially power relations, are the raw material of the symbol-making function,” and are well-evidenced in Reagan’s symbol-heavy nationalistic messaging (Rothman 285).

Reagan was a master of utilizing American symbols and political symbolism and employed them in nearly all aspects of his elections and his presidency. His consistent and persistent use of symbol-laden nationalistic messaging allowed him to play upon the fears and the desires of the American electorate. His relentless rhetoric allowed them to forget the precariousness of the moment—the profound discontinuity exacerbated by neoliberal realities—while encouraging them to believe and remember what was right and good and true about *their* nation. Cultural critic Michael Novak describes Reagan as acutely understanding the variety and vitality of American symbols, of which he guilelessly identified himself (xvi). “[H]e expressed them not only convincingly, but stirringly. He awakened in old symbols echoes that had for some years fallen out of fashion. He reminded people of the high regard for such symbols our forebears had shown, and he deftly sketched a vision of the power they would gain in the future” (M. Novak xvi-xvii). Reagan masterfully utilized political symbolism to interpret and impart his synthesized, nostalgized, and mythified version of the nation’s history and its purpose.

Political scientist James Combs describes the time leading up to the Reagan era as one of increasing dread regarding the nation’s complicity in “difficult and inconclusive” foreign entanglements and presumed imperial decline, as well as growing doubts concerning the legitimacy and longevity of America’s myth of progress (26).

By the time of Reagan, the predicaments and disappointments of history seemed also to include a sense of “the disenchantment of the world,” the accumulative and widespread conception found both in popular attitudes and art, of the devaluation of values that logically might lead to the delegitimization of institutions (Combs 26).

Resultantly, Reagan’s errand was to renormalize and resituate the United States at the world’s center and fight pessimistic thinking that America’s fabled existence was at its end (Combs 26).

Reagan “had to re-enchant the world, to imbue the profane present with the aura of the sacral

past in order to forestall or reverse the rapid decomposition of value orientations” (Combs 26).

Reagan “[appropriated] popular memory in the service of political stability and economic power” in order to reaffirm the myth of progress and deny the nation’s historical and contemporary decline (Combs 26).

At its core, “Reagan’s project concerned the peculiarly American tension between power and innocence” (Combs 27).

Americans are always losing their innocence while proclaiming that they remain innocent of historical guilt and moral culpability. Yet our vast imperial power and sense of fallenness nags at us. We once occupied a “virgin land” and saw ourselves in the new world. The dream of romantic democracy is a world of innocent post, or more precisely, power exercised by the innocent, insuring both purity of motive and benacity of result. Imagining ourselves as the sacralized heirs of the enchanted world of romantic democracy not only provides mythic self-justification, it also suggests continued self-possession (Combs 27).

Combs argues, in a society fiercely committed to innovation and progress (such as the U.S.), the “ideal Self”<sup>118</sup> is in danger of becoming protean, which, in turn, forces the reassertion and reaffirmation of (mythic) heroic qualities in order to renew a sense of the self that *made this country great* (27).

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<sup>118</sup> In relation to mythic inconsistencies creating political conflict over “the interpretation of symbols of moral and material worth,” Combs explains, “The social and political tensions created by antinomies of ‘freedom and responsibility,’ ‘liberty and equality,’ ‘individualism and altruism’ and so on, have made the definition of the American Self difficult and insured that the “quest for the ideal Self” would be unending and variously defined. Conflicts between Americans over whose choice and definition of mythically derived values often become politically salient, and thus politicians attempt to represent who and what is to be honored” (9).

Combs description of Reagan's endeavor to, if not restore, then to remind the nation of its greatness, fully aligns with Reagan's mythical America; that is, greatness consecrated by the past and envisioned for the near future. This is well-evidenced in remarks given by Reagan during a 1984 visit to the Goddard Space Flight Center, after the Discovery Space Shuttle made its first launch into space. After chronicling and exalting some of NASA's recent high technology accomplishments, he states,

Our vision is not an impossible dream; it's a waking dream. As Americans, let us cultivate the art of seeing things invisible. Only by challenging the limits of growth will we have the strength and knowledge to make America a rocket of hope shooting to the stars. ... The dream of America is much more than who we are or what we do. It is, above all, what we will be. We must always be the New World—the world of discovery, the world that reveres the great truths of its past, but that looks forward with unending faith to the promise of the future. In my heart, I know we have that faith. The dream lives on. America will remain future's child, the golden hope for all mankind (Reagan, "Remarks... Goddard Space Flight Center").

Reagan's envisioned future is further evidenced in his remarks at a 1984 question-and-answer session:

The dream of America is much more than who we are or what we do; the dream is what we will be. We must always be the New World, the world of discovery, the world that reveres the great truths of its past but that pushes on with unending faith toward the promise of the future. In my heart, I know we have that faith. The dream lives on. America will remain future's child, the golden hope of all mankind ("Remarks... 'Choosing a Future' Conference").

At the 1981 Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner, he extolled,

There is, in America, a greatness and a tremendous heritage of idealism which is a reservoir of strength and goodness. It is ours if we will but tap it. And, because of this—because that greatness is there—there is need in America today for a reaffirmation of that goodness and a reformation of our greatness (Reagan, "Remarks... Conference Dinner").

In yet another example, Reagan describes the "theme of [his] administration [as] a new beginning, a national renewal that will make America great again" ("Remarks... Employees").

Reagan's Neoliberal Mission

For Reagan, and past and contemporary masses of others genuflecting to the neoliberal mission, key to *making America great again* was—and remains in the current Trump era—the neoliberalization of the nation: the full execution (à la Conservative British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's infamous *there is no alternative*<sup>119</sup>) of the neoliberal resolve for deregulation, privatization, and the favoring of finance capital and the free global market, which includes systematic dismantling of environmental protections and regulations and the drastic restructuring of agricultural policy and economy.<sup>120</sup> As cultural geographer Tony Weis explains, the Reagan administration “marked the ascendance of neoliberalism and aggressively rolled back environmental regulations as a core part of its ideological agenda” (33). For example, the Reagan

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<sup>119</sup> The bold hypocrisy of the 1980s neoliberal maxim *there is no alternative* is shocking considering the neoliberal doctrine's promises of individual liberty, freedom of choice, and free market options.

<sup>120</sup> In the Trump era, farmers are experiencing what is being dubbed a new farm crisis. Today's farm industry “is faced with many of the same issues that plagued the industry in the 1980s farm crisis, such as trade tensions, low commodity prices and record debt levels. ... Farm real estate debt is expected to reach \$263.7 billion in 2019, a 5.1[%] annual increase in nominal terms and a 3.3[%] rise in inflation-adjusted dollars. Farm real estate debt accounts for 61.8[%] of total farm debt. Farm non-real estate debt is expected to increase 1.9[%] in nominal terms to \$163.0 billion in 2019” (Onion). As in the 1980s farm crisis, farmers are extremely distressed. For example, according to reporting in *Forbes*, anecdotal but prevalent suicide data indicate a significant increase in farmer suicides in rural America (C. Jones). The Center for Diseases Control (CDC), however, has offered fluctuating information on rising rate of farmer suicides (limited to 2012-2015 and 17 states) (Perdue). On October 15, 2019, Senators Jon Tester (D-Montana) and Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) introduced The Seeding Rural Resilience Act “To amend the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 to provide assistance to manage farmer and rancher stress and for the mental health of individuals in rural areas, and for other purposes” (U.S. Congress).

administration enthusiastically supported anti-environmental positions opposing governmental action towards protecting and preserving the environment and pushed back against warnings from scientists about irreparable damage to the planet due to human actions. Official White House communications fused “nihilistic or exceptionally selective position[s] toward scholarly environmental science with repeated calls for free markets and corporate self-regulation and, to the extent that biophysical limits are acknowledged, a messianic faith that they can be overridden by technology” (Weis 33). A casual look at modern-day communications published on the White House website clearly shows Reagan’s efforts are being dutifully maintained by the Trump administration.

During the 1980 presidential election, Reagan’s neoliberal mission to restructure the nation’s agricultural policy and economics gained considerable purchase with American voters, especially the nation’s agrarian(rural) peoples, who were deeply concerned about the precarious state of U.S. agriculture, as well as their own future in economically declining and socially deteriorating agrarian(rural) spaces. At the time of the election, the agricultural boom of the mid-1970s had already begun its brutal reversal, largely due to greatly increased inflation, despite the Federal Reserve’s 1979 tightening of the nation’s monetary policy, and the Jimmy Carter administration’s January 1980 embargoing of agricultural exports to the Soviet Union in response to the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

#### 1980s Farm Crisis and Emergent Neoliberal Agripolicymaking

The agricultural boom “began in 1973 with a series of events that encouraged an incautious optimism about agriculture’s future. For the next seven years, despite warning signals, capital investment in farming expanded without interruption” (Strange 17). The domestic and

international events of the 1960s and early 1970s, which prompted this “wave of enthusiasm,” included a global food production shortfall (which caused commodity reserves to fall sharply), improving trade relations with Japan, China, and the Soviet Union, and the establishment of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which along with access to “third world” oil, provided the promise that rising oil prices would equate to increased demand for American grain exports (of which the U.S. at that time had a near monopoly)—“a barrel of oil for a bushel of wheat”<sup>121</sup> (Strange 17; Luttrell 13). From 1972 to 1981, U.S. agricultural exports increased from \$8 billion to over \$44 billion (Strange 18). “The price of wheat zoomed up 132[%], from \$1.76 to \$4.09 per bushel, from 1972 to 1974. Corn was up 92[%] and soybeans 52[%] in the same period. Between 1972 and 1976 the price of cotton more than doubled. Rice doubled in one year, from [1972 to 1973]” (Strange 18). In response, American farmers were released from federal production constraints (adopted after the Great Depression to keep

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<sup>121</sup> “Near the end of 1973 the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) increased the average price of crude oil to about \$10 per barrel, more than four times the prevailing price earlier that year. This price was increased another 10[%] in 1975, nearly 15[%] from 1975 to early 1979, and about doubled from early 1979 to early 1980. By December 1980, the price of United States imported oil averaged \$35.63 per barrel, more than 12 times the price in mid-1973. These sharp increases have adversely affected the U.S. economy by reducing both potential output and productivity, raising the general price level and slowing real business investment. OPEC’s actions in raising oil prices and restricting production have given rise to numerous proposals designed to offset the higher petroleum costs. One widely discussed proposal has been for the United States to organize a grain cartel that would significantly raise grain prices to the OPEC nations. Many suggest that the terms of trade between the two cartels should be a bushel of wheat for a barrel of oil, i.e., about the same terms that prevailed in early 1973 when wheat sold for about \$2 per bushel and imported oil sold for about \$2 per barrel” (Luttrell 13).

commodity prices from going too low and thus undercutting farmers' earnings) and encouraged farmers to "plant every acre" or *fencerow to fencerow*<sup>122</sup> (Strange 18). Transition to monocrops—the growing of a single crop on the same piece of land year-after-year (versus rotating crops and polycrops, blended crops planted together)—surged at this time. "Between 1973 and 1981, the number of acres planted to crops on American farms increased by 12[%], from 316 to 353 million. Acres planted to corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, and cotton—the principal export crops—increased by 33[%], from 179 to 239 million in the same period" (Strange 19). Land prices soared and farmers dramatically increased their debt load to keep up with expansion demands, which included buying larger and more expensive farm equipment and buying or leasing additional land.

The agricultural boom of the 1970s, however, turned into the bust of the 1980s, and by the middle of the decade, the agricultural economic downturn turned into a full crisis (aka: the 1980s farm crisis). With no guaranteed global market, the movement of U.S. agricultural goods came to a grinding halt, land prices plummeted, and farmers, badly indebted and financially overextended, began failing. Small marginal family farms failed in great numbers, while some

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<sup>122</sup> Planting *fencerow to fencerow*, along with the *get big or get out* dictum, were famously promoted by Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture for the Nixon and Ford administrations (before being forced to resign due to his public displays of vulgarity and overt racism). Butz rabidly promoted the emergent neoliberal agenda and applied it to the U.S. agricultural sector towards large-scale corporate farming, monocropping, overproduction, and overconsumption. Butz's neoliberal agripolicies steered the nation towards the agricultural recession of the 1980s and the worst farm crisis since the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. His impact on the neoliberalization of America was immense. Butz is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

large family corporate farms and many conglomerate farms, able to take advantage of the precarious situation, grew exponentially. As environmental scholars Lester Brown and Erik Eckholm explain, the events of the 1970s “signal[ed] a fundamental shift in the structure of the world food economy. Throughout most of the period since World War II, the world food economy [had] been plagued by chronic excess capacity, surplus stocks, and low food prices” (5-6). The circumstances at the turn of the decade, however, transitioned U.S. agriculture from “chronic excess capacity” to “chronic scarcity and higher prices” (Brown and Eckholm 6).

Reagan’s neoliberal restructuring of U.S. agricultural policy and economics concerned working to reverse inflation (which had surged as high as 18% during the Carter administration), strangle federal agricultural and vast other spending, significantly reduce federal involvement in farming, roll back or eliminate federal agricultural regulations and reporting requirements, design and pass an overtly market oriented farm bill, lift Carter’s unpopular grain embargo with the Soviet Union, open/increase agricultural trade through international trade negotiations, reduce trade barriers, and commit to aggressively expanding markets for U.S. agricultural exports (“Jimmy Carter vs. Inflation”). In addition to reversing or eliminating environmental regulations of agrarian spaces, Reagan’s neoliberal governmental responsabilization vision for the nation’s farm policy included eliminating key protections for the agricultural sector, such as

annual commodity programs which provided direct federal payments to farmers,<sup>123</sup> that is, deficiency payments for the difference between legislatively set target prices for commodity crops (wheat, rice, cotton, and feed grains for livestock) and the always lower national average market price.

Neoliberal logic demands the free market set global commodity prices—not the federal government. Reagan believed global demand should dictate which crops were grown in the United States, and that the federal government should stop paying farmers to not raise commodity crops; that is, dissolve federal policies stemming from the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (aka: The Farm Relief Bill), which provided federal support programs designed to safeguard farmers and ensure they could sell their commodity crops at a rate that allowed them to remain solvent. Reagan also detested the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which takes crop and range land out of production in order to protect waterways, soil, and wildlife habitat. His core concern as president was to eliminate federal government intervention in the U.S. agricultural sector under the guise of liberating American farmers from an oppressive system.

Despite his claim to be a friend of the farmer—“How can we not open our hearts to these people in distress who mean so much and give so much to America?”—in the Agriculture and

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<sup>123</sup> Agricultural policies such as this were initiated in the 1930s to “mitigate the financial risks faced by farmers and the environmental risks posed by agricultural production” (McFadden and Hoppe i).

Food Act of 1981 (aka: the 1981 farm bill), Reagan worked to severely disable federal supports, constrain agricultural legislation, and place severe limits on agricultural spending (“Radio...Farm Industry”). For example, the 1981 farm bill forced a 10% reduction in planting crops in order to receive federal agricultural support, and, just as before the boom of the 1970s, required farmers to place their least productive acres in reserve. Farmers responded counterproductively to Reagan’s efforts by, not surprisingly, increasing production on their more productive acres, which, again, created surplus products and increased farmer requests for additional federal government financial assistance.

By the mid-1980s, the height of the farm crisis, American farmers were experiencing intense anxiety and existential fear concerning financial insecurity, indebtedness, and their continued existence. Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural School and Community Trust (2000-2012), writes,

By 1984, ordinarily conservative experts were cautiously estimating that between 40 and 50[%] of our commercial-sized family farms had so much debt that they could not remain solvent for long with current interest rates and commodity prices. Less conservative experts were freely predicting that a fourth to a third of the farmers wouldn’t survive two more years under current conditions. As the crisis wore on, fewer and fewer admonitions were heard that these estimates were too pessimistic (14).

Despite Reagan’s efforts to cut off federal support to farmers, the federal government dumped federal funds into addressing the farm crisis. In blatantly non-neoliberal fashion, the “federal government spent over \$28 billion on farm programs in 1983 and the figure rose to \$30 billion in 1986, but it seemed to do little to break the fall of American agriculture” (14). According to former U.S. Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, though Reagan “said he wanted to bring a market-oriented approach to farm policy, his administration ended up expanding federal involvement in

American agriculture. In fact, Reagan's farm programs cost more than the combined farm expenditures of every president from Franklin Roosevelt to Jimmy Carter" (qtd. in *Farm Crisis*).

The efforts of the Reagan administration to reestablish global markets, ameliorate farmers' financial troubles, and *make farming profitable again* were not successful. In the mid-1980s banks in the Midwest, which largely served farmers and agrarian/rural peoples, began failing and farmers increasingly lost their farms. "Bankers as much as farmers were lobbying Congress for federal relief for farmers" (Strange 14). Pleas to the Reagan administration for federal assistance, however, fell on deaf ears. For example, Reagan vetoed the modest emergency debt-relief package Congress passed in March of 1985 in response to the farm crisis. Though always remaining loyal to Reagan himself, farmers increasingly protested for farm justice, including holding protest rallies and hanging villains of the administration in effigy. For example, "Reagan's first budget director, David Stockman, did the honors in effigy... for callously remarking that farmers deserve what they are getting because they are greedy" (Strange 14).

Acknowledging the complicitousness of farmers for their dire straits is not unjustified or undeserved. While farmers bemoaned the precariousness and injustice of their situation and damned the inadequacy of federal financial assistance, while steadfastly remaining loyal to Reagan, they also complained about the perceived indifference of the nation's citizenry (the "common people"); that is, their apparent (short-lived) declining belief in agrarian myth ideals, including its core tenet of farmers as the nation's finest citizens whom are "owed a social debt by society because they suffer so that a democratic society can prosper" (Murphy 28). While neoliberals criticized farmers' lack of dedication to the neoliberal mission to dismantle federal

supports for agriculture, or welfare for farmers, everyday Americans criticized their demands for what was perceived as hypocritical and undeserved special treatment. While farmers conveniently straddled the hypocrisies of their situation, the Reagan administration's neoliberal purpose was increasingly exposed as a heartless and relentless drive for growth and wealth creation (for a few) at any cost, with no meaningful acknowledgement of the terrible cost to others snared in its gears. Commenting in 1988 on the complexity of the issue, particularly concerning farm justice and injustice and farmer's political problems, Strange notes,

If farmers seem less like common people, perhaps it is because they have separated themselves from the vital struggles of many common people. Just a few decades ago the cause of common people and the cause of farmers was synonymous. But farmers have been associated with none of the great social movements since the Second World War. In efforts to end poverty and racial discrimination, to recognize women's equality, to improve the environment, and to end the threat of war, farmers as a group have had little involvement. Sometimes, as in the effort to reduce pesticide pollution or to improve the living and working conditions of farm workers, farmers have vehemently opposed social justice and the public interest. Even more discrediting to the farmers' cries for social justice is the fact that they appear to have welcomed the very economic policies that have placed them in such jeopardy. Were they not among the most supportive of Reagan when he sought reelection in 1984, even as the farm crisis deepened? Did not 70[%] or more of the farmers vote for him in that election when he pledged to reduce the budget deficit by cutting social spending? How could they be surprised and outraged when his first veto in 1985 was of an emergency farm-credit bill that would have added to the deficit? Weren't they being a little hypocritical to think he would cut all social spending except agriculture? The public probably believes that farmers are not to be blamed for their economic problems, but that they have no one but themselves to blame for their political problems (15-16).

He concludes his commentary by calling American agriculture a political and economic enigma:

"It is productive but troubled. It is desperate, but supports the status quo. It frequently issues calls to 'get the government out of agriculture,' but regularly fights prolonged battles to protect farm programs with complicated rules, regulations, and subsidies. It is modern and progressive, but stuck in the mud" (Strange 16). Again, this is reminiscent of today's political environment

concerning farmers, whom are overwhelmingly Trump supporters,<sup>124</sup> and their hypocritical and convoluted relationship with the federal government—conveniently supported by selective neoliberalism.<sup>125</sup>

### Reagan’s Agrarian Myth Rhetoric

Alongside his neoliberal rhetoric, Reagan habitually employed raced, classed, gendered, and faithed agrarian myth rhetoric, or what cultural scholar William Adams calls Reagan’s relentless “manipulation of rural pastoralism” (“Natural Virtue” 711). This was particularly the case during his two extraordinarily successful presidential campaigns: the 1980 campaign against incumbent Carter and the 1984 reelection campaign against challenger Walter Mondale in which Reagan conjured the classic notion of (white straight Christian male) yeoman republicanism: yeoman farmers as ideal citizens whom fortify and enrich American society. Through this lens of agrarian(rural) whiteness,<sup>126</sup> invoking Jeffersonian yeomanism, Reagan represents American farmers as the most virtuous and the *most American* of the nation’s citizens.

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<sup>124</sup> Like Reagan, farmers are one of Trump’s most solid voting blocs. According to *FiveThirtyEight* reporting, 67% of farmers voted for Trump in the 2016 election (Stoil). In 2019, Farmers’ favorable rating of Trump routinely hovers around 76% and occasionally climbs above 80%, despite discontent over tariffs on China and trade policy (Brooks).

<sup>125</sup> In this project “selective neoliberalism” concerns professed faith in the legitimacy of the neoliberal purpose and agenda, while requesting (demanding) and accepting substantial government handouts—a practice contrary to prevailing neoliberal ideology.

<sup>126</sup> Rural America or Reagan’s America—and Trump’s America, for that matter—is overwhelmingly represented as and understood to be white—a notion reinforced by conservative pundits, politicians, and opinion media; however, one-fifth of rural America, some 10.3 million people, are people of color (Genovese; Lichter 28).

On the 1984 campaign trail, Reagan told farmers, rural, and other folks at a state fair, “You who struggle so hard and devote so much and give of yourselves to feed the hungry are a true light of hope for all the world. And through you, America can be the source of all the hopes and dreams that she was placed on this good Earth to provide” (“Presidential...State Fair”). In a 1985 radio address on the status of agriculture in the nation, after extolling their vital service to the country and the importance of his administration’s support of farmers (despite considerable evidence to the contrary), he says,

Facts and figures don’t tell the whole story. They don’t convey the strength and nobility of values, the deep faith in God, and love of freedom and independence, the many years of hard work and caring for friends and neighbors that began on the farm and made America the greatest nation on Earth. Farming is hard work, maybe the hardest. The strength of our farmers has always been the strength of their dreams for the future—dreams that a son or a daughter working the fields, tending the herds, might decide to stay on that farm and be able to make a go of it. There is no price tag on traditions like these, only the stark realization that to lose our farmers would be to lose the best part of ourselves, the heart and soul of America. Well, we cannot let that happen. We cannot permit the dreams of our farmers to die. We must have compassion for these men, women, and their families, so important to all of us (Reagan, “Radio... Farm Industry”).

Reagan resolutely tied the modern farmer to historic yeoman republicanism and his unrealistic/unattainable utopian neoliberal economic-driven agrarian neoyeoman vision for America.

### “Reagan Country”

Both of Reagan’s presential campaigns employed overt elements (symbols) of rural pastoralism and yeoman republicanism—tropes of the agrarian myth so embraced by early American Studies scholars of the Myth and Symbol school. This strategy worked to effectively link the candidate and his purpose to agrarian ideals, while conveniently distancing himself from

the precariousness of the 1980s farm crisis and any presumed awareness of other problems impacting farm country—in particular, ongoing environmental degradation of agrarian(rural) spaces. His many campaign commercials, biographical films, posters, campaign paraphernalia, and props at rallies regularly depicted sentimentalized agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces. These symbols of ingrained agrarian goodness allowed Reagan and his supporters to revel in yeoman morality and idealism, without concerning themselves over the darker side of agriculture towards neoyeomanship.

An excellent example of Reagan’s use of idealized American agrarian imagery is the highly nostalgic painted mural referred to as “Reagan Country,”<sup>127 128</sup> which was used to great effect and affect during his 1984 presidential reelection campaign. The massive mural, and the agrarian ideal it represents, acutely signifies Reagan’s agrarian myth rhetoric, or what Adams

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<sup>127</sup> The November 19, 1984, special edition of *Time Magazine*, dedicated to the 1984 general election, includes a cover story titled “Reagan Country” (and includes an image of Reagan standing in front of the mural at a campaign rally in rural Pennsylvania). In the short opening article, Roger Rosenblatt writes, “For some reason there has been a tendency to mythologize this campaign, to portray Reagan as an abstract force that has settled at the heart of the country and held it in thrall. Our barefoot boy. Our monarch. Reagan has contributed to this view by being at once highly visible and unreachable, creating a public presence so pleasantly familiar that it dismisses normal scrutiny” (1). A later article describes Reagan as “aging” but “still tall in the saddle, holding forth a future rooted in a mythic past of heroic patriots and open opportunity” (White 72).

<sup>128</sup> Rural America as “Reagan Country” was also “one of the principal symbolic vehicles in Reagan’s television advertisements, and it figured prominently in the film of his life and career shown at the Republican convention in Dallas. In all its manifestations, this somewhat reactionary variation of the rural narrative was enormously important in Reagan’s victory” (W. Adams 711).

describes as the “figural representation of the values the president pushed so relentlessly during the campaign: hard work, moral virtue, independence” (“Natural Virtue” 711). The mural depicts a bucolic image of romanticized American agrarian life, “a classic pastoral landscape”: barns and farmhouses, crops near ready for harvest, green rolling hills, a clear running river, a pristine pond (W. Adams, “Natural Virtue” 711). The sprawling utopian agrarian(rural) image embodies the classic nostalgic wistful notion of going back, of going home. The scene depicted is reminiscent of those celebrated by early American Studies scholars like Perry Miller, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, Roy Harvey Pearce, Charles L. Sanford, and John William Ward. Leo Marx, in his formative American Studies work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (1964), focuses Myth and Symbol inquiry on the pastoral ideal, and is especially interested in depictions of America as a sublime garden—a New Eden. Like the cultural products examined by Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, the “Reagan Country” mural uses the idea of the pastoral and its idealization to interpret and communicate the mythologized American experience. The pastoral is the idyllic representation of agrarian(rural) spaces: Richard Hofstadter’s frontier agrarian myth, Henry Nash Smith’s myth of the garden, Marvin Meyer’s Old Republican idyll (Marx 7). “To depict America as a garden is to express aspirations still considered utopian—aspirations, that is, toward abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence” (Marx 42-43). America’s mythical garden exists between wilderness and civilization—a *middle landscape*, where one is “spared the deprivations and anxieties of associated with both the city and the wilderness”; that is, an agrarian(rural) space that is “free of the repressions entailed by a complex civilization” yet invulnerable to “the violent uncertainties

of nature” (Marx 22). The pastoral is the ploughed—representative of “a balance of the forces of nature and man” (Nash 6).

The rustic agrarian idealism of the scene depicted in the Edenic mural mirrors Jeffersonian agrarianism and the notion of the American yeoman farmer living and working close to nature: the farmer as a moral pillar of (white straight Christian) American society, a model of American identity, embodying the belief that farmers are better, more democratic, and, therefore, better Americans. The scene evokes the Jeffersonian agrarianism tenets of honesty, self-reliance, egalitarianism, and the belief that farmers are more economically, socially, and politically stable than others because they live on and work the land for the benefit of family, community, and nation. The scene also evokes the myth of a homogenous rural countryside, an exclusively white space. At the 1984 campaign rally where the mural was prominently displayed, also hangs a banner welcoming Reagan to rural Pennsylvania. In front of the mural, along the top, boldly in white and all caps, is the signature “REAGAN COUNTRY.” It stands out in stark (black-and-white) contrast against the bucolic agrarian(rural) landscape below. The mythology of Jefferson’s agrarian republic is literally over-written by Reagan’s mythmaking: his mythical America, Regan’s America, “Regan Country.”

The classic nostalgic and, for the most part, timeless scene depicted in the mural evokes *the quest for the remembrance of things past*. Though employed in the ambiguous present, the scene simultaneously symbolizes the idealized past and the glorified future, and, expressly for Reagan’s purposes, fully anticipates the nation’s promised future in which its citizenry is highly hyper-independent, self-optimizing, and self-enterprising; that is, wholly disinterested in and disinclined to ask for government assistance: the neoliberal dream actualized. “America had

strayed” Reagan makes us believe, and the symbolism of heaven on earth in the mural—an actualized New Eden, with “traditional, rural life and values”—serves as his medium for illustrating for us “what we had strayed from and where we were headed”—with the “us” here being the good white Christian folk who want to *make America great again*; white again, straight again, (their version of) sane again. (W. Adams, “American Gothic” 223).

Much as the agrarian myth overtly lacks meaningful consideration of race, class, and gender, the mural also omits (erases) any suggestion of environmental degradation due to agricultural or energy production carried out predominantly in agrarian(rural) spaces. The neoyeomanization of this agrarian(rural) space is concealed. The ecosystems depicted in the mural are healthy and suggest abundant biodiversity. The scene presents a safe and wholesome space for both people and wildlife. There is no farm equipment in the scene. There is no hint of pollutants in the air, soil, or water, or of soil erosion or sedimentation. The landscape is not blighted or scarred in any way. There is no evidence of oil and gas production marring the land. There are no workover rigs on drilling locations readying hydrofracturing operations, or vast ponds of toxic fracking (drilling) mud and wastewater waiting to be hauled off and spread on pastures. There are no pieces of heavy equipment preparing new oil patches or sprawling work trailers and “man-camps.”<sup>129</sup> There are no exhaust-eructing equipment-haulers, tankers, gravel trucks, and other numerous and various work trucks tearing up and down the country roads. Nor

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<sup>129</sup> Man-camps are temporary remote workforce housing for off-duty rig-workers working on oil and gas production sites. Rig-workers are almost exclusively men.

are there rows of massive wind turbines, or networks of utility roads, transmission lines, turbine pads, meteorological towers, substations, or operation buildings dotting the countryside. The scene in the mural is pristine; it is perfect; it communicates natural order and natural balance—and conceals everything else.

The mural's idyllic agrarian scene depicts a rational and ordered space—accordingly, a beautiful and bountiful America. It is a space where (white straight Christian male) yeoman farmers till the soil, bring in the harvest, and depend only on themselves. Everything is as it should be. It is a space where any thoughts of irrationality or deprivation are eliminated long before they can be articulated. There is nothing perverse about this space. It is a space sanctified by God and validated by the American experience: the pioneering spirit, settler fortitude, and frontier heartiness and perseverance. “Reagan Country” is “symbolic of the virtues for which Reagan ostensibly stood—thrift, hard work, patriotism, etc.” (O’Shaughnessy 43). As communication scholar Nicholas O’Shaughnessy continues, the mural represents a uniting “need for utopia, conceptually and stylistically, all propaganda. A yearning for the primordial, for the pure—for a perfect world... a prelapsarian fantasy” (43). The scene is immaculate, as New Eden should (must) be.

The longed for and exalted agrarian(rural) landscape, embodying the familiar and reassuring terrain of the agrarian myth, elevated by Reagan, provides a safe place from which to “view the immense and troubling changes that” were occurring in the 1980s and yet impact, “our society and culture... changes in economic structures (including, ironically, *the continuing collapse of the family farm*), but also changes in the role of women, in sexuality, in the power

and self-conceptions of American ethnic minorities” (W. Adams, “American Gothic” 223; emphasis mine).

If American society and culture are changing too quickly, and if traditional political identities are threatened by such changes, then it makes sense to call for a return to older and safer understanding and values. The changes are not real, the president's pastoralism suggests; they will disappear if we recover a more traditional sense of what it means to be an American. Political differences notwithstanding, the deeper unity here is the displacement of powerlessness and confusion onto myth, a displacement which resolves in symbolic and illusory form things we cannot express, let alone resolve, in more rooted forms of language and action (W. Adams, “Natural Virtue” 711-12).

The mural thus works as morally virtuous high ground from which Reagan’s supporters and other similarly minded people can look down upon the many troublesome peoples and unsettling changes and circumstances evidenced in modern American society. It gives permission (nay, justification) to retreat into agrarian goodness (whiteness).

The mythical America articulated in “Reagan Country” is also a national and nationalized space conveying the great and growing divisions in American society—particularly as evidenced in the nation’s politics then and now. It conveys an us-versus-them message: the sane mainstream versus the radical fringe; those who love and want to (re)fortify the nation versus those who want to weaken it (through gender, ethnic, racial, sexual, and class disruption); the worthy (hardworking) versus the undeserving (indolent).

### Conclusion

Reagan fundamentally shifted the national psyche toward neoliberalism. He accomplished this in large part through blatant and persistent myth use and mythmaking through which he created his own nostalgic mythical America, ripe for continued neoliberal conquest. This includes his masterful use of the agrarian myth to appropriate the “agrarian vision of

‘historical utopia’ [per political theorist Fredric Jameson] to which we turn to overcome through myth a set of problems we cannot confront in practice” (W. Adams, “Natural Virtue” 710). Such myth-in-practice works to organize and solidify social, political, and economic perception, understanding, and self-identity, despite being bound to a nostalgized past, which never actually existed—a past “no longer rooted in real or possible social circumstances” and which “tend[s] to hide those circumstances from us” (W. Adams, “Natural Virtue” 710).

Profound discontinuity created and exacerbated by the pervasive negative impact of neoliberal ideology and well-evidenced in the Reagan era, especially by the 1980s farm crisis, set(s) in motion precarity and precarization (towards neoyeomanship). In rural America—“Reagan Country”—now *Trump Country*—this created/creates significant threats to feelings of self-continuity (one’s sense of self) and belongingness, which deepened/deepens drives to correct perceived societal wrongs, such as indolence, lewdness, socialism, traitorousness, and indigency, and reestablish *appropriate* social circumstances and connections—ones which reinforce whiteness, nationality, citizenship, gender norms, and straightness. Nostalgic longing for the historic utopia of Reagan’s mythical America, symbolized in the “Reagan Country” mural, were/are perverted by ongoing neoliberal realities. Resultantly, continuity will not and cannot be achieved because existential fears concerning feelings of insecurity, indebtedness, and the like cannot be relieved, triggering perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past, which is sustained by deeply entrenched desires to (re)enact and (re)produce the tenets and promised rewards of the agrarian myth—tenets and rewards on full display in “Reagan Country.”

In the next chapter, I move closer to the present to look at Bill Clinton's 1990s iteration of neoliberalism and the consolidation of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in the modern U.S. land grant university system. For context, I analyze late 20<sup>th</sup> century neoliberal agripolicymaking including the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the 1996 Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act (a farm bill better known as the Freedom to Farm Act), as well as intensified monocropping and concentrated animal feeding operations (better known as "factory farms").

I also provide a close reading of Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), a novel published during the ascendancy of Clinton era neoliberal agripolicymaking, which presciently predates the neoliberal turn in American Studies. Set at a fictive midwestern land grant university (Moo U.), the novel demonstrates the disastrous effects of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism; that is, *Moo* depicts the modern U.S. land grant university system under the intoxicating sway of neoliberalism's embrace at its most wanton and absurd, as it kowtows to the neoliberal realities of the 1990s. I also explore the novel's environmental critique of the insidious link between neoliberalism and its devices.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## MOO U.

*[T]he hegemony of neoliberalism is made most evident by the ways in which profoundly political and ideological projects have successfully masqueraded as a set of objective, natural, and technocratic truisms. —James McCarthy and Scott Prudham, “Neoliberal Nature and the Nature of Neoliberalism” (2004)*

*The University is a critical institution or it is nothing. —Stuart Hall, quoted in Henry Giroux’s *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (2014)*

*The university shamelessly promised everything to everyone, and charged so much that prospective students tended to believe the promises. While a state university, unlike an Ivy League institution, did not promise membership in the ruling class ... [Moo U.] had made serious noises to all sorts of constituencies... [and] had become, more than any- thing, a vast network of interlocking wishes, some of them modest, some of them impossible, many of them conflicting, many of them complementary. —Jane Smiley, *Moo* (1995)*

In this chapter, I look at Bill Clinton’s enthusiastic embrace of leftist neoliberalism, which does not look terribly different from Ronald Regan or George H. W. Bush’s rightist iterations of neoliberalism, and connect it to a 1990s cultural production: a satirical novel with neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in its crosshairs. For context, I analyze Clinton era neoliberal agripolicymaking with emphasis on the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a multilateral treaty which fundamentally fulfilled the neoliberal aspirations of the neoliberal regime; that is, the exaltation of the market economy, internationalization of production towards globalism, capital accumulation, socioeconomic polarization and commodification, and the 1996 Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act, which exemplifies neoliberal agripolicymaking and fully engages romanticized agrarian myth rhetoric. This chapter also explains intensified monocropping and concentrated animal feeding

operations (better known as “factory farms”) towards overproduction and overconsumption (discussed in depth in Chapter 6) as a consequence of neoliberal agripolicymaking, and explores how the agrarian myth provides shelter to the environmental degradation of agrarian(rural) lands, while simultaneously and increasing insecurity, decline, destabilization, precarity, and precarization of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces.

I also explore the consolidation of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in the modern U.S. land grant university system; that is, corporatized and commercialized ethos(es) (dis) affecting the nation’s institutions of higher education in order to more fully understand the ongoing negative effects of neoliberalism on agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces. Neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism, often couched in agrarian myth rhetoric, has subsumed U.S. land grant colleges and universities, and works to legitimize the neoliberal agenda. I argue neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism confirms and conveys the many negative consequences of neoliberalism.

Recent scholarly inquiries into neoliberal agripolicymaking have largely concerned the ongoing negative impact of neoliberalism on the Global South—economies, peoples, food systems, and ecosystems. My inquiry into neoliberal agripolicymaking contributes to the limited body of academic scholarship utilizing an agrarianism/agrarian myth lens to analyze Clinton era neoliberal globalist profiteering, free trade expansion, and market liberalization, as manifested through powerful neoliberal agrilegislatives devices (NAFTA, FAIR)—marking the full ascendancy of neoliberalism over U.S. legislation and policymaking, agricultural or otherwise. Specific to American Studies, my project, and this chapter in particular, contributes to ongoing scholarship into the intersections of academia, social and environmental justice, and

neoliberalism, including neoliberalism's ongoing rhetorical commitment to appropriating the agrarian myth to advance its agenda.

In addition to presenting important context on neoliberal agripolicymaking and its negative consequences, I provide a close reading of Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), a satirical *slippery slope* novel focusing on negative aspects of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism—a novel that presciently predates the neoliberal turn in American Studies. Smiley's clever narrative concerns the machinations of leadership, faculty, staff, and students at Moo U., a fictive land grant university located in the Midwest, and demonstrates the disastrous effects of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism on a (mostly) well-intentioned campus. I also connect the novel's environmental themes with neoliberal devices, namely neoliberal legislation, which bolsters neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism and fosters university-industry relationships, as well as provides shelter for environmental degradation.

### Introduction

As observed by British economic geographer David Harvey, the neoliberalization of America “set in motion in the 1970s” was “consolidated in the 1980s and 1990s” (qtd. in Lilley). The right-wing archconservative neoliberalism of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s initiated “neoliberalism's hegemonic dominance,” while, in the 1990s, Bill Clinton “cemented neoliberalism as our new hegemonic frontier by creating a more progressive, [left-wing] neoliberal political horizon” (J. Wilson 40). Where Reagan era neoliberalism was overtly racist, classist, and sexist, while triumphantly (re)claiming American exceptionalism through austerity

governance, Clinton era neoliberalism<sup>130</sup> was (somewhat) covertly racist, classist, and sexist,<sup>131</sup> while claiming cosmopolitanism and inclusiveness through “third way”<sup>132</sup> neoliberal policymaking (J. Wilson 41). Reaganism unabashedly deregulated agricultural policies and removed environmental protections, where Clintonism promised prosperity through globalist profiteering, continued free trade expansion, and market liberalization on the backs of American wage workers and small-scale family farmers, as well as deregulated agricultural policies and subtly removed environmental protections. The greed and corruption of Reagan era neoliberalism was effectively reimagined and reinvigorated by the greed and corruption of Clinton era neoliberalism. While the pendulum of modern politics usually swings every 4 or 8 years between rightist conservatism and leftist progressivism, neoliberalism’s unrelenting grasp

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<sup>130</sup> Neoliberalism does not only have a conservative face as many believe. According to cultural theorist Jim McGuigan, due to its assiduous economism, neoliberalism may be blended with progressive political positions concerning social and cultural issues. “Outstanding examples of this strain of neoliberalism with a progressive face are Tony Blair’s New Labour governments of the late 1990s and 2000s and the Democratic presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama before and after George W. Bush’s neoconservative spasm of the 2000s. Such neoliberalism is extremely insidious because it is so well masked” (McGuigan 23).

<sup>131</sup> Clinton’s Violent Crime Control Act (aka: the 1994 crime bill) effectively “[waged] a war on black folks, unleashing a racist carceral society that placed many thousands of non-violent black offenders in prison and jail,” while his Welfare Reform Act of 1996, or the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, “was fueled by racist undertones that played into public angst about rising taxes and the national debt that were attributed to the high payout of welfare checks to people who were not carrying their own weight”—widely perceived to be people of color (reminiscent of Reagan’s “welfare queen” narrative) (DeVega; Carten). Clinton’s reputed personal and political misogynistic encounters are far too many to go into in this project.

<sup>132</sup> Clinton’s “third way” was a conciliatory “middle path between the harsh policies of the Reagan... and common-good approaches associated with the left” (J. Wilson 41).

on American society, politics, governance, and culture, and its cultural production, remains steadfast.

The neoliberalization of the nation moved forward largely unabated in the 1990s, with certain neoliberal devices particularly defining the period—devices which directly negatively impacted American agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces. These include the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the 1996 Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act, intensified monocropping and factory farming, and the consolidation of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism throughout the U.S. land grant university system. It is impossible to separate these devices from the U.S.’s resolute commitment to neoliberal ideology. They clearly mark the ascendancy of neoliberalism over U.S. legislation and policymaking, while, increasing insecurity, decline, destabilization in agrarian(rural) spaces and facilitating precarity in and precarization of agrarian(rural) peoples.

### Clinton Era Neoliberalism

While common wisdom locates Reagan’s conservative or rightist neoliberalism at the center of the neoliberal turn in U.S. governance and economic policy and legislation, Clinton’s progressive or leftist neoliberalism normalized key tenets of Reaganomics and expanded upon Reagan’s neoliberal worldview. Clinton’s neoliberalism exalted new equality politics, free market supremacy, and government withdrawal, and advocated for globalization and neoliberal governance and responsabilization. As he (Clinton, not Reagan—in this respect they are easily confused) stated in his 1996 State of the Union address: “The era of big government is over”—signaling Clinton’s move to the neoliberal center (“Address... Joint Session”).

While in office, for political expediency, Clinton embodied the status quo neoliberal center, and expressed a leftist neoliberal worldview in contrast with Reagan's rightist neoliberal worldview. According to Julie Wilson, the politics of leftist neoliberalism concern,

The ongoing construction of a competitive, enterprise society, where people must assume more and more personal responsibility for their lives, hinges on new and profoundly contradictory mobilizations of identity and difference. On the one hand, previously excluded groups are granted inclusion into market society, so long as they conform to the norms of self-enterprise and privatized self-care (199).

In contrast, the politics of rightist neoliberalism concern,

Social hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, ability, and citizenship are seen as irrelevant and, increasingly, retrenched in brutal ways... [Rightist] neoliberalism mobilizes an aggressively Social Darwinist view of competition that works to render vulnerable populations and historically marginalized groups disposable in order to maintain the social hierarchies and regimes of dispossession from which its constituents benefit (J. Wilson 199).

While both leftist and rightist neoliberalism are dedicated to reifying market order and neoliberal logics, leftist neoliberalism is significantly invested in imbedding diversity and inclusivity, while rightist neoliberalism is scarcely concerned over either (J. Wilson 206). Instead, rightist neoliberalism "embraces the Social Darwinism at the heart of neoliberal social ontology fully and aggressively, seeing the lack of inclusion as an economic advantage to be exploited... [and thus] ends up explicitly working through existing social hierarchies"; that is, working openly through the biopolitics of disposability (per cultural scholar Henry Giroux) (J. Wilson 206-07). Where leftist neoliberalism works to expand market access through marketizing equality, reorient identity-based sociopolitical conflicts and struggles, and effectively "[authorize] its own version of antiracism rooted in post-race sensibilities," as evidenced in the so-called "post-racial" era of Barack Obama and the wholesale legitimization of diversity in order to secure consent for neoliberal hegemony, rightist neoliberalism leans considerably more towards

authoritarianism and at times extreme social and political conservatism (J. Wilson 41, 204, 206). Where leftist neoliberalism works to “actively construct a more competitive market for historically marginalized groups,” rightist neoliberalism instead “focuses on promoting competition without regard to such marginalization” (J. Wilson 107). What differentiates leftist neoliberalism is its emphasis on social justice, remediation, and reconciliation, though, importantly, its larger objective “is not a truly egalitarian society, but just a ‘fairer’ meritocracy” (J. Wilson 107).

In the triumphant post-Cold War context of the 1990s, Clinton took up Reagan’s neoliberal social welfare restructuring, albeit from a (mostly) different angle: substantial welfare reform and rollbacks for the *common good* versus hyper-responsibilization and severe reductions for the sake of austerity. Clinton also took up Reagan’s neoliberal governmentality stance by promoting a supposedly new system of global capitalism. However, since the full integration of American neoliberalism into U.S. society and politics, there is truly very little difference in the core economic stances of the Democratic and Republican parties. For example, in relation to the 1996 presidential election, which pitted incumbent Clinton against Republican challenger Bob Dole, along with third-party nominee Ross Perot (Reform Party) thrown into the mix, cultural critic Patricia Ventura suggests there were “scant differences between the candidates” and the two “parties offered little of political or economic substance about which to argue; after all, the Clinton administration’s most lasting achievements—the institution of the World Trade

Organization and the passing of NAFTA<sup>133</sup> and welfare reform—fulfilled the goals of the Republicans who preceded them” (92).

### The North American Free Trade Agreement

While Clinton era neoliberal free trade policies “promised greater prosperity through global competition, NAFTA [has been] devastating, especially for workers and small farmers in both the Global North and South” (J. Wilson 40). In addition to the loss of millions of U.S. manufacturing jobs because “companies were incentivized to move operations south of the border, where workers and natural resources could be exploited and appropriated on the cheap,” NAFTA has “lowered U.S. wages, increased inequality, hurt U.S. manufacturing and wiped out small farmers in all 50 states,” as well as across Mexico and Canada, while further enriching agribusinesses conglomerates, masking rollbacks of food safety, health, and environmental protections,<sup>134</sup> and increasing migration over the southern border<sup>135</sup> (J. Wilson 40; Public Citizen, “More Information”). While the first decade after NAFTA was particularly difficult for

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<sup>133</sup> NAFTA was negotiated by George H.W. Bush and signed into law by Clinton.

<sup>134</sup> NAFTA “empower[s] corporations to attack environmental and public health protections,” lowers environmental and labor standards, and “restrict[s] the policy tools that governments can use to protect the environment and other broadly-shared priorities” (Public Citizen, “Leading Environmental” 1-2).

<sup>135</sup> While small-scale American farmers have been badly affected by NAFTA, Canadian and Mexican farmers also experienced negative impact, causing considerable displacement, especially among Mexican farmers. Instead of slowing migration from Mexico, as promised by the Clinton administration, the flow of Mexican migrants more than doubled in the decade after NAFTA went into effect—largely due to former Mexican farmers migrating north for agricultural work (Flores).

small-scale American family farmers,<sup>136</sup> it was a huge boon to large-scale agricultural operations,<sup>137</sup> in some part due to hypocritically non-neoliberal-fashioned federal subsidies, or selective neoliberalism, “almost as if [large-scale farming were] still rooted in the small family farm but operating as highly mechanized and rationalized large-scale operations” (Ventura 137). Since 1998, “one out of every 10 small U.S. farms has disappeared [and by] 2017, nearly 243,330 small U.S. farms have been lost” (Public Citizen, “NAFTA’s Legacy” 1). Recent (2017) U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data shows, under NAFTA, “U.S. agricultural exports to the NAFTA countries have lagged, agricultural imports from those countries have surged and family farms have disappeared” (Public Citizen, “NAFTA’s Legacy” 1). Further, U.S. agricultural trade surpluses with Canada and Mexico have plummeted.<sup>138</sup> NAFTA’s neoliberal promises of near unfettered access to new global export markets (*export to prosperity*) and lasting solutions to their economic struggles have resulted in ongoing sociopolitical and

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<sup>136</sup> Small-scale family farm loss was six times higher during NAFTA’s first seven years than the (already difficult) five-year period prior to it going into effect (Public Citizen, “Down on the Farm” 13).

<sup>137</sup> The profits of global agribusiness giants such as ConAgra and Archer Daniels Midland grew 189% between 1993 and 2000). (Public Citizen, “Down on the Farm” vi).

<sup>138</sup> “The U.S. agricultural trade balance with NAFTA partners has fallen from a \$2.5 billion surplus in the year before NAFTA to a \$7.7 billion deficit in 2017—the largest NAFTA agricultural trade deficit to date. This was not an anomaly. A review of agricultural trade over the preceding several years shows that the average U.S. agriculture trade balance with NAFTA nations over the past five years dropped \$6.1 billion below the average balance in the five years before NAFTA” (Public Citizen, “NAFTA’s Legacy” 1).

socioeconomic decline and increased precarity and precarization for American small-scale family farmers.<sup>139</sup>

### Freedom to Farm Act

Like NAFTA, the neoliberal Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform (FAIR) Act, better known as the so-called Freedom to Farm Act (aka: the 1996 farm bill) takes full advantage of enduring romanticized agrarian myth rhetoric.<sup>140</sup> This agrilegislation, also referred to as the

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<sup>139</sup> At the time of this writing, during ongoing trade disruptions with China, NAFTA underwent an overhaul, though, aside from the new name, there are very few changes to the original treaty; that is, the beneficiaries are once again primarily global agribusiness giants. The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Free Trade Agreement (USMCA) (aka: NAFTA 2.0) was signed on November 30, 2018 (and the revised agreement signed December 10, 2019, then ratified by U.S., Mexico, Canada as of March 13, 2020). This is what Donald Trump had to say about the USMCA in late 2018 at a political rally in Belgrade, MT (of which I was in attendance): “You look all over this country—you still have steel mills. You still have factories that are empty, that are dead for years because they moved to Mexico and Canada, and we’re replacing it with the new U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, called the USMCA, which I like. YMCA. If you have a problem with it, just think of YMCA. Think of the song, and every time you say, ‘the USMCA,’ just think of the song and start dancing, because that’s how good the agreement is. The USMCA is a great victory for Montana farmers and ranchers and dairy producers. We’ve taken the toughest ever action to crack down on China’s very abusive trade practices, and now they’re paying big tariffs on \$250 billion, and that could rise very sharply, or we might make a deal, and if we don’t, that’s OK, and if we do, that’s OK. I’m happy either way” (“Political Rally”).

<sup>140</sup> Though the tenets of the agrarian myth took a hit during the farm crisis of the 1980s, Americans largely stayed true to the classical belief that “agriculture is the basic occupation of mankind, rural life is morally superior to urban life and a nation of small, independent farmers is the proper basis for a democratic society” (Knutson et al. 7). This belief hinges on the resoluteness of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces—the yeoman farmer and his land. Rural planning and development scholar, Mark, B. Lapping describes Americans’ feelings in the 1990s, as continuing “to believe that those who live and work in rural places live the good, natural, and all-American life, a life that is fundamentally sustainable and worthy” and cites a 1992 Roper survey finding that Americans perceive rural people as “friendlier, better citizens,

“freedom to farm/starve act” or the “freedom to farm/fail act,” was designed to further reduce federal restrictions initiated under Reagan, allow for crop flexibility in response to global market demands, and to uncouple subsidy farmer payments from production levels and market prices in order to eventually planning to phase out subsidies entirely<sup>141</sup>—supposedly, providing farmers *freedom to farm*. This neoliberal legislation was “heralded as a clear and unambiguous signal that the USA is committed to full [liberalization] of farm policy, and hence of farm trade,” effectively freeing, and overtly encouraging, American farmers to openly compete in the global free market (Harvey, “The US Farm Act” 111). While promising prosperity, the 1996 farm bill and intensified monocropping and factory farming instead proved, and continues to prove, highly problematic to agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces.

Monocropping The 1996 farm bill perpetuated environmental protections deregulation initiated under NAFTA, with unsurprisingly significant negative impacts to agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces. As rural sociology scholars Paul Stock et al. explain, neoliberal policies and

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more family oriented, and harder working than the average American... and [as having] the last chance to pursue the ‘American dream’” (30; qtd. in Lapping 30). The precariousness of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces, however, makes pursuing, let alone achieving, the American dream in current times very difficult indeed (and in truth).

<sup>141</sup> When commodity prices swiftly fell after the 1996 farm bill went into effect, Congress capitulated and gave farmers annual “emergency” payments until a new farm bill was passed in 2002, reinstating subsidies, setting back the Freedom to Farm Act’s neoliberal commodity program ambitions. Despite neoliberalism’s staunch hold on U.S. policymaking and legislation, farm subsidies remain a key component of federal agricultural policy—quite hypocritically, as autonomy is a core attribute of both neoliberalism and American farmer identity. Neoyeomen cannot quite seem to manage without their decidedly non-neoliberal, non-autonomous federal subsidies.

processes of neoliberalization have deeply penetrated agrarian(rural) spaces, “with significant implications for the material transformation of rural landscapes,” such as “species extinction, biodiversity loss, climate change, and soil erosion [and sedimentation]” (412). The 1996 farm bill significantly increased agricultural pollution and environmental degradation by enthusiastically encouraging increased monocropping which includes the overproduction of highly subsidized commodity crops—especially soybeans and corn, in large part for biofuel/ethanol production (a highly energy- and chemical-intensive process) and to cheaply feed immense numbers of factory farmed animals, as well as for mass export (Nelson 2-3). According to plant pathologist Scot Nelson, on a global scale, monocropping is linked to

Soil depletion and erosion, destruction of biological diversity, loss of rainforests, climate change, atmospheric degradation, pollution of water tables, destruction of coral reefs [due to sedimentation], plant disease, epidemics of enhanced severity, famine, death, loss of agrarian way of life and displacement of agrarian populations, loss of seed biodiversity and plant genetic resources, desertification, poverty, and nutrient imbalances in soils (2).

Additional negative aspects include the introduction or establishment of invasive species, “extinction of native species, loss of geographic and species interdependence, increased crop susceptibility to weather,” as well as “exploitation of laborers, dependence on corporations, loss of traditional social structure and values, . . . poor land stewardship, land abandonment, [and] destruction of culturally significant sites” (Nelson 3).

In addition to depleting and damaging soil, monocrops substantially increase agricultural chemical pollution from fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, which destroys innate soil fertility and causes environmental contamination of and degradation to surroundings ecosystems through drift and runoff. Further, industrialized farming, well-evidenced in even small-scale family farming efforts, is “a major contributor to global emissions of the greenhouse gases (GHGs) that

drive climate change” (Greenhouse Gas Protocol). While in many sectors, GHG emissions are declining, “those from the agriculture sector have increased more than 10[%] since 1990” (Lilliston).<sup>142</sup>

Intensified Factory Farming The 1996 farm bill further deregulated food safety, health, and environmental protections initiated under NAFTA, which directly facilitated the rise of concentrated animal feeding operations (factory farming).<sup>143</sup> Factory farming is the intensive

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<sup>142</sup> According to Greenhouse Gas Protocol, agriculture and agriculture-driven land change is responsible for 17% of global GHG emissions, with the caveat that “75[%] of agricultural producers targeted by CDP [formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project] do not report their emissions” (“Agriculture Guidance”). Recent (2019) reporting by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates the world’s fossil fuel dependent agriculture(food) system to be responsible for 16 to 27[%] of total net global greenhouse gas emissions and may be as high as 37% (8). Using 2017 data, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that agriculture accounts for 9% of U.S. GHG emissions (“Inventory” ES-24). This percentage, however, “does not include on-farm energy and fuel use... nor does it count emissions related to shifts in cropland..., the production of ammonia fertilizer..., nor other elements of the food system related to transport, processing and waste” (Lilliston).

<sup>143</sup> Dramatically expanded under Clinton era neoliberalism, factory farming continues to greatly increase. Food & Water Watch’s analysis of USDA Census of Agriculture data (1997, 2002, 2007, 2012) finds after the 1996 farm bill went into effect, “The number of hogs on factory farms increased by more than one-third, and the average farm size swelled nearly 70[%] from 1997 to 2012... [t]he number of broiler chickens on factory farms rose nearly 80[%] from 1997 to 2012, to more than 1 billion... [and the] number of broiler chickens raised on factory farms rose 79.9[%] from 583.3 million in 1997 to 1.05 billion in 2012... [and the] number of egg-laying hens on factory farms increased by nearly one quarter from 1997 to 2012, to 269 million. The number of egg-producing layer hens increased 24.8[%] from 215.7 million in 1997 to 269.3 million in 2012... The average size of egg operations has grown by 74.2[%] over 15 years, rising from 399,000 in 1997 to more than 695,000 in 2012” (3). They attribute this outrageous growth to “unchecked mergers and acquisitions between the largest meatpacking, poultry processing and dairy companies [which] created an intensely consolidated landscape where a few giant agribusinesses exert tremendous pressure on livestock producers to become larger and more intensive, ...[and] lax environmental rules and lackluster enforcement [which] allowed factory

livestock production practice of large-scale breeding and rearing of huge numbers of animals (aka: “units of production” or “livestock units”) in appalling conditions (thousands of tightly confined cows, hogs, chickens, or turkeys) in order to harvest their bodies and bodily outputs as agricultural commodities—*cheap eats (meats) for human consumption*. This practice hinges on hyper-profitization; that is, grossly maximizing production while simultaneously minimizing (slashing) costs.

Like NAFTA and the 1996 farm bill, intensified factory farming negatively impacts agrarian(rural) spaces by permitting increased agricultural pollution. Intensified factory farming annually produces millions of tons of toxic waste (excessive concentrations of excrement) a year.

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farms to grow to extraordinary sizes [without pressure to properly manage waste and pollutants, and,] misguided farm policy [which] encouraged over-production of commodity crops such as corn and soybeans, which artificially depressed the price of livestock feed and created an indirect subsidy to factory farm operations” (4). In the Trump era, this monstrous growth continues unabated. For example, during an October 2019 town hall meeting at the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wisconsin, Trump’s agriculture secretary, Sonny Perdue, stated he does not know if small-scale family dairy farming can survive, as the dairy industry switches over to the factory farming model. According to Perdue, “In America, the big get bigger and the small go out” (qtd. in Richmond). From Todd Richmond’s reporting for the *Associated Press*: “Perdue’s visit comes as Wisconsin dairy farmers are wrestling with a host of problems, including declining milk prices, rising suicide rates, the transition to larger farms with hundreds or thousands of animals and Trump’s international trade wars. Wisconsin, which touts itself as America’s Dairyland on its license plates, has lost 551 dairy farms in 2019 after losing 638 in 2018 and 465 in 2017, according to data from the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection... Jerry Volenec, a fifth generation Wisconsin dairy farmer with 330 cows, left the Perdue event feeling discouraged about his future. ‘What I heard today from the secretary of agriculture is there’s no place for me,’ Volenec told reporters. ‘Can I get some support from my state and federal government? I feel like we’re a benefit to society’” (“Ag secretary”).

For example, in 2012, “factory-farmed livestock produced 369 million tons of manure<sup>144</sup>... about 13 times as much as the sewage produced by the entire U.S. population” (Food & Water Watch 5). Unlike domestic or municipal (human-produced) sewage/wastewater, manure produced on factory farms is not treated; thus, toxins and contaminants move easily from farm to ecosystem, polluting air, soil, and water (groundwater, streams and rivers, wells), while also creating human health<sup>145</sup> and other environmental hazards.

### Neoliberal Academic Entrepreneurialism<sup>146</sup>

Important to understanding neoliberalism’s ongoing impact on agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces in the 1990s to the present is the rise and consolidation of the neoliberal academic

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<sup>144</sup> “[These] 13.8 billion cubic feet of manure is enough to fill the Dallas Cowboys stadium 133 times” (Food & Water Watch 5).

<sup>145</sup> Contaminants found in manure include antibiotics, heavy metals, and pathogenic bacteria (Food & Water Watch 21). “Six of the 150 pathogens found in animal manure are responsible for 90[%] of human food- and water-borne diseases: *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, *E. coli* 0157:H7, *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia*” (Food & Water Watch 21).

<sup>146</sup> Collaboration between universities and the U.S. military on federally funded research and development projects, or what is widely referred to as the military-industrial-academic complex, also greatly impacts the nation’s university system. For example, in *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (2007), Giroux describes the “the rising tide of militarization” in American society and describes public universities as spaces where “militarized knowledge and research [and] the increasing development of academic programs and schools that serve military personnel” replace the public university as “a democratic public sphere” (7). He describes universities as “a part of an unholy alliance that largely serves dominant state, military, and business policies while decoupling vital aspects of academic knowledge production from democratic values and projects” (Giroux, *The University* 7). While exploring the substantial impact of the military-industrial-academic complex in relation to the neoliberalization of land grant universities is both a fascinating and worthwhile prospect, it is beyond the scope of this project.

entrepreneurialism; that is, corporatized and commercialized ethos (dis)affecting higher education in the U.S. Often couched in agrarian myth rhetoric, neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism is deeply entrenched in the land grant university system and works to legitimize neoliberalism across all aspects of American society and culture. Like the neoliberal devices discussed above, neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism confirms and conveys the negative environmental effects of neoliberalism and provides shelter to environmental degradation.

At its core, neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism represents the greed embedded in neoliberalism. As Henry Giroux explains, “In the age of money and profit, academic disciplines gain stature almost exclusively through their exchange value on the market” (“Neoliberalism, Corporate” 432). President of Arizona State University, Michael M. Crow’s unironic proclamation in 2000, “that professors should be labeled as ‘academic entrepreneurs’” epitomizes the problematic shift in the role of higher education towards neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism (qtd. in Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate” 432). “In light of his view of the role of academic labor, it is not surprising that [Crow] views knowledge strictly as a form of financial capital” (Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate” 432). According to Crow, public higher education leadership is “expanding what it means to be a knowledge enterprise. We use knowledge as a form of venture capital” (qtd. in Giroux, “Neoliberalism, Corporate” 432). This transformative reclassification of public educators, scholars, and researchers into entrepreneurs epitomizes neoliberal ideological tenets of competition, commodification, commercialization, marketization, and even privatization, as public higher education institutions, including land grant universities, increasingly create and extend ties with the private/corporate sector. While

admittedly, considerable innovation is supported and promoted through this neoliberal academic-entrepreneurial model, the costs and negative consequences are many, including undermining the core values of the public university and subordinating greater societal needs.

Land Grant Universities. As a more practical, versus romanticized, embodiment of the agrarian myth, linking the importance and primacy of U.S. agricultural production to the nation's society, economy, and national identity, as well as establishing an indelible link between the federal government and the agricultural sector, land grant universities<sup>147 148</sup> were created through the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890<sup>149</sup> (the Land-Grant Agricultural and Mechanical College Act of 1862 and the Agricultural College Act of 1890) for the purpose of the:

Endowment, support, and maintenance of at least one college [in each state] where the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactics, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life (“Transcript of Morrill Act (1862)”).

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<sup>147</sup> There are currently 105 land grant universities in the United States and associated territories, of which 17 are historically black institutions, and 29 are tribal colleges.

<sup>148</sup> For an excellent discussion on history of the “massive wealth transfer” of stolen Native lands “masquerading as a donation” (the Morrill Land-Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890) see Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone “Land-Grab Universities: Expropriated Indigenous Land is the Foundation of the Land-Grant University System” (2020) in *High Country News* (Lee and Ahtone).

<sup>149</sup> The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890 fixed liberal arts into the land grant institution curricula (beyond the agricultural and mechanical arts to include language arts, economics, and mathematics, physical science and more), guaranteed annual federal appropriations to support this expanded curriculum, and established separate land grant institutions for African Americans (National Research Council 9).

Aside from African slave-based agriculture of early republic and antebellum America,<sup>150</sup> the creation of land grant universities, alongside the momentous Homestead Act of 1862 and later homestead acts,<sup>151</sup> marks the nation's first deliberate and deliberated endeavor to develop a national system of agricultural education and production. In a tandem effort, the USDA (or as Abraham Lincoln called it "the people's department") was established in 1862 "to acquire and to diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with agriculture in the most general and comprehensive sense of that word, and to procure, propagate, and distribute among the people new and valuable seeds and plants" (qtd. in Christiansen; USDA, "An Act to Establish"). Through these federal Civil War era efforts—the endowment of what would become a nationwide network of public higher education institutions with a central purpose of agricultural instruction, vast numbers of land grants bestowed to nearly exclusively white individual settlers gained through seizure of Native lands,<sup>152</sup> and the improvement of the

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<sup>150</sup> Enslaved Africans and their descendants were inarguably the backbone of America's colonial, early republic, and antebellum agricultural trade. Slave-driven agricultural production established and systematically advanced the nation's agrarian(rural) economy until its abolition. Public policy scholar Thomas Craemer estimates the total value (in 2009 dollars) of African slave labor in the United States from 1776 to 1865, of which agricultural labor is a significant portion, to be in the range of \$5.9 to \$14.2 trillion (639).

<sup>151</sup> The homestead acts include: The Homestead Act of 1862, the Southern Homestead Act of 1866, the Timber Culture Act of 1873, the Kinkaid Amendment of 1904, the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916, and the Subsistence Homesteads provisions of 1930 (under the New Deal).

<sup>152</sup> Land grants to settlers were made possible due to the seizing and redistribution of Native lands made legal through the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, or the General Allotment Act. According to federal Indian law scholar Kristen Ruppel, allotment forced the loss of 90 million acres of Native lands—from 138 million acres in 1887 down to 48 million acres when the policy

citizenry's agricultural knowledge and skills and access to agricultural materials and technologies and later entitlements and subsidies—the seeds were sown, so to speak, to turn the nation's vast so-called surplus lands into productive, nation sustaining and nation empowering agrarian(rural) spaces (R.L. Williams 69-70).

While land grant universities were created in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century primarily to provide a home for agricultural educational, research, and extension programming for the benefit of American farmers and the ultimate health and stability of the nation's agricultural economy, land grant universities of the late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup> century have been largely subsumed by neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism, favoring income generation, capitalization, and marketization over founding missions. Land grant universities have arguably strayed considerably from their original purpose and have become spaces where competition, commercialization, and commodification are the primary motivators for innovation, and corporate agricultural and other commercial and military interests rule much of the academy's research foci and agendas. This shift in purpose is representative of the invasive and pervasive impact of neoliberal ideology across all aspects of modern American society.

Land grant universities' collective shift in purpose can be tied to neoliberal legislative measures intended to bolster neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism and promote university-

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officially ended in 1934 with the passing of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, or the so-called "Indian New Deal" (30). According to *High Country News* reporting, "approximately 10.7 million acres [was] taken from nearly 250 tribes, bands and communities through over 160 violence-backed land cessions" to create the land grant university system (Lee and Ahtone).

industry relationships, such as the Bayh–Dole Act of 1980 (aka: the Patent and Trademark Law Amendments Act),<sup>153</sup> which “signaled the inclusion of universities in profit-taking” by fundamentally changing property rights claims (certainty of title) to findings derived from federally funded research from the U.S. government to the contractor or inventor/researcher: ownership of patents, inventions, and intellectual property (Slaughter 215). Until the passage of this legislation, the U.S. government retained ownership of federally funded research and development project outcomes. The Bayh-Dole Act “encouraged small business firms, universities, and other nonprofit organizations to collaborate and gave them the right to patent the results of publicly funded research. In return, universities were required to file for patent protection and to ensure commercialization upon licensing” (Irzik 140). Through Executive Order 12591, “Facilitating Access to Science and Technology” (1987), Reagan extended the Bayh-Dole Act to all federal contracting, including large firms, with the explicit purpose of promoting commercialization (E.O. 12591; Irzik 140). In fact, Reagan’s executive order *mandates* the advancement of “commercialization” (E.O. 12591; Irzik 141). Correspondingly, the National Cooperative Research Act of 1984 deregulated university-industry collaborations and enabled vast government-industry-university funding of research and development (Slaughter 216). Importantly, the act provided special antitrust status to collaborative university-

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<sup>153</sup> “In addition to this act, a number of other legal arrangements were made during the 1980s to foster university-industry relationships. These include the Stevenson-Wydler Technology Innovation Act of 1980, the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, the Trademark Clarification Act of 1984, and the Federal Technology Transfer Act of 1986” (Irzik 140-41).

industry research and development projects, permitting federal funds to be used for academic and other projects which would otherwise violate anti-trust laws (Slaughter 216). The Bayh–Dole Act and the National Cooperative Research Act are clear expressions of neoliberal legislative action which enthusiastically encourage land grant universities and other research institutions to directly enter the free market.

The ascendancy of neoliberalism over land grant universities continued in the Clinton era through federal policymaking and legislation. In addition to NAFTA’s neoliberal manifestations outlined above, Clinton’s free trade treaty “increased the protection of intellectual property” for researchers and “heightened penalties for violation, *stressing knowledge as commodity*” (Slaughter 216; emphasis mine). According to intellectual property attorney Fran Smallson, NAFTA “contains the most comprehensive multilateral intellectual property agreement ever concluded” and represents “the most far-reaching bilateral or multilateral agreement on the enforcement of intellectual property rights,” including strong protections for genetically modified crops (“NAFTA’s Intellectual”). NAFTA also further expands opportunities for substantial investments into agricultural, and a wide range of other, academic research by the private/corporate sector. There are legitimate concerns over whether corporate-funded academic research “promote[s] the development of [knowledge and] technology that provides the most benefits to society” along the lines of land grant universities’ original purpose or unduly influences public agendas against the greater good; that is, for example, disproportionately leveraging academic research “toward[s] the needs of private industry, rather than for the broader interests of farmers or consumers” (Klotz-Ingram and Day-Rubenstein 26).

According to Kenneth R. Lutchen's 2018 reporting in the *Harvard Business Review*, over the last decade,

There has been an explosion in the number of research deals between companies and universities. Companies, which have been reducing their spending on early stage research for three decades, have been increasingly turning to universities to perform that role... And faced with stingier government support of academic research and calls for them to contribute more to their local economies, universities have been more receptive (“Why Companies”).

The consistent decline in federal and state investment in higher education, primarily due to neoliberal austerity measures (adhering to the neoliberal tenet to deny federal support in favor of the free market as the definitive means for promoting national interests), has created a deep dependence on the part of public higher education institutions on student tuition and fees, fundraising and grant-seeking, as well as increasingly, other outside sources of income through private industry/corporate grants, collaborations, and investments. This has resulted in public colleges and universities—including, of course, land grant universities—being transformed into wannabe for-profit research institutions. While this neoliberal reality negatively impacts disciplines across campus, social (soft) sciences, humanities, and the fine arts, once foundational to liberal education, in particular have taken a hit because their market value is not readily apparent. Hard and applied sciences, on the other hand, are the clear winners in the private industry/corporate investment game—but open themselves up to charges of compromise and capitulation.

A fairly new and burgeoning means of infusing private industry/corporate money into academic research, further evidencing the pervasive impact neoliberal ideology on higher education, is bought-and-paid for direct corporate engagement in academic affairs and functions, or pay-for-influence. “Proponents of such arrangements... say that corporate engagement in

research is critical if universities are to continue their cutting-edge work. For many opponents, however, the mere mention that a corporation has sponsored research is enough to dismiss it as “compromised” (McCluskey). As recently reported by Molly McCluskey for *The Atlantic*,

Some schools openly advertise their [industry-affiliates] programs. At [land grant university] Montana State University’s Center for Biofilm Engineering, for example, affiliates pay \$24,000 a year to advise on research, specify deliverables, and have their products tested by university staff before going to market (“Public Universities”).

In another example, through land grant university Purdue’s Department of Food Science industry-affiliates program, corporate “partners are invited to pay \$5,000 a year for influence over ‘current and proposed curricula’” and also receive “an array of other benefits, from prepublication review to access to students and ‘potential consultants’” (McCluskey). Purdue’s industry-affiliate program is so popular, it is estimated that industry partners, such as ConAgra and Dow Chemical, are on campus “nearly every school day (and on some weekends)” (McCluskey). Land grant university Virginia Tech has 30 separate industry-affiliates programs, which allow corporate partners to provide input on research topics and activities and the adoption of research methodology (McCluskey).

Clinton’s neoliberal policy agenda to reform and globalize, driven by formidable neoliberal devices—NAFTA, the 1996 farm bill, intensified monocropping and factory farming, and neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism—powered and yet perpetuate the ongoing crisis of neoliberalism. They undermine environmental protections, increase pollution, spoil the environment, eliminate jobs, ruin farms, erode wages, marketize public education, and fuel climate change. Through these devices, the agrarian myth has been used as both a symbol to be used to mollify societal anxiety and mask decline and degradation and a commodity to be

exploited for progress and profit (of course). The neoliberalization of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces plows onward.

Moo U.

Jane Smiley's *Moo* (1995), published during the ascendance of Clinton era neoliberal agripolicymaking—yet presciently predates the neoliberal turn in American Studies—is a powerful, though farcical, microcosm of neoliberal America and its neoliberalized land grant universities.<sup>154</sup> Set at a fictive land grant university, *Moo* embodies the calamitous effects of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism. The unnamed “revered agricultural and technical institution of higher learning,” referred to as Moo U. in the novel, located in an unidentified midwestern state, presents a modern land grant university under the influence of neoliberalism at its most reprobate and ridiculous, as it kowtows to the neoliberal realities of the 1990s and the increasing demands of the neoliberal regime (Smiley 15). *Moo* presents neoliberalism as

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<sup>154</sup> While Smiley is very clear and clever in her depiction of the corporate-centric neoliberalized university model—in addition that which is discussed in this chapter, Smiley also explores privatization through the introduction of a McDonald's on campus, as well as another dubious university-industry collaboration, this one concerning bovine cloning—she wholly neglects discussing military-university collaborations, which were and remain as pervasive as university-industry collaborations. Smiley focuses only on the “industrial” aspect of the university-military-industrial complex. The university-military-industrial complex has been widely studied; see for example, Rebecca Lowen's *Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford* (1997), Bill Readings' *The University in Ruins* (1996), Henry Giroux's *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (2007), Nick Turse's *The Complex: How The Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (2008), S. Mike Pavelec's *The Military-Industrial Complex and American Society* (2010), Ethan Blue et al's *Engineering and War: Militarism, Ethics, Institutions, Alternatives* (2013).

something beyond mere hyper-capitalism. It evidences the ever-widening borders of influence of neoliberalism and the extension and reticulation of market rationalities and realities throughout the nation's varied social, political, and cultural approaches, contexts, and institutions. It is also an environmental critique of the insidious link between neoliberalism and its devices and the sheltering of resultant environmental decline and degradation and associated global ecological implications.

What is *Moo* is not, is diverse. The white-centric, male-centric, straight-centric, narrative largely omits diversity and defaults to white plots and straight male perceptions. Though Smiley describes the community (as represented at a church gathering) as comprising “all physical types, from the blackest Africans to the palest northern Europeans,” the novel has but two minor Black characters; faculty members who are largely relegated to serving together on pigeonhole committees, the “Minority Student Affairs Steering Committee, Black Studies Hiring Committee... [and the] Black Awareness Month Committee,” and one minor Latinx character, the assistant professor of foreign languages is part Mexican; not surprisingly, she teaches Spanish (Smiley 26, 35). These characters of color contribute very little to the major story threads and are largely consigned to the romantic or gossipy subplots. Smiley also hints at a diverse student body and includes a thread about an incoming Black student adapting to life among her white cohorts, but it largely concerns her insecurities and experiences of discrimination. (For impact, Smiley even drops the n-word.) At Moo U., students of color mostly live in the same student housing—the “multicultural diversity” house, where students receive discounted room and board because they must largely do for themselves (Smiley 8). Concerning

gender, while there are numerous female characters in *Moo*, the important characters are nearly all male. Male storylines drive the novel.

The publisher of the latest edition of *Moo* describes Moo U. as pleasantly pastoral: “a distinguished institution devoted to the art and science of agriculture... [n]estled in the heart of the Midwest, amid cow pastures and waving fields of grain”<sup>155</sup> (qtd. in Smiley 415). Despite this farm-charming setting, Moo U. is representative of modern land grant universities that have succumbed to the destructive pressures of neoliberalism—specifically, neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism, and its core tenets of capitalization, marketization, privatization, and greed, which are systematically played out through the many intertwining story threads.

Though the story has global implications, the many key threads, situated in “an atmosphere rife with devious plots, mischievous intrigue, lusty liaisons, and academic one-upmanship,” mostly occur on the campus of this archetypal land grant university (Knopf Doubleday qtd. in Smiley 415). In addition to numerous love and other sundry affairs, the novel’s key threads concern a giant “secret hog [research project] at the center of the university,” a governor’s acerbic embrace of neoliberal governance, responsabilization, and anti-intellectualism, a shady hidden university-industry collaboration to provide empirical academic cover for a gold mining operation “under the largest remaining virgin cloud forest in Central

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<sup>155</sup> Many have speculated that Moo U. is a lightly veiled depiction of Iowa State University, the land grant university where Smiley was a Professor of English from 1981 to 1996. She emphatically states, however, “I not only didn’t consciously base it on Iowa State, I didn’t subconsciously base it on Iowa State” (qtd. in Nakadate 183).

America,” an industry-revolutionizing planting machine invented by an anti-government, Morrill Act-invoking elderly farmer who hates “big ag companies,” the death of the giant hog, and the destruction of a campus relic (Smiley 371, 203, 85). These threads depict both the promise and perniciousness of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism. The precepts of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism are pervasive in the novel. Correspondingly, the 70-odd human and nonhuman characters in *Moo* either actively endorse and cultivate neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism, or oppose and resist it—or, in the case of the secret hog, embody it.

### Get Big or Get Out

At the literal and figural center of it all is the crudely satirical Earl Butz, a 700 plus pound Landrace hog. Earl Butz is the secret research project (subject) of Dr. Bo Jones, who surreptitiously spends \$233,876.42 on his project to fatten the hog as big as he will grow. Dr. Jones wants to “[know] something about hog” (Smiley 6).

Hog... is a mysterious creature, not much studied in the wild, owing to viciousness and elusiveness... Never been a hog that lived a natural lifespan. Never been an old hog. Hog too useful. Hog too useful to be known on his own terms, you know. What can I do with this hog, when can I eat it, what can I make of this hog, how does this hog profiteth me, always intervenes between man and hog. When I die, they’re going to say that Dr. Bo Jones found out something about hog (Smiley 5-6).

In his effort to fatten the hog, Dr. Jones is exceedingly successful.

The hog, Earl Butz, is “white, white as cream cheese or sugar” and “as big as a Volkswagen Beetle” (Smiley 4, 371). He lives in a secret pen in the basement of Morgantown Hall, an abandoned building, which “stood on the exact geographic center of campus,” and familiarly referred to as Old Meats because “classes in slaughtering and meat cutting... had once been held there” (Smiley 3, 6). The hog’s concealed accommodations are lavish; his “venue [is]

a sparkling new, clean, air-conditioned, and profoundly well-ventilated Ritz-Carlton of a room” (Smiley 4). Earl Butz’s only purpose “[is] eating, only eating, and forever eating” (Smiley 4). Earl Butz satirically embodies the intrinsic grotesque greed and gluttony of neoliberalism—its purpose to exponentially grow, grow, grow. Earl Butz *is* hyper-commodification. Earl Butz *is* hyper-capitalism. Earl Butz *is* hyper-profitization. Earl Butz *is* neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism. “Right on Earl’s pen... was taped up a sign that read ‘Get big or get out’” (Smiley 4).

Smiley is cunning in the naming of the hog at the center of the narrative. Earl Butz, the man for whom the huge white swine is named, served as the Secretary of Agriculture for the Nixon and Ford administrations, before being forced to resign due to public crudeness and bigotry. Butz forced then burgeoning neoliberal notions about the future of the nation’s agricultural sector onto the public agenda, especially regarding large-scale corporate farming and escalating consumer calorie consumption, through the promotion of expansion, exportation, deregulation, and reducing/eliminating subsidies. His resultant impact on U.S. agriculture and role in the early purchase of neoliberalism in the American psyche was immense. As agriculture journalist Tom Philpott explains, “Blustering, boisterous, and often vulgar, Butz lorded over the U.S. farm scene at a key period. He plunged a pitchfork into New Deal agricultural policies that sought to protect farmers from the big agribusiness companies whose interests he openly pushed” (“A Reflection”). Butz famously promoted planting fencerow to fencerow; that is, “plow[ing] up and plant[ing] every bit of land you can get your tractor on. He brooked no dissent. ‘Get big or get out,’ he routinely thundered” (Philpott).

Through Earl Butz (the hog), Smiley allegorically accounts for Earl Butz (the man). The centrality of Earl Butz (the hog) to neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism at Moo U. mirrors the significance of Earl Butz (the man) to the neoliberalization of U.S. agriculture. Earl Butz (the hog), the subject of the “[hyper-]hog-fattening experiment,” represents the commitment of Earl Butz (the man) to fatten (exponentially grow) American farming (Smiley 384). Earl Butz (the hog) embodies *get big or get out*. Earl Butz (the man) embodies *get big or get out*. Moo U. embodies *get big or get out*. The modern land grant university model embodies *get big or get out*.

#### Neoliberal Governance and Responsibilization

Like many publicly funded higher education institutions dealing with the difficult machinations and maneuverings associated with implementing the neoliberal austerity model, Moo U. increasingly faces swift and sweeping economic disruptions and transformations. As discussed above, ongoing decreases in state and federal investment in higher education, largely due to neoliberalism-induced austerity fever (promoted as a net positive for the American taxpayer), has created economic insecurity for many public universities, forcing increased dependence on student tuition and fees, fundraising and grant-seeking, and university-industry relationships. Resultantly, public universities increasingly act like for-profit institutions, with

“students as customers,” professors as *homo oeconomicus*,<sup>156</sup> and integrity up for sale (Smiley 111). *Moo* depicts the effects of neoliberalism on public institutions by exploring some of the ways public universities respond to severe cuts to state support.

In *Moo*, the incoming governor’s sharp embrace of neoliberal governance and responsabilization, as well as his draconian anti-intellectualism and hostility towards the academy, forces an austerity famine on the state’s public institutions through extreme across-the-board budget cuts.<sup>157</sup> In a Reaganomics-invoking chapter titled, “Trickle Down Economics,” a newspaper article announcing the cuts reads,

In a surprise move today, Governor [Orville] T. Early slashed the state budget by more than \$200 million, with cuts affecting many state programs and agencies, but not all. While some cuts had been foreseen for a number of weeks, the scope and depth of the final cuts took most observers by surprise. “This is a victory for the fiscal health of our state,” declared Governor Early, “and will ease the tax burden on our citizens. I consider these necessary cuts the boldest and most courageous accomplishment of our administration so far, and I know that the citizens of the state will applaud them” (Smiley 111).

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<sup>156</sup> Recall from Chapter 2, according to political theorist Wendy Brown, *homo oeconomicus*, or “economic man,” is “the relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism”; that is, “neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus* (*Undoing the Demos* 31). Professors as *homo oeconomicus* forces them to be self-appreciating individuals, whose lives are about “producing and growing [their] human capital” (J. Wilson 119).

<sup>157</sup> O.T. Early believes universities would better serve the public if they operated like businesses. On *Moo U.*’s leadership he says, “Education is an investment. The trouble is, they don’t run it like an investment over there, with students as customers, because that is what they are, you know... Now they run it like welfare, but I’m telling you, if they don’t turn it around for themselves, we’ve got to turn it around for them” (Smiley 118).

The governor's fiscal policies mirror the neoliberal higher education funding model currently employed by many neoliberal state governors<sup>158</sup>—initiated during the Reagan administration and yet evidenced during the Trump administration. In his “homely, down-to-earth way” of communicating, O.T. Early equates his austerity measures (“sacrifice”) with dieting.

I've been on a diet before, and I know how it feels. For the first few days, you think you've got to have those donuts and hot fudge sundaes you got so used to. Later, though, you know how much better you feel with a little salad and a piece of broiled fish for lunch. This state has been on a binge that we can't afford. I came into office with a mandate to end that binge, and this is the first, hardest step. There's going to be clamor and complaining, but I vow to the citizens of this state that I will be strong and resist. No more hot fudge sundaes! (Smiley 111).

The slashed state budget is a considerable financial blow to Moo U., which is already facing a \$7 million shortfall.

The institution's economic insecurity and embrace of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism is played out through Dr. Ivar Harstad, Moo U.'s beleaguered provost. Like public higher education institutions today, Moo U. is at the mercy of the encroaching forces of neoliberalism, corporatism, and ideological and intellectual intolerance and is thus prone to falling for the promises of financial security through neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism and its devices (university-industry relationships).

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<sup>158</sup> O.T. Early's neoliberal politics are reminiscent of the extreme austerity politics of former Kansas governor Sam Brownback (in office 2011-2018). During his tenure as governor, Brownback slashed taxes and undermined Kansas' public institutions. Brownback currently serves as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom for the Trump administration.

In a chapter titled, “The Provost is Tempted,” Texas billionaire, chicken tycoon, and president of TransNationalAmerica Corporation, Arlen Martin, whom already has a problematic history with Moo U., reminds the provost of the nuances of the university-industry relationship.<sup>159</sup>

You know, we’ve brought six companies under the TransNational wing in the last six years, some big, some not so big. That gives us control of eleven diverse companies in all, and, of course, a goodly debt. Not much left over for research and development, for, let’s say, the physical plant aspects, and the personnel. So I look around me, and I say, who’s got the physical plant and the personnel, and I don’t have to look far, do I?... Our interests continue to coincide, Dr. Harstad. I got hybrid seeds, you got plant genetics. I got steel roller mills, you got materials science and industrial engineering. I got airplane engine parts, you got aerospace engineering. I got chickens, beef, and llamas, you got animal science. I got a chemical company that specializes in pesticides, you got entomology. I got a big accounting and PR firm, you got a business school. Are you catching my meaning, Dr. Harstad? Why should I hire R and D people just to read what your R and D people already know? (Smiley 73).

While the provost is *tempted*, he is also hesitant to collaborate with Martin. His hesitance stems from the a past collaboration with Martin wherein “he had given a grant to the university for the purpose of investigating the health effects on chickens of a diet made up partially of dead chicken offal—ground-up bone meal, ground-up dried blood and innards, and feathers, etc.” (Smiley 71). The Moo U. scientist’s findings, much to Martin’s disappointment, “showed that both the eggs and the killed carcasses of the chickens on the Martin diet showed higher levels of salmonella contamination that could not be satisfactorily controlled by antibiotics” (Smiley 71).

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<sup>159</sup> This passage epitomizes the encroachment of corporations in universities as a direct result of the Bayh-Dole Act—including the free market’s considerable influence on academic missions, research, and curricula.

When the scientist published these findings, in addition to rescinding his pledge to fund a new university library, Martin “attempted to destroy the reputation not only of the scientist who had received the grant, but also of the graduate student who had helped him and the journal who had published the results” (Smiley 71-72). Not surprisingly, “Other studies discrediting that study had been published very quickly thereafter,” further embarrassing Moo U. (Smiley 72). This incident demonstrates how academic freedom is vulnerable to and can be subverted (and perverted) by neoliberal logic, as well as the capriciousness of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in favoring profitability over principles.

#### University-Industry Collaboration

In *Moo*, Smiley extends environmental degradation connected to neoliberal devices from the local to the global, and highlights the greed and corruption associated with neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism. Through an initially undisclosed partnership between TransNational’s president, Arlen Martin, and Moo U.’s Dr. Lionel Gift, a renowned (and egregiously entrepreneurial/profitteering) professor of economics, a collaborative university-industry project is developed to calculate the economic merits associated with destroying “the largest remaining virgin cloud forest in the world” in order to mine the gold underneath it; that is, provide empirical academic cover for an environmentally destructive mining operation in a developing country (Smiley 229). The Costa Rican cloud forest above the seam of gold is “entirely ringed by land owned by... International Cattle”—a TransNational subsidiary (Smiley 229). The aggressive mining operation will be conducted by Seven Stones Mining Corporation—another TransNational subsidiary. “[T]he ring of private land [is] like a noose, the tunnels of the gold mine literally undermining the forest’s attachment to the earth” (Smiley 229). Here,

corporate interests and neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism—symbolized through figures of Martin and Gift, evangelists of neoliberalism—willingly and enthusiastically come together to prioritize profits while disregarding near all else.

In addition to being “a distinguished economics professor” at Moo U., “Gift is also an economic consultant for the Costa Rica government. The development of Costa Rica, the rising GDP, those symbols of modernization and urbanization are what Dr. Gift cares about, rather than the preservation of resources in nature” (Smiley 31; Wu 57). Along these lines, Gift, for a fee (grant award), will deliver conclusive findings on the Arlen Martin plan to mine gold under the precious Costa Rican ecosystem, while simultaneously stressing his benefactor’s appropriateness to oversee the undertaking; that is, prop up the failing Seven Stones Mining with an already appalling environmental record. Dr. Gift’s TransNational-funded report reads in part,

While gold mining is admittedly stressful to the environment in a number of ways, it is the opinion of this writer that environmental impact assessments will show that it should take a hundred years or less for the area in question to recover from the necessary impacts of mining, especially if the historically disruptive migrations of peoples to areas where gold has been discovered are prevented by adequate security. While such security precautions may be out of the financial reach of the Costa Rican government at this point, there are alternative avenues for meeting this expense, possibly through public moneys raised in the U.S. as a result of lobbying Congress to prevent the dissolution of Seven Stones Mining, which employs a substantial number of people in areas already economically depressed (Smiley 204).

Gift’s findings usefully coincide with Representative John H. Gonner (R -Alaska) and Representative George D. Comer (D - Texas) introduction of “a bill that would provide \$150 million in interest-free loans and tax rebates to western mining corporations” (Smiley 325). Gift will continue supporting the effort as a well-paid consultant to the Costa Rican government.

Martin and Dr. Gift’s greedy aspirations are thwarted, however, when Gift’s report is leaked, and the mining plan is revealed. Moo U.’s Coalition to Stop the Destruction, led by

Chairman X, Chair of the Horticulture Department, unrepentant 1960s hippy-radical, avowed Maoist communist, and professor of horticulture (who teaches new agrarianism alongside Buddhist principles) exposes the nefarious plan,<sup>160</sup> resulting in national headlines, a small campus riot, “the collapse of Seven Stones Mining and the subsequent, probably fatal, weakening of the whole TransNational empire,” as well as “the quick escalation of a... crisis in Central America” (Smiley 354, 325). In the end, the “cloud forest... was saved (the Costa Rican government had even decided to buy up the cattle ranches around the forest, and, strapped for cash, TransNational had decided to sell them)” (Smiley 365). Incidentally, TransNational also withdrew sizeable pledged financial investments in Moo U, once again putting the institution in financial dire straits.

The self-serving Gift was unconcerned over this turn of events. “The market, after all, had acted to correct TransNational’s overextension” and he “had long ago cashed all checks and invested all monies accruing to him through his contract with the company” (Smiley 355).

Demonstrating his “philosophical perspicacity,” Gift decides,

It did not matter, really, who he was or who Martin was, where, in particular, the money came from or where it went. Individuals and individual companies were but

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<sup>160</sup> The Stop the Destruction protests go as far as to ignite a small campus riot, during which Chairman X assaults Nils Harstad, the provost’s identical twin brother (and Moo U.s’ dean of extension). Chairman X’s worldview is diametrically opposed to that of Ivan Harstad. Before the riot, Chairman X had comically fantasized about putting his hands around the provost’s throat, his “water-colored eyes popping and his blue lips croaking, ‘I’m sorry I destroyed indigenous agricultural systems! I’m sorry I imposed monocultures on delicate and diverse ecosystems! I’m sorry I was so arrogant and so stupid at the same time! I’m sorry I treated people who were well adapted to their ecological niches like fools and knaves!’” (Smiley 341).

flickering pauses in the eternal exchange of fiscal energy. Restlessly it flowed here and it flowed there. No one man could stop it or direct it; all were equally doomed to watch the golden streams flow through their clutching fingers. Finally, you had to take solace and even inspiration from that very evanescence. As he told his packed house of fifteen hundred customers [students], we spend our whole lives thinking that value is an object, and collecting gold, or diamonds, or stocks and bonds, but even while you are piling it up, even while you are watching it, value is flowing ceaselessly into and out of it (Smiley 354-55).

This incident represents the intrinsic conflict between the exploitative core of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism and its devices, and the environmental sensibility and responsibility required of our public institutions. Where neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism devices, such as university-industry collaborations, are concerned with power and profit, and in this scenario, even the exploitation of a developing nation and its resources, right-minded academics, such as Chairman X and his cohorts, are concerned with the greater good: environmental protections and exposing exploitation.

### Manifestations of Perverse Nostalgia

At the margins of *Moo*, is Loren Stroop, an elderly “eccentric and paranoid farmer-inventor” who hates federal intelligence agencies and “big ag” with equal fervor, because he believes they want “to get him out of the way before he perfected and marketed his invention, which was going to revolutionize American agriculture” (Nakadate 197, Smiley 85). Stroop is reminiscent of many an old farmer to be found at the communal table at the local rural cafe, drinking coffee, complaining about the weather and the price of corn, and praising the latest Reagan-esque iteration running for office. Stroop “[drives] an old John Deere tractor with thousands of hours on it and without a cab of any sort, much less an air-conditioned one,” yet buys the latest and greatest in survival products (writing them off on his taxes as “miscellaneous

equipment”), believing the new “bulletproof vest technology really paid for itself in weight and comfort, especially for summer cultivating and hay harvesting... [as] the bulletproof vest was his best protection against the FBI, the CIA, and the big ag businesses” (Smiley 85). He wears his bulletproof vest day and night. He fears they—“the collusion of the USDA, Cargill, Iowa Beef Processors, Pioneer, Ciba-Geigy, [John] Deere, [International Harvester], the Big Banks, the CIA, the FBI, and the Trilateral Commission”—will destroy his invention (and him) in order to maintain the status quo (Smiley 107). Stroop keeps his invention “safe in the barn, untouched and unsabotaged by the FBI, the CIA, and the big ag companies” (Smiley 313).

Stroop believes in his core that he embodies the principles of yeomanship, though he would refer to them along the lines of *rugged individualism*, *pulling yourself up by your bootstraps*, and *American ingenuity*.<sup>161</sup> He believes in the tenets of agrarianism, and he believes

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<sup>161</sup> Bob is another character embodying yeoman traits—though presented through far more earnest and wholesome lenses. Bob is a work study student in his second year at Moo U. His job caring for the esteemed hog is “an extension of his life on [his father’s successful hog] farm” (Smiley 4.) Bob identifies more with the hog than his fellow students. “Bob filled his trough, emptied and refilled his water reservoir, and scratched his back with a stick... He visited him five times every day, and Dr. Bo Jones, Earl’s owner, said that he was the best caretaker they’d found. Bob took the compliment for what it was, a testament to the fact that he felt more comfortable with Earl than he did with anyone else he had met since coming to the university” (Smiley 5). Another character who grew up on a family farm is the incoming freshman, Keri—though her family struggled through “the farm crises of the eighties” (Smiley 144). “Her grandfather farmed the original 400 by himself, her father had 600 of his own, and [her uncle] Jack, the most insatiable member of the family, farmed his and [her uncle] Dwight’s 780, they were in the fields day and night, every planting season and harvest was a nightmare, the family debt load soared to astounding proportions, all the money from the farm went back into the farm” (Smiley 144). Though she works to hide it at college, Keri represents the stereotypical

in *his* land grant university—specifically, “the extension office at the university (*his* university, founded under the Morrill Act to help *him*)” (Smiley 86, emphasis mine). As a result of these beliefs, Stroop relentlessly writes letters and visits *his* university to discuss his invention—a minimally described “unshiny and low-tech” planting machine—but receives no responses nor inklings of interest (Smiley 106). In fact, he attempts contact with Dr. Nils Harstad, dean of extension, nearly every day for more than a year and half with no joy. Stroop goes straight to the dean because he “know[s] all about the Morrill Act and what [his] job is”—to help him, the farmer (Smiley 90). The dean and his secretary however see Stroop as a nuisance (and possibly mentally unstable) and thus deflect his persistent communications. Stroop, however, sees himself as “a tremendous patriot from way back” and it is with this same patriotic conviction, that he believes “*his* dean of extension... would eventually do the right thing and champion [his] invention. The thing was getting past Dr. Harstad’s secretary, who, like most women, didn’t have a grasp of the principles involved and preferred filing her nails to forwarding American agriculture” (Smiley 86, emphasis mine).

Though Smiley dulls the edges of the more problematic aspects of Stroop’s character—his anti-governmentism and misogynism—we see in him clear expectations of how things *should* be, as evidenced through his repeated invoking of the Morrill Land-Grant Act, which is clearly contrary to his anti-governmentism. His perception of the land grant university extension is

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farm girl: farmer’s-daughter-beautiful; her mother and grandmother’s right hand helping feed and support the men; an industrious 4-H member; and, her county’s most recent Pork Queen.

proprietary. Stroop clearly believes, as a farmer, he is owed this service—though seemingly what he is asking for is far beyond what which is outlined in the statute or offered through the agricultural extension programming. He is basically asking for comprehensive legal services, which he did not acquire on his own because he “believe[s] that lawyers were always being paid off to show their clients’ files to the FBI, the CIA, and the big ag companies” (Smiley 389). Stroop’s feelings of being owed harkens back to aspects of the agrarian myth under which farmers “are owed a social debt by society because they suffer so that a democratic society can prosper” (Murphy 28).

In Stroop, we see minor manifestations of perverse nostalgia, though Smiley’s rendering of this character in this regard is muted. While we readily see his nationalism, anti-governmentism, and, to a lesser degree, his misogyny, oft co-occurring *isms* such as white nationalism, racism, anti-queerism, and anti-immigrantism are not depicted. For example, his identity consolidation as presented in *Moo* manifests not in fear and loathing of Others but rather as fear of loss of life and liberty under neoliberal precarity, though interestingly—patriotically to his mind—Stroop puts his invention above his own life. “[H]is personal safety was of secondary importance” to “revolutioniz[ing] American agriculture” (Smiley 85, 86).

Though the dean finally sees Stroop and agrees to look at his invention, it is only after Stroop has a severe stroke and dies,<sup>162</sup> and posthumously gifts Moo U. his invention, that the

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<sup>162</sup> Sadly, in the end, Stroop is unable to communicate beyond the word “moo.”

university learns of his simple genius. He dies before showing the dean the plans and his machine. Stroop distrusts the government and the big ag businesses yet entrusts his invention to Moo U., wrongfully believing the university will keep it out of their hands. However, he “[unknowingly relinquishes] his remarkable invention to the very enemy he has always feared” (Nakadate 197-98).

In the end, it is Stroop’s bequest of the plans and rights to his invention to Moo U. that saves the university, financially speaking, and even somewhat redeems it in the eyes of the state’s anti-intellectual governor, resulting in his “repealing a measure that would have reverted... funds already allocated to the university back to the state... amounting to some \$3 million,” further lightening the university’s financial burden (Smiley 395). The governor notes however, that “‘The people of the state are watching those pinheads, and they had better watch their step.’ When asked if he meant ‘eggheads,’ a common term for university intellectuals, Governor Early said, ‘Pinheads, eggheads, knuckleheads, what’s the difference?’” (Smiley 395). After the news of the invention goes public, bids from corporations for its development and manufacturing rights comes from across the globe. “Said Dr. Nils Harstad, dean of extension, ‘After having almost daily contact with Mr. Stroop, the inventor, over the last few years, I know how thrilled he would be at the interest of these legendary companies in his homely efforts. Our state is certainly a land of opportunity, even in these restricted times’” (Smiley 395).

### Growing Pains

Old Meats (Morgantown Hall), the abandoned “large and blocky” old abattoir at center of Moo U., “had disappeared from the perceptions of the university population at large,” but once was “bustling with activity, with white-coated, bloody-aproned meat science instructors who

formed a tangible link between the animal on the hoof and the meat on the table” (Smiley 3, 244). In this outdated building once beat the heart of the land grant university’s agricultural education programs, but now only houses the grossly overweight hog, Earl Butz, Dr. Jones’ secret research project (subject). “Outside of Earl’s pen, Old Meats was dim and empty. The classes in slaughtering and meat cutting that had once been held there were long removed to the purview of the junior college forty miles away” (Smiley 6). Inside his pen, the hog, far too heavy for his body’s frame, is increasingly in pain. Like Old Meats, Earl Butz, is no longer viable or sustainable.

Near the end of *Moo*, with no funds for renovation,<sup>163</sup> Old Meats is to be demolished. With Dr. Jones away on yet another research trip, this time to Tadjikistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan to study wild boars—funded by Mid-America Pork By-Products, a subsidiary of Western Egg and Milk, a subsidiary of TransNational—the only one who knows of Earl Butz’s existence is his caretaker, an undergraduate work study student unaware of the university’s plans to tear the building down.

Earl Butz was wholly unprepared “[w]hen the clam bucket took its first bite out of the wall of [his] suite” but soon, despite his gargantuan size and dormant survival instincts, managed to escape the doomed the building (Smiley 368). Accidentally freed from his subterranean

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<sup>163</sup> Old Meats was to be saved (renovated) through TransNational funding for a chicken museum “to celebrate the natural history of the chicken as well as the glory of modern chicken processing technology [i.e., factory farmed chickens]” but Arlen Martin withdrew the funding when his Costa Rica gold mining plan failed (Smiley 245).

existence, the hog fled the scene crazed and bolted across campus. Of those he passed, only Mrs.

Lorraine Walker, the provost's senior secretary,

Saw him for what he was, the secret hog at the center of the university, about whom she had been dismissing rumors for a year. He lumbered past, his high squealing underpinned by labored breathing, his white hide streaked with red where he had scraped himself. Something about the enormous, barreling, frightening animal struck her as poignant. Even as she jumped back, she held out her hand as if to pat him on the head (Smiley 371-372).

When Earl Butz "slowed down, he was forced to reckon with the damage that his wild run had wreaked upon his bones and sinews" (Smiley 372). Earl had been "bred to eat and lie around," not "gallop" (Smiley 372). As he reckoned with the "new and excruciating variations on his old shooting pains" they "focused and concentrated themselves in his left foreleg, and then exploded deep in his chest"; the defeated hog "took a labored, heaving breath, and suddenly jerked over onto his side. His whole body trembled. ... He gave another great shuddering breath that froze and hovered in the cold air, and then he closed his eyes" (Smiley 372-373).

As with his secretary, the death of the hog forces the provost take pause. For him, the hog's demise, however, has deeper meaning. For Harstad, the hog's death represents, through false promises and the pursuit of money and "getting big," the death of the purpose of the land grant university to serve the community and be a "people's university," and more broadly, public education's occupation of protecting liberal humanist values and serving as the repository of our national values and culture. As humanities scholar Bill Readings explains, the university "once the story of liberal education, has lost its organizing center—has lost; that is, the idea of culture and the object, as both origin and goal" (10).

In Harstad's experience, "the university shamelessly promised everything to everyone, and charged so much that prospective students tended to believe the promises" (Smiley 385).

Moo U.,

Over the years, had made serious noises to all sorts of constituencies: Students would find good jobs, the state would see a return on its educational investment, businesses could harvest enthusiastic and well-trained workers by the hundreds, theory and technology would break through limits as old as the human race (and some lucky person would get to patent the breakthroughs)... Over the years... everyone around the university had given free rein to his or her desires, and the institution had, with a fine, trembling responsiveness, answered, "Why not?" It had become, more than anything, a vast network of interlocking wishes, some of them modest, some of them impossible, many of them conflicting, many of them complimentary. Ivar himself resisted neither the wishes nor those who offered funds to pay for them. The most that he could say for himself was that, from time to time, he had felt obscurely uneasy (Smiley 385-86).

This surely relates to *get big or get out* growing pains.

### Conclusion

Clinton era neoliberal agripolicymaking, manifested through intensified monocropping and factory farming, as well as the consolidation of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in the modern U.S. land grant university system, evidences the harsh realities of progressive or leftist neoliberalism—which are not far off from the harsh realities of conservative or rightist neoliberalism. The influence of Clinton era leftist neoliberalism has lasted well beyond the 1990s and is well-evidenced in modern-day mainstream progressive politics and policies. As Lily Geismer explains, "The mainstream Democratic Party—as demonstrated by the Obama administration and its allies—[remain] committed to growth and investment over redistribution and celebrated market-orientated solutions, public-private partnership" and look towards "nonprofits and foundations as the main mechanism for addressing problems of inequality. In

promoting the market and private sector as a means to ‘do good’ and solve problems of poverty,” leftist neoliberals continue to “make market ever more embedded in government policy and American life” (“Democrats and Neoliberalism”). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, we saw the extension of globalist profiteering, free trade expansion, market liberalization, and deregulation, providing clear precedence for continued globalist profiteering, continued free trade expansion, continued market liberalization, and continued deregulation in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century—to the continued detriment of marginalized peoples, public health, and the environment.

Jane Smiley’s provocative *slippery slope* novel represents the complex intersections of agrarianism and the harsh neoliberal realities of the 1990s. As a microcosm of neoliberal America, Moo U. represents the disruptive impact of neoliberalism and its devices on the nation’s land grant universities and agrarian(rural) peoples, spaces, and beyond. While the novel strives for ethical balance, it calls out neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism and the cooptation and corporatization of American democratic values and institutions. Smiley’s ironic tone is not difficult to discern. Undergirding the ethical and environmental crises portrayed through the machinations at Moo U., a public institution for the public good, are mainly self-serving individual inclinations and the nation’s larger sociopolitical tendencies towards boundless power and profit—core characteristics of neoliberalism, supported through the neoliberal devices discussed in this chapter—namely, officious neoliberal legislation. Unlike the ill-fated hog, Earl Butz, neoliberalism—neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism, specifically—is yet fattening at the trough.

In the next chapter, I bring the project fully into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to look at crises of overproduction and overconsumption—effects of the globalization of the industrial diet under neoliberalism: the neoliberal diet—which facilitate ongoing damage to human health and the environment. The neoliberal diet integrates an already industrialized American diet with intensified per capita low-quality food consumption, market distortion, and food insecurity—a diet facilitated by destructive neoliberal agripolicymaking, aggressive agribusiness biotechnologies, and oligopolistic transnational agrifood producers, processors, and distributors. The chapter focuses on neoliberal agripolicy, market-distorting governmental subsidization, harmful impacts to human health (antibiotic resistance, factory farming and pandemics), negative environmental effects, inequitable access to healthy foods, and the potentially irreputable impact of aggressive agricultural biotechnology.

In this chapter, I also provide a close reading of Zoe Lister-Jones and Daryl Wein's independent film *Consumed* (2015), an environmentally themed political thriller concerned with the production and consumption of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and their believed associated risks to human health. The cultural product component of this chapter explores how *Consumed* works implicitly and explicitly as social commentary on modern-day neoliberal realities, in particular, neoliberalism's highly problematic economic doctrine of profit over people as embodied in the neoliberal diet and university-industry collaborative efforts to expand its already strong hold on global food systems.

## CHAPTER SIX

## CONSUMED

*God (Nature, in my view) makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.* —Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education* (1762)

*We've arranged a global civilization in which most crucial elements profoundly depend on science and technology. We have also arranged things so that almost no one understands science and technology. This is a prescription for disaster.* —Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, 1995.

*The neoliberal diet is the nutritional expression of the neoliberal food regime.* —Gerardo Otero, *The Neoliberal Diet: Healthy Profits, Unhealthy People* (2018)

In this chapter, I look at the continuing neoliberalization of the U.S. in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, primarily regarding the cruel consequences of decades of neoliberal agripolicymaking,<sup>164</sup> the resultant linked crises of overproduction (of federally subsidized

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<sup>164</sup> As discussed in Chapters 2 and 5, neoliberal agripolicymaking fully engages romanticized agrarian myth rhetoric (with some practical attributes, especially where economics and production are concerned), whereas agrotechnology and agribusiness engages more practical agrarian myth rhetoric. Romantically speaking, the agrarian myth embodies the ethical, emotional, and spiritual vitalness of agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces (reinforcing shared(united) national ethical, emotional, and spiritual vitalness). Romanticized agrarian myth attributes are yeoman attributes: morality; industriousness; self-sufficiency; self-reliance; individualism; virtuousness; independence; and, integrity. Practically speaking, the agrarian myth embodies the distinctive role of farmers in U.S. history (nation building, progress, underpinning American democratic society) and modern society (food security, agribusiness, agrotechnology, merited government protection), and the significance of U.S. agricultural production to the nation's society and economy, as well as (a particular interaction of) American national identity.

commodity foods) and overconsumption (dangerously high per capita food consumption), and the globalization of the industrial diet (worldwide food and agriproduct market liberalization)—which, I argue, facilitate hazards to public health and the environment. I use labor studies scholar Gerardo Otero’s term “neoliberal diet” to drill down on these issues—to both explain them and explore their many real-world ramifications and correlations with agrarian myth rhetoric. In addition to continuing my inquiry into neoliberal agripolicy, its negative impacts, I look at the rise of aggressive agricultural biotechnologies, or agrobiotechnologies, including genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and New Breeding Technologies (NBTs), as well as oligopolistic transnational agrifood structures, with specific focus on market-distorting governmental subsidization, associated risks to human health, adverse environmental effects, inequitable access to healthy foods, and negative impacts associated with agrochemicals and agrobiotechnologies.

My project, and especially this chapter, contribute significantly to gaps in scholarship concerning the cruel realities of highly impactful and problematic neoliberal agripolicymaking, along with the parallel issues of overproduction and overconsumption, aggressive agrobiotechnologies, governmental subsidization, and unbalanced global agrifood systems—all components of or contributors to the neoliberal diet—neoliberal realities aided and abetted by agrarian myth rhetoric. While American Studies as a discipline is highly critical of neoliberalism and the neoliberalism of American society and culture, as well as its vast global influence, a review of the literature evidences very limited scholarship on the issues discussed in this chapter. For example, as of June 2020, the *American Quarterly* (AQ) has published few articles concerning agrobiotechnologies in relation to American society and culture, transnational issues, or otherwise. Only five articles in the AQ database concern GMOs and none concern NBTs. No

*AQ* articles concern agricultural overproduction and overconsumption and only two articles mention “factory farming.” Though the neoliberalization of the industrial diet greatly impacts American society and culture and beyond, it has not been a particular research interest for American Studies scholars. These matters are of great interest to environmental studies; however, much scholarship along these lines lacks close consideration of sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic issues which are considered at length in this project: neoliberalism and the precarious (precariousness, precarity, and precarization); erasure of race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and (O)ther identities; and, the neoliberal instrumentalization of American culture and cultural production, including national metanarratives.

The cultural product I analyze in this chapter is Zoe Lister-Jones and Daryl Wein’s independent film *Consumed* (2015), an environmentally themed political thriller concerned with the production and consumption of ultraprocessed foods comprised of GMOs, as well as their believed associated risks to human health. I look at how the film works implicitly and explicitly as social commentary on contemporary neoliberal realities, in particular, neoliberalism’s highly problematic economic doctrine of profit over people as embodied in rise of the neoliberal diet. I do this primarily through looking at agrobiotechnologies and university-industry collaborations (the latter of which I also explore in Chapter 5)—neoliberal devices that work to expand neoliberalism’s already strong hold on global food systems. In sharp contrast to the “Reagan Country” mural (discussed in Chapter 4), which works to shelter precarity induced by Reagan-era neoliberalism and its devices, *Consumed* works to actively expose the precariousness of the

modern moment and deliver another example of the relentless neoliberalization of America society and culture.

### Introduction (The Neoliberal Diet)

Under neoliberalism, American agriculture concerns itself with (over)production and (over)consumption—not as the source of healthful abundance, not as the conduit of ideal social values, and not as the embodiment of self-sufficiency (per the tenets of agrarianism/the agrarian myth under which it locates itself). Today, U.S. agricultural food products are valuable commodities tied directly to the global free market and supranational agreements. As the agricultural sector has become increasingly deregulated and dependent on neoliberal globalization, free market forces, and market-distorting direct and indirect government subsidies, the neoliberal diet has become the American diet with all its terrible consequences to human health and the environment.

Gerardo Otero refers to the globalization of the industrial diet under neoliberalism, as the “neoliberal diet”—a diet characterized by intensified per capita low quality food consumption, immense market-distorting governmental subsidization, and inequitable access to healthy food—a diet facilitated by destructive neoliberal agripolicy, aggressive agrobiotechnologies, and oligopolistic transnational agrifood producers, processors, and distributors.<sup>165</sup> Approbating the

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<sup>165</sup> The neoliberal diet occupies parallel but divergent (class differentiated) economic spaces, in that, as the neoliberal diet becomes increasingly globalized and predominantly accessed by the poor/lower- and middle-classes through cheap foods (low-quality, nutrient-poor, high

neoliberal diet as the national(world) diet creates and sustains a global crisis of overproduction, with resultant health crises ensuing from overconsumption, and persistent environmental degradation of agrarian(rural) spaces and beyond. The overproduction crisis, its consequential overconsumption, and resultant damage to human health, as well as the continued devastation of the environment, is predicated on destructive deregulation, aggressive economic restructuring, global expansion, and the hegemonic domination of neoliberal political ideology—an ideology which not only delegitimizes social and economic safeguards and values, but increasingly employs punitive strategies directed against the underprivileged and the poor. Neoliberal political ideology dominates, affirms, reinforces, and justifies social and economic inequity and inequality—fortifications of the neoliberal diet.

### Neoliberal Agripolicy

As discussed in Chapter 5, neoliberal agripolicy, under the shelter of the agrarian myth, greatly impacts and influences agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces—especially through duplicitous farm bills, sweeping harmful trilateral trade deals, and, increasingly, through autocratic executive presidential orders. While purportedly working to help farmers through

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calorie/energy-dense foods largely comprised of sugars, vegetable oils, and salt, such those generally categorized as “junk food”), it also involves luxury food goods imported from world markets (high-quality, nutrient-rich foods, such as fresh produce, expensive meats, cheeses, and wines, and exotic “super foods”) available only to the wealthy/higher-class (Otero 169). While exploring the privileged aspects of access is a compelling prospect (and a potential avenue for continued research), this project is primarily interested in inequitable access to healthy foods as the result of neoliberalism and the rise of the neoliberal diet.

subsidizing our food and farm systems and feed the nation through assuring a dependable food supply, including food access for the poor, neoliberal agripolicy often has the contradictory negative result of deregulating food safety, health, and environmental protections, while concomitantly enabling harmful overproduction of agricultural commodity products and overconsumption of commodity foods. Deregulation concerns reducing or eliminating government regulations enacted so that federal agencies can achieve their respective, congressionally issued, statutory missions and responsibilities to protect the American public and the nation's lands and resources. The neoliberal regime believes federal regulation significantly diminishes profits and thus must be reduced or eliminated. Such egregious deregulation jeopardizes public health and safety and the environment.

While the neoliberal doctrine of aggressive deregulation of U.S. food safety, health, environmental, and other protections is well-established, the current efforts of the Trump administration to eliminate regulatory safety nets and erase benefits to public health and the environment enacted in the Obama administration is well-evidenced and has significant negative implications to public health and the environment.<sup>166</sup> This is especially well-demonstrated

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<sup>166</sup> Also causing great concern is the Trump administration's assault on scientific evidence, such as rolling back, rescinding, or revising policies and rules (backing out of the Paris Climate Agreement, rolling back the Clean Power Plan, repealing the Waters of the United States rule, reversing the chlorpyrifos ban), cutting federally support scientific research (climate change research, chemical safety and sustainability, reducing budget support of science and technology), hindering scientific peer review (dismissing Board of Scientific Counselors, realigning the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee and the Science Advisory Board towards industry-friendlier boards), limiting the evidence base (restricting scientific findings supporting federal regulation,

through Donald Trump’s crusade to fight off the “food police” through executive order—very effectively circumventing established congressional and separation of powers processes and norms. Law scholar Lisa Heinzerling describes Trump’s misguided overuse of executive powers as “a one-way road to environmental destruction”<sup>167</sup> (300). This *one-way road* is well-evidenced in Executive Order (E.O.) 13771, “Reducing Regulation and Controlling Regulatory Costs” (2017), an idea originally rolled out as Trump’s 2016 “2-for-1” campaign promise. The order directs executive branch agencies and departments to eliminate two existing federal regulations for every newly created one,<sup>168</sup> making it near impossible for them to promulgate new regulations (E.O. 13771). This is particularly problematic as new environmental and other problems emerge, such as the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, along with inadequate existing protections. The order also mandates the total incremental (net) cost of all new federal

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excluding historical epidemiologic data, narrowing the focus of evidence reviews and exposure assessments for chemical hazards), and revising scientific methods (lessening the protective risk assessment, promoting threshold assumption, limiting the scope of benefit cost analysis) (Samet and Burke 351).

<sup>167</sup> According to Heinzerling, in effort to tighten his control over regulatory policy and environmental agencies, Trump, through executive order, has “instructed the agencies to revisit just about every major environmental initiative of the Obama administration. His political appointees in the agencies have retaliated against career civil servants deemed hostile to his political agenda. The agencies have proposed to revoke numerous environmental rules not only by explaining that they are not consistent with the policies of this administration but also by claiming that the relevant agencies actually never had the statutory authority to issue them in the first place” (300).

<sup>168</sup> Trump administration deregulation has thus far been focused on these agencies: Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Education, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of the Interior (DOI), Department of Labor (DOL), Department of Transportation (DOT), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

regulations must be no greater than zero dollars (E.O. 13771). New federal regulations must be offset through the elimination of existing regulations. Far exceeding the 2:1 deregulation ratio mandated in the order, the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) reports the deregulation ratio of regulatory actions in 2017 as 22:1, in 2018 as 12:1, and in 2019 as 17:1, with the majority of deregulation focusing on dismantling food, health, and environmental protections,<sup>169</sup> as well as education and labor protections (“Regulatory... 2017” 1; “Regulatory... 2018” 1; “Regulatory... 2019” 1). As public health scholars Jonathan Samet and Thomas Burke explain, Trump’s “aggressive deregulation, with support of major industries including coal, oil and gas, chemicals, and industrial agriculture, has the potential to profoundly and unfavorably impact the nation’s environmental quality and public health” (350).

Another neoliberal policy negatively impacting agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces and far beyond is the United States Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA), or NAFTA 2.0 (also discussed in Chapter 5). USMCA is Trump’s renegotiation of the North American Free Trade

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<sup>169</sup> USDA and EPA deregulatory actions directly impact agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces and beyond. Since E.O. 13771 went into effect, the U.S. has completed 26 deregulatory actions and 3 regulatory actions (2017: 5 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions; 2018: 8 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions; 2019: 8 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions) (OIRA, “Regulatory... 2017” 1; OIRA, “Regulatory... 2018” 1; OIRA, “Regulatory... 2019” 1). In the same timeframe, the EPA has completed 10 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions (2017: 1 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions; 2018: 4 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions; 2019: 5 deregulatory actions and 0 regulatory actions) (OIRA, “Regulatory... 2017” 3; OIRA, “Regulatory...2018” 1; OIRA, “Regulatory... 2019” 1). Deregulatory actions pertaining to food safety, under the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), under HHS, largely pertain to food labeling.

Agreement (NAFTA), the 1994 trilateral trade arrangement which fundamentally transformed North America into a unified neoliberal growth (profit for profit's sake) machine, especially through fostering increased agricultural industrialization. Like NAFTA before it, USMCA facilitates and exacerbates damage to the environment. The Sierra Club categorizes USMCA as an environmental failure, identifying seven areas where the agreement fails to address vital environmental concerns stemming from and spread by NAFTA. According to supplementary information to a December 2019 press release, the Sierra Club and other leading environmental organizations, including the League of Conservation Voters and the Natural Resources Defense Council, argue USMCA will “exacerbate the climate crisis, encourage further outsourcing of pollution and jobs, offer handouts to notorious corporate polluters, and prolong Trump’s polluting legacy for years” (“Trump’s NAFTA 2.0” 1). The core environmental failures of the renegotiation from an environmental standpoint include not binding climate standards (to restrict job and climate pollution outsourcing, as well as ensure the U.S. and its trading partners satisfy Paris Climate Agreement commitments), not binding clean air, water, and land standards (to stop dumping Canadian and U.S. pollution in Mexico), not obligating the U.S., Mexico, and Canada to satisfy their commitments under key Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEA) (sustaining “the incentive to violate their MEA commitments in order to boost trade or investment, spelling threats to air, water, climate stability, and ecosystems”), not creating a new, independent, and binding enforcement system to stop environmental violations, not eliminating handouts to corporate polluters which support tar sands oil and fracked gas, not eliminating the broad rights for corporate polluters to sue Mexico over environmental policies (thereby preserving an “illegitimate, shadow legal system for notorious corporate polluters like Chevron

and ExxonMobil” allowing “oil and gas corporations with Mexican government contracts sue Mexico over climate and environmental protections in private tribunals, using the same broad corporate rights that they’ve repeatedly used to successfully challenge environmental policies”), and not eliminating rules that help corporate polluters weaken and delay environmental regulations (by “[offering] corporations multiple opportunities to challenge proposed regulations before they are finalized, and to ask that existing regulations be ‘repealed’ for being more burdensome than necessary”) (“Trump’s NAFTA 2.0” 1-2; Brune et al.). Like NAFTA before it, USMCA encourages overproduction and overconsumption towards consolidating the neoliberal diet.

### Governmental Subsidization

Despite neoliberalism’s economic imperative to dismantle all aspects of the welfare state, the U.S. continues its protectionism of American agriculture—protectionism of the agrarian way of life/agrarian myth—protectionism well-supported by the electorate. Fear of electoral backlash effectively mediates absolute implementation of the neoliberal agenda in U.S. agriculture: selective neoliberalism. This is in large part based on the long-held belief that the American agricultural sector performs vital social, environmental, and economic functions, which necessitates hypocritical governmental subsidization, while simultaneously supporting the neoyeomanization the agrarian(rural) peoples and spaces.

There is an inherent hypocrisy to preaching the neoliberal paradigm of responsabilization, privatization, free market infallibility, and a self-correcting market, while our federal government annually awards billions of dollars in agricultural subsidies to American farmers, not to mention government subsidies and other benefits to other industries, such as fossil fuels, biofuels, and

wind energy. Federal subsidy programs are explicit examples of selective neoliberalism. Deceptively, profit-driven food and agricultural corporate strategies embrace unrestrained free-market capitalism, while the neoliberal diet heavily relies on governmental subsidies and other supports to bolster its profitability. Cutbacks to education, health care, and safety nets for the poor are part of the neoliberal playbook per the neoliberal tenets of responsabilization and privatization as the only viable and sustainable solutions to eradicating societal ills; however, in our current iteration of selective neoliberalism, the beneficiaries to government subsidies—which in addition to cash grants include assumptions of risk, including loan guarantees, tax benefits and concessions, and lucrative federal procurement policies—far from oppose them, despite their overt support of the larger neoliberal agenda: *selective* primacy of the market, deregulation, *selective* privatization, elimination of the public good towards total responsabilization, and on and on.

Despite persistent rhetoric about family farms being the backbone of the nation, and rural America as the *real* America, aside from subsidized federal crop insurance and disaster aid, most American small-scale family farmers<sup>170</sup> do not much benefit from direct and indirect market-distorting federal agricultural subsidy programs in comparison with commercial family farms

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<sup>170</sup> This type of farm includes (oft struggling) low-scale and moderate-scale family farms, retirement farms, and off-farm operations, where the principal farm owners/operators primarily earn their income outside of farming (USDA, “Farm Structure”).

and large-scale agricultural commodity operations.<sup>171</sup> A vast majority of federal subsidies support commodity production, which, in turn, mightily supports the neoliberal diet.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers more than 60 direct and indirect aid programs to American farmers. These subsidies largely fall under the categories of Agricultural Risk Coverage (ARC), Price Loss Coverage (PLC), insurance, conservation programs, marketing loans, disaster aid, marketing and export promotion, and research<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> The USDA's farm typography system categorizes small family farms as having an annual gross cash farm income (GCFI) of less than \$350,000; commercial family farms are categorized as having a GCFI of more than \$350,000, with midsize family farms having a GCFI between \$350,000 and \$999,999, large family farms having a GCFI between \$1,000,000 and \$4,999,999 and very large family farms having a GCFI of \$5,000,000 or more (USDA, "Farm Structure").

<sup>172</sup> ARC covers 20+ crops at the cost of \$7 billion (2016), and "[p]ays farmers if revenue per acre... falls below a benchmark or guaranteed level" (Carolan 190). PLC covers 20+ crops at the cost of about \$2 billion (2016), and "[p]ays farmers based on the average national price of each particular crop compared to the crop's reference price," meaning "[t]he larger the fall in a crop's price below its reference price, the larger the payout to farmers" (Carolan 190). Federal crop insurance (subsidized premiums), the largest farm subsidy program, covers 100+ crops at the cost of about \$8 billion annually, and "protects against various business risks, such as adverse weather, low production, and low revenues" (Carolan 190). On average, between 2000 and 2014, farmers received a 120 percent annual return on their subsidized insurance: \$2.20 in claims for each dollar in paid premiums (Carolan 190). Conservation programs, at the cost of more than \$5 billion a year, "[pay] farmers to keep millions of acres of their more sensitive lands (e.g., highly erodible) out of production" (Carolan 190). Marketing loans, at the annual cost of about \$400 million (2016), provide subsidized loans during harvest time so farmers can wait to sell their crops at higher prices (Carolan 191). Disaster and supplemental aid, at the cost of up to \$2 billion a year, assist when "acts of God" occur (destroying crops or herds) (Carolan 191). Marketing and export promotion services promote U.S. food and agricultural products abroad, at the cost of \$1.5 billion annually (Carolan 191). This is in addition to the roughly \$3 billion the USDA spends annually on support services, such as statistical information and economic studies (Carolan 191).

(Carolan 190-91). Direct subsidies are largely awarded to corn (maize),<sup>173</sup> soybean, and wheat growers (who receive more than 70% of U.S. agricultural subsidies), versus fruit and vegetable growers and livestock producers, though livestock producers receive considerable indirect benefit through greatly reduced prices on livestock feed primarily comprised of corn along with soybeans and wheat (Bekkerman et al. 3). The ARC, PLC, and federal crop insurance programs

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<sup>173</sup> Agricultural subsidies indirectly benefit ethanol producers. “Ethanol, made mostly from corn starch from kernels, is by far the most significant biofuel in the [U.S.], accounting for 94[%] of all biofuel production in 2012” (USDA, “USDA Announces Support”). In the last five quarters (through the last marketing year quarter of 2019), over 38% of the nation’s corn crop has gone to ethanol production, with the remaining corn used for livestock feed, human food and food products, and exports (USDA, “U.S. Bioenergy Statistics”). This benefit is in addition to federal ethanol subsidies, in particular the Volumetric Ethanol Excise Tax Credit, referred to as a ‘blender’s credit,’ a tax incentive through which registered ethanol blenders receive a tax credit of \$.45 for every gallon of pure ethanol (minimum 190 proof) they blend with gasoline. Despite promising to shrink the size of the federal government (and government payouts), at a 2016 presidential campaign stop in Iowa (where *Corn Grows Iowa*), reading from a prepared statement for the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association, Trump promised corn farmers biofuels standards would be expanded in 2020, calling for an increased ethanol mandate. “The EPA should ensure that biofuel [renewable volume obligations] or blend levels match the statutory level set by Congress under the [renewable fuel standard]... past the current 2022 cutoff” adding he was “with you [farmers] 100[%]” on increasing federal ethanol subsidies; “you’re going to get a really fair shake from me” (D. Trump “Higher Ethanol Mandate”). The EPA, however, in its federal renewable fuel standard final agreement (December 2019, announced in a press release titled “EPA Fulfills Another Trump Administration Promise”), the agency did not include language Trump agreed to in meetings with ethanol industry representatives, corn farmers, Iowa’s governor, and congressional representatives (“EPA Fulfills”). The agreed upon language purportedly was to “add ethanol gallons back into the nation’s gasoline supply based on the exemptions granted in the past three years” and “would have created market certainty by assuring the industry... it would meet the 15 billion gallons... of corn-based ethanol for 2020 mandated by federal renewable fuel standard law” (Pitt). The EPA’s final ruling noncommittally states it will base volume exemptions on the U.S. Department of Energy recommendations (EPA, “Renewable Fuel” 7051).

are the nation's largest agricultural subsidy programs<sup>174</sup> and, not surprisingly, mainly benefit the nation's biggest producers. The American Enterprise Institute's 2018 study on the distribution of ARC and PLC program payments and crop insurance subsidy payments to U.S. producers (using USDA 2014 data<sup>175</sup>) finds

The top 10[%] of the crop sales distribution received approximately 68[%] of all crop insurance premium subsidies in 2014 and that farms in the top 2[%] receive approximately \$50 per acre in crop insurance subsidies, more than four times higher than the average per-acre subsidy of \$12.28. In addition, farms in the top 20[%] of the crop sales distribution received more than 82[%] of ARC and PLC payments in 2015. Farms in the top 5[%] of crop sales received close to the total amount of ARC and PLC payments (\$299 million) received by farms in the lowest 90[%] of crop sales (\$358 million). Finally, the top 10[%] of farms in crop sales were estimated to receive nearly \$3 billion in total ARC, PLC, and crop insurance subsidy payments in 2015, and farms in the bottom 80[%] of crop sales received approximately the same total amount of ARC, PLC, and insurance subsidy payments as farms in the top 2[%] (Bekkerman et al. 1).

Since 2014, federal disbursements for these three subsidy programs have averaged \$12-\$14 billion per year—a funding range expected to continue between 2018 and 2027 (Bekkerman et al. 1). As discussed in Chapter 1, the Trump administration's Market Facilitation Program

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<sup>174</sup> “Crops eligible for PLC and ARC payments include barley, chickpeas, corn, dry peas, grain sorghum, lentils, oats, peanuts, rice soybeans, wheat, and a wide range of minor oilseed crops including canola, crambe, flaxseed, mustard, rapeseed, safflower, sesame seeds, and sunflower. More than 130 crops are eligible for federal crop insurance subsidies” (Bekkerman et al. 15). The American Enterprise Institute, per the Congressional Budget Office, “June 2017 Baseline for Farm Programs” report, finds “In 2017, corn, soybeans, and wheat together received \$4.458 billion in crop insurance premium subsidies, 73[%] of the total amount of \$6.07 billion in premium subsidies paid to all 130 or more crops in the program. In 2016, ARC and PLC payments for all crops amounted to \$5.283 billion, of which corn (\$3.752 billion), wheat (\$756 billion), and soybeans (\$328 billion) received 85[%] (\$4.502 billion)” (Bekkerman et al. 15).

<sup>175</sup> This data comes from the USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Risk Management Agency, and the USDA's Agricultural Resource Management Survey.

(MFP), a response to Trump's going trade war with China, will pay an additional \$14.5 billion in direct payments to producers through the Farm Service Agency (FSA), to help farmers with lost income due to Chinese reprisals<sup>176</sup> to Trump's "America First" tariffs on goods from China (USDA, "USDA Announces Support"). This is in addition to \$1.4 billion in MFP subsidies through the Food Purchase and Distribution Program through the Agricultural Marketing Service to purchase surplus commodities impacted by Chinese "trade retaliation" and an additional \$100 million that will be issued through the Agricultural Trade Promotion Program and administered by the Foreign Agriculture Service to further "assist in developing new export markets on behalf of producers" (USDA, "USDA Announces Support"). Trump's trade war subsidies surpass the nation's three largest agricultural subsidy programs combined.

The U.S.'s massive subsidy infrastructure is embedded in its agripolicy. The subsidy system is enormously profitable to farmers who receive the valuable and lopsided support—farmers almost exclusively who employ high energy, high chemical, and resource inefficient farming practices. These harmful subsidized farming practices promote and support overproduction towards overconsumption, evade environmental protections, and craftily avoid crop yield accountability.

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<sup>176</sup> Soybeans were the U.S.'s top agricultural export to China. Due to Chinese import levies, U.S. soybeans exports fell over 70% in 2018 from 2017 and remain down more than 34% from the 2017 total (Roberts). In 2016, China accounted for more than 60% of U.S. soybeans exports, a value of \$14.02 billion (Roberts). China has turned to Brazil for its soybeans, making it now the largest soybean exporter in the world.

Going back to Earl Butz's neoliberalist *get big or get out* mid-20<sup>th</sup> century policy shift towards the massive expansion of agricultural operations and exportation (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), coupled with the modern-day neoliberal agrobiotechnological advances, crop production and yields have continued to monstrosly increase. Since the 1950s, through Butz's *pioneering* neoliberal agripolicy, initiated under the Eisenhower administration, and solidified under the Reagan administration and sustained thereafter regardless of the political party in power, "helped to lock in the growth spiral" of vast toxic chemical usage towards increased agricultural yields and profits, and in turn, firmly "[linked] government subsidies to yield rather than to acreage," through which high energy, high chemical, and resource inefficient farming practices became not only the norm, but the celebrated and richly rewarded (Dean). Because neoliberal agripolicy resolutely ties federal support to production levels, maximum production of subsidized commodity crops is greatly incentivized and very profitable, which results in revenue driven large-scale, resource-intensive, high-yield farming operations (rather than sustainable farming practices and resource and production accountability), creating crises of overproduction and overconsumption. Overproduction, manifested through subsidized operations and exported surpluses, drives overconsumption.

### Overproduction and Overconsumption

As with other offending industries, broadly speaking, the agricultural sector is guilty of excessive greed and the pursuit of relentless growth, accelerated and exacerbated by neoliberal agripolicy, to the great detriment of the commons and the greater good. Human and environmental health bear the burden of harm caused by agricultural overreach—namely, through agricultural overproduction which sustains the neoliberal diet; that is the "pattern of

production and consumption of cheap, energy-dense, nutrient poor, processed edibles that has increasingly dominated food environments since the 1980s”—a diet encouraging “the consumption of economically high-value, industrially produced packaged foods over their lower-value (but nutritionally superior) unprocessed predecessors”—a diet promoted by the U.S. government (Otero et al. 7).

Overproduction and overconsumption are inextricably linked to agricultural industrialization through federally subsidized monocropping (the growing single crops on the same piece of land year-after-year) and concentrated animal feeding operations (aka: factory farms) towards the production of cheap low-quality commodity foods.<sup>177</sup> The neoliberal regime advances unmitigated economic growth through the deregulation of agricultural operations towards the reduction or removal of barriers to the unrestricted distribution of commodities and capital, which, in turn, further encourages overproduction and overconsumption. Overproduction of agricultural commodities creates the circumstances for overconsumption. Propelled by reckless crop management and factory farms, and supported by vast market-distorting governmental subsidization, agricultural overproduction also results in drastically increased agricultural pollution, which creates dangerous scenarios for peoples and spaces, locally and cumulatively. This is in addition to severe negative impacts to public health. Concomitantly, overconsumption, facilitated by agricultural overproduction and the manufacture of (directly or

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<sup>177</sup> See Chapter 5 for discussion on monocropping and factory farming and their negative impacts.

indirectly subsidized) artificially cheap ultraprocessed commodity foods, damages human health and perpetuates and accelerates harmful cycles which further facilitates overproduction and resultant and amplified environmental degradation. It is a vicious cycle, fueled by greed and the exploitation of agrarian ideals.

### Impacts to Human Health

The neoliberal diet, or the “western diet” as Michael Pollan refers to it, is comprised of simple carbohydrates (sugars), high-fat vegetable oils, high-fat dairy products, factory-farmed meats, and processed and ultra-processed foods, and is a significant contributor to a wide range of negative impacts to human health including obesity and chronic diseases, or “western diseases,” such as Type 2 diabetes, Crohn’s disease, hypertension, coronary artery disease, stroke, kidney and gallbladder disorders, and various cancers (102). This diet is supported by heavily federally subsidized commodity crops, factory farmed animals, and agro- and other by-products.

Simple carbohydrates, typified in the form of high-fructose corn syrup, a highly processed sweetener made from corn (milled to extract corn starch, which is then broken down into glucose and then mostly converted into fructose), are the main ingredients in processed and ultraprocessed foods, as are artificially produced trans fats, saturated fats, and high-fat vegetable oils, typified in margarines and oils for frying fast food, such as soy-based oils. Simple carbohydrates are also added in bulk to animal feeds to significantly increase productivity and lower costs.

To further reduce costs and increase profits, the diets of factory farmed animals are supplemented with agro and other “by-product feedstuffs,” which may include municipal

garbage, restaurant waste, fish waste, poultry processing and egg production waste (including egg shells, unhatched eggs, infertile eggs, and dead and culled chicks), animal blood (for blood meal), chicken heads (for poultry meal), poultry feathers (for feather meal), animal bones (for bone meal), animal carcasses, animal skin, hooves, viscera, and poultry litter and manure (Jayathilakan et al. 287; Galanakis 154; Robinson). Though U.S. regulations changed in 1997 to disallow adding animal by-products of the same species into feeds, such as including beef by-products in cattle feed (the believed cause of bovine spongiform encephalopathy; aka: mad cow disease), it is widely believed that this still occurs, including feeding poultry by-products to chickens and turkeys in their feed (Robinson). High-fat dairy products are produced by factory farmed animals on diets adhering to the neoliberal principle of increased productivity and reduced costs. Factory farmed dairy animals are fed heavily federally subsidized grains and by-product feedstuffs creating artificially low prices for the subpar dairy products. For example, in a 2011 North Carolina State University study on the nutritional value of conventional (factory farmed) versus free-range eggs, found that except for cholesterol, all the nutrient contents examined (n-3 fatty acids, saturated fat, monounsaturated fat, polyunsaturated fat,  $\beta$ -carotene, vitamin A, and vitamin E) were positively affected by free-range farm environments, with both total fat and essential fatty acids markedly increased in the free-range eggs (Anderson 1600; Brower et al). Factory farmed livestock raised on federally subsidized grains and processed commodity crops result in inferior factory farmed meats, which have lower nutritional value (more saturated fat and calories) and less vitamins and healthy fats (omega-3 fatty acids) than livestock raised on natural diet, such as grasses. In a 2019 report, using 2017 Census of Agriculture and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) concentrated animal feeding

operations (factory farm) definitions, the Sentience Institute estimates 99% of farmed animals in the U.S. exist in factory farms: over 70% of cattle; over 98% of hogs/pigs; nearly 100% of turkeys; over 98% of egg chickens (chickens raised for their eggs); nearly 100% of boiler chickens (chickens raised for their meat); and, nearly 100% of U.S. fish farms (“U.S. Factory Farming Estimates”).

Processed foods, according to the NOVA Food Coding and Classification System, are “foods manufactured with the addition of salt or sugar or other substances of culinary use to unprocessed or minimally processed foods, such as canned food and simple breads and cheese” (qtd. in Martínez Steele et al. 1). NOVA defines ultraprocessed foods as

[Industrial] formulations of several ingredients which, besides salt, sugar, oils and fats, include food substances not used in culinary preparations, in particular, flavors, colors, sweeteners, emulsifiers and other additives used to imitate sensorial qualities of unprocessed or minimally processed foods and their culinary preparations or to disguise undesirable qualities of the final product (qtd. in Martínez Steele et al. 1).

Epidemiologists and public health researchers find that consumption of ultraprocessed food alone accounts for nearly 58% of the U.S.’s food energy intake, with ultraprocessed foods contributing nearly 90% of food energy intake from added sugars from such sources as subsidized corn crops for the production of high-fructose corn syrup (Martínez Steele et al. 1). To put this in context, added sugars found in ultraprocessed foods, comprising over 21% of the calories found in these products, is eight times higher than in processed foods (over 2%) and five times higher than in unprocessed or minimally processed foods combined (nearly 4%) (Martínez Steele et al. 5). Processed and ultraprocessed foods, or what sociologist Anthony Winson calls “pseudo foods,” comprise approximately 70% of the neoliberal diet (175).

Specific to federally subsidized commodities, researchers with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in a 2016 study, using 2001-06 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data, found over 56% of calories consumed in the neoliberal diet are derived from the major subsidized food commodities, identified in the study as corn, soybeans, wheat, rice, sorghum, dairy and livestock (Siegel et al. 1127).

Results suggest that adults with the highest subsidy scores, compared with those with the lowest, had a 37[%] higher risk of being obese; a 41[%] higher risk of having abdominal adiposity (belly fat); a 34[%] higher risk of having an elevated C-reactive protein level; a 14[%] higher risk of having dyslipidemia (abnormal cholesterol levels); and a 21[%] higher risk of having dysglycemia (abnormal blood glucose levels) (“Dietary Studies”).

The study’s results clearly suggest that individuals whose diets consist of a higher quantity of subsidized foods have a much higher likelihood of being obese and are more vulnerable to chronic diseases (“Dietary Studies”). In addition, the neoliberal diet is also closely linked with the conveyance of antibiotic resistant bacteria to humans and poses risks relating to outbreaks of emerging zoonotic diseases.

Antibiotic Resistance Inarguably, antibiotic resistance is a growing global public health crisis. According to leading researchers on soil microbes, along with “climate change, water stress, and environmental degradation, widespread antibiotic resistance should be regarded as one of the global challenges that humans face in this century” (Tiedje et al. 274). Antibiotic resistance occurs when germs (bacteria, fungi) change and cause the antibiotics designed to defeat them to fail (CDC). More than 2.8 million Americans contract antibiotic resistant infections each year with more 35,000 annual associated deaths (CDC). A significant contributing factor to antibiotic resistance in humans is the widespread, near indiscriminate, use of agricultural antibiotics, which increases the risk of transferring antibiotic resistant bacteria

into human pathogens—conveyed to humans when agricultural antibiotics infiltrate land, water, and air environments (Chang et al. 240). This is in addition to “direct infection with resistant bacteria from an animal source” and “breaches in the species barrier followed by sustained transmission in humans of resistant strains arising in livestock” (Chang et al. 240). Risks to human health occurs when antibiotic residues in the environment are ingested, “altering the human microbiome and promoting emergence and selection for bacteria resistance inhabiting the human body” (Ben et al. 483). Currently, there are more than “250 types of semisynthetic or modified natural product-based [antibiotics] produced,” categorized according to their functional chemical structures—aminoglycoside,  $\beta$ -lactams, chloramphenicols, lincosamides, macrolides, polypeptides, quinolones, sulfonamides, tetracyclines—of which about 120 are used for human health care and livestock husbandry purposes (Ben et al. 485).

Antibiotic resistant genes are amplified and spread directly from animals and through food, water, and air (Tiedje et al. 274). Distribution and propagation of antibiotic resistant genes through food occurs through contaminated agricultural products, such as grains and vegetables exposed to livestock manure or meats tainted with fecal waste during the slaughtering process (Tiedje et al. 278). Livestock manure is used extensively in industrial farming as a nutrient source for both soils and crops—manure *enriched* with antibiotic resistant bacteria due to broad agricultural antibiotic (over)use (Tiedje et al. 277). “Irrigation with treated wastewater and fertilization with livestock manure are high potential pathways for the introduction of antibiotics in the agroecosystem” (Ben et al. 483-84). Factory farms produce millions of tons of toxic waste (excessive concentrations of excrement) annually—waste that is not required to be treated yet

contain contaminants including antibiotics, heavy metals, and pathogenic bacteria (Food & Water Watch 21).

The major environmental sources of antibiotic resistant bacteria in water, especially those harmful to humans, are the result of wide antibiotic use in animal agriculture for prophylactic, therapeutic, and growth promotion purposes, as well as in some pesticides used on crops (Tiedje et al. 275-76). The transfer of antibiotic resistant genes from agriculture into human pathogens through water occurs when humans ingest antibiotic resistant genes residing in the sediments of drinking and other water sources. Soil receives antibiotic resistant bacteria and genes “from both human and animal wastes, which can be returned to humans through vegetable and animal products, through surface, ground, and reclaimed water and via aerosols” (Tiedje et al. 274). “Airborne particulate matter promotes the transmission of microbial biota harboring [antimicrobial resistant] genes downwind of cattle feedlots” (Tiedje et al. 278). Particulates can also be spread on the persons of farmers and farm laborers. Lastly, due to extreme overuse of antibiotics as regular practice in treating food-producing animals for the purposes of prophylactic, therapeutic, and growth promotion, human exposure to antibiotic residues can also occur directly through food consumption (Ben et al. 486).

As the number of factory farms dramatically increases across the globe, so too are the number of antibiotic resistant genes. Relatedly, new infectious diseases are emerging at an unprecedented rate (years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic) (K. Jones et al. 990). Though epidemics thrive in urban spaces, agrarian(rural) peoples are the most vulnerable to increased infectious diseases which almost always originate in agrarian spaces (Rohr et al. 446). Rampant emergent infectious diseases are the inevitable, yet preventable, consequence of the expansion

and intensification of factory farming and the pervasive and extensive use of agricultural antibiotics to support the neoliberal diet.

Factory Farming and Pandemics Not only are factory farms significant conductors to antibiotic resistance, they “[present] an entirely separate risk to pandemics by increasing the likelihood of emerging zoonotic diseases”<sup>178</sup> (Weathers). Researchers identify the precipitous growth of factory farms across the globe as catalysts for the emergence of emerging infectious diseases in both industrialized and newly industrialized nations (Hollenbeck 44). Factory farms are breeding grounds for infectious diseases, and provide a fertile environment for the evolution of new disease strains, which can spread across human and animal populations through contaminated food, airways, waterways, and people—initially through farmers, farm laborers, and others involved in food production, then throughout communities, then states, then nations.

Factory farms, with their huge populations of livestock animals in dangerously close quarters, enable the rapid proliferation pathogenic agents into human populations, as evidenced by the Influenza pandemic (H1N1) of 2009 (Hollenbeck 44). In untreated agricultural waste

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<sup>178</sup> Zoonotic diseases are any diseases that are spread from animals to humans, such as (listed in order of priority by the 2017 “One Health Zoonotic Disease Prioritization Workshop Report, United States”) Zoonotic influenza (zoonotic influenza A viruses), Salmonellosis (Salmonella species), West Nile virus (Flaviviridae, Flavivirus), plague (Yersinia pestis), emerging coronaviruses (such as SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV), rabies (Rhabdoviridae, Lyssavirus), Brucellosis (Brucella species), and Lyme disease (Borrelia burgdorferi) (3).

alone (manure),<sup>179</sup> there can be more than 150 known enteric pathogens present, with one new enteric pathogen being discovered nearly every year in recent years (Hollenbeck 44). Of the 150 pathogens found in manure, six are “responsible for 90[%] of human food- and water-borne diseases: *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, *E. coli* 0157:H7, *Cryptosporidium* and *Giardia*” (Food & Water Watch 21). In addition to swine flu, recent examples of emerging infectious diseases spread from animals include mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy), bird flu (avian influenza), and most recently, COVID-19 (2019-nCoV acute respiratory disease). According to the U.S.’s first report on zoonotic diseases (December 2017), comprised by the CDC, the USDA, and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI), in humans, about 60% of infectious diseases and approximately 70% of emerging infections are zoonotic (“One Health” 25).

In addition to health risks imposed by factory farms through contamination, are risks that are increasingly linked to deforestation and habitat conversion (to create new pasturelands), through which humans come in closer contact with wild animals which may transmit novel diseases (viruses and other pathogens) capable of being transferred between species (Weathers). Deforestation and habitat conversion support the neoliberal diet through the vast clearing of wooded spaces, such as rainforests—the last of the planet’s agricultural frontiers—to support

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<sup>179</sup> Manure produced on any scale, from small family farmers to massive factory farm operations, is not required to be treated allowing toxins and contaminants to freely pollute ecosystems and create significant environmental and human health hazards through tainted air, soil, and water.

massive cattle, chicken, and hog operations. According to the World Bank, using the most recent available data (2016), nearly 38% of the world's landmass is dedicated to agricultural operations of some scale<sup>180</sup> ("Agricultural Land"). Of this, about 60% is dedicated to beef production—a highly inefficient use of this land, as it produces under 5% of the world's protein and under 2% of the world's calories (Boucher et al. 1). According to the USDA, the U.S. has the largest global fed-cattle industry and is the world's largest beef producer for domestic and export use; vast sections of the Amazon rainforest continue to be cleared for U.S. cattle operations and imports ("Cattle & Beef"). Due to the "cycle of pasture degradation and low profitability... cattle ranching has historically been associated with deforestation" with pasturelands for beef production making up 60% of deforested land in the Legal Amazon region alone (Zu Ermgassen et al. 3). The USDA describes the U.S. as "a net beef importer," which means it buys low-value (low-quality) beef from other countries for mass processing (towards mass overconsumption) ("Cattle & Beef").

### Negative Impacts to the Environment

Overproduction through monocropping and factory farming is a destructive consequence of all scales of industrial agriculture. Supported through heavy federal subsidies, monocrops, with their high production yields, produced at artificially low rates, facilitate great boons for fast food and food processing giants, which, in turn, undergird the neoliberal diet. In addition to the

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<sup>180</sup> According to the same World Bank data, over 44% of the U.S.'s landmass is agricultural land ("Agricultural Land").

negative impacts to human health discussed above, monocropping and factory farming have tremendous negative impacts on the environment. For example, agricultural overproduction depletes and damages the soil, while increasing chemical pollution from fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides, which, in turn, further damages the soil's innate fertility and causes contamination, which can be extended to surrounding ecosystems through drift and runoff.<sup>181</sup>

The neoliberal diet has also greatly increased the chemical burden on the environment. Woefully inefficient federal regulation, propped up by neoliberal policy, supports agricultural polluters in the name of unfettered profit seeking. Because they are not held accountable, producers of all scales are unhindered in their highly destructive pollutive operations, with the greatest offenders being large-scale commodity crop producers (monocroppers) and factory farm operations.

According to environmental law scholars Linda Breggin and D. Bruce Myers Jr., there are several possible reasons why agricultural polluters have not been held accountable (by law,

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<sup>181</sup> This is in addition to significantly contributing to global emissions of the greenhouse gases (GHGs) driving climate change (Greenhouse Gas Protocol). As discussed in Chapter 1, the agricultural sector is responsible for over 50% of GHG emissions through intensive use of toxic agrochemicals (pesticides, fertilizers (nitrates, phosphates), and other toxic agrochemicals) and factoring in the sector's wide use of fossil fuels (directly for soil management/tillage and transportation, and indirectly for agromanufacturing and other activities) in order to achieve maximum crop yields (Blau 70). In descending order of magnitude, the major greenhouse gases related to agricultural activities are methane, nitrous oxide, and carbon dioxide. Ruminant livestock enteric fermentation (the means through which microorganisms break down carbohydrates for absorption as part of the digestion process) and manure management/release (storage, handling/processing, and disposal) also contribute to (methane) emissions. (See Chapters 1 and 5 for a more thorough discussion on GHG emissions.)

policy, and/or public pressure) for their destructive operations (506). For example, due to persistent agrarian myth rhetoric, the public, and many uninformed policymakers, do not readily associate commodity crop production with pollution and resultant environmental degradation (Breggin and Meyers 506). Rather, they perceive good'ol American farmers to be small family farmers: a farmer is a farmer is a farmer.<sup>182</sup> Further, to the extent the pollution crisis is recognized and associated with large-scale commodity crop producers, “policymakers may be hesitant to impose regulatory requirements that could be perceived as limiting agricultural efficiency or productivity” (Breggin and Meyers 506). Additionally, because pollution created by large-scale commodity crop operations and the resultant damage to the environment tends to be accumulative and very difficult to attribute to a single originating source, equitably and credibly assigning responsibility is highly problematic, from both political and accuracy standpoints (Breggin and Meyers 506). Such is the case with the Gulf of Mexico dead (hypoxic) zone,<sup>183</sup> the

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<sup>182</sup> For more on this thinking; that is, farming and ranching as signaling small family farming, see Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady’s 2003 W.K. Kellogg Foundation Institute report on the collapse of rural life in America, “The Agrarian Myth Revisited: Findings from Cognitive Elicitations,” wherein they find the American public’s dominate way of thinking about those living and working in agrarian(rural) spaces assumes them to be yeoman-like “hard-working, virtuous, simple ” people of the land” (3). Aubrun and Grady associate these assumptions about agrarian(rural) peoples with their Rural Utopia model, which is essentially Hofstadter’s version of the agrarian myth, though Aubrun and Grady also clarify “The Rural utopia model is more general than the Agrarian Myth. It includes, for example, small ranchers or dairy farmers, who fit the general profile of the Myth, but not the specific (and for Hofstadter, defining) characteristic of cultivating the land” (7). Aubrun and Grady’s study is discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>183</sup> According to U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) “66[%] of nitrogen originates from cultivated crops, mostly corn and soybean, with animal grazing and manure contributing about 5%. Atmospheric contributions also are important, accounting for 16% of nitrogen (Alexander et al).

second-largest in the world, caused by eutrophication (harmful algal blooms) directly related to amplified levels of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution entering the Mississippi River on its journey to the northern gulf, from the “combined nutrient runoff from thousands of fields—as well as from animal production facilities, municipalities, golf courses, and lawns” (Breggin and Meyers 496, 499, 506). Additionally, the scientific and economic literature has yet to fully quantify these agroenvironmental problems—“quantification... critical to effectively communicating the harms to policymakers and to the public” (Breggin and Meyers 506).

As emphasized throughout this project, American farmers, especially large-scale commodity crop operations, privileged under U.S. agroenvironmental policy, effectively externalize the cost of pollution and damage to the environment. Preferential treatment includes highly advantageous federal subsidies and broad exemption from federal environmental laws (Breggin and Meyers 506). As Breggin and Meyers explain,

Virtually all major federal environmental statutes and their implementing regulations grant favorable treatment to the agriculture sector. As the sector has transformed over the years from small family farms to large-scale operations that generate significant amounts of pollution, environmental laws have not been updated to keep pace. Agriculture is now the only major industrial sector that is routinely exempted from baseline environmental safeguards (507).

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“Animal manure on pasture and rangelands and crop cultivation are the largest contributors of phosphorus, accounting for 37 and 43[%], respectively. Findings suggest that phosphorus associated with the wastes of unconfined animals is a much larger source of phosphorus in the Mississippi River Basin than previously recognized. Current animal manure management emphasizes controlling nutrients primarily from confined animal facilities. In total, agricultural sources contribute more than 70[%] of the nitrogen and phosphorus delivered to the Gulf, versus only 9 to 12[%] from urban sources. Such findings show the dominance of agricultural nonpoint sources outside urban areas in the Mississippi River Basin” (Alexander et al).

Resultantly, agropollution is largely unregulated and unreported.

An example of a blanket exemption from agroenvironmental policy is the Toxics Release Inventory (TRI) program under the EPA, which tracks and reports on “industrial management of toxic chemicals that may pose a threat to human health and the environment” (EPA, “TRI Data and Tools”). Unlike mining, utility, manufacturing (including petroleum and coal products, chemical products and preparation), and hazardous waste (waste collection, treatment and disposal) sectors, agriculture is not a covered industry sector under TRI, despite it being a sector that widely uses pesticides, nitrates, phosphates, and other toxic agrochemicals. “Large-scale commodity crop operations are not required to report releases of toxic chemicals” and “the application of pesticides is exempt from TRI reporting requirements,” facilitating complete exemption for American farmers, thus ensuring the public does not have access to information about the extent of their chemical use and abuse (Breggin and Meyers 513-14).

### Inequitable Access to Healthy Foods

Neoliberal realities in the U.S. have created conditions where there is inequitable access to healthy food. In his analysis of American household food consumption by income levels<sup>184</sup> to discern the consequences of inequitable access to healthy foods, Gerardo Otero finds “food systems and social inequality constitute structural realities, placing most solutions well beyond individual choice” (23, 82). Under neoliberal responsabilization, inequitable access to quality

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<sup>184</sup> Per Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey data for the years 1972–1973, 1984, 1994, 2004, and 2014.

foods, along with declining food quality and security and their attendant health risks, is the problem of the individual not the state—though Otero clearly classifies the precariousness of the situation as far beyond individual control/choice. This highly raced, classed, and gendered precariousness directly negatively impacts human health.

Otero’s thinking aligns with that of agriculture and food law scholar Andrea Freeman on “food oppression”; that is, the “structural perpetuation” of race- and class-based health crises, as a “form of structural subordination that builds on and deepens preexisting disparities along race and class lines” (2245).

Conventional wisdom holds that food consumption is a matter of private choice and free will, but blaming individuals for their own health problems obscures the structural nature of food oppression... [which is] the institutionalization of poor health and lower life expectancy for groups already facing multiple sites of oppression (Freeman 2245-46).

That is, institutionalization facilitated by neoliberal agripolicy supporting the fast food industry’s strategy to keep the cost of producing fast food artificially low through corporate-friendly federal agricultural subsidies for livestock feed, grains, dairy, sugars, and fats (Freeman 2242).

“Although at first glance fast food’s corporate strategy appears to embrace free-market capitalism, the industry actually relies heavily on state support to shore up its profitability” (Freeman 2242).

As discussed above, the U.S. government directly and indirectly subsidizes specific areas of agricultural production which greatly benefits fast food and food processing operations, hiding the true cost of the neoliberal diet. Consumers pay a small price for low cost/low quality foods; however, the “*true* costs are much greater than the price” (Bittman; emphasis in the original). In effort to explain this, *New York Times* food journalist Mark Bittman explores the real cost of a fast food cheeseburger as symbolic of “a food system gone awry” and finds that externalities,

along the same lines as those discussed above (chronic disease, obesity, antibiotic resistance, carbon generation, and pollution), significantly increase the true cost of the neoliberal diet, with the cheeseburger symbolizing negative “externalities in spades” (Bittman).

Bittman estimates (in 2014 dollars) that the added cost of fast food cheeseburgers is conservatively about \$4 billion per year or about \$.68 per burger but may actually be \$2.09 per burger or higher, with “combined costs arising directly from diseases related to obesity [potentially increasing] by an additional \$52 to \$71 billion each year” between 2010 and 2030 due to added health costs, increasing the real cost of a cheeseburger up to 18-fold (Bittman).

Understandably, many externalities are near impossible to meaningfully calculate, such as

The cost of food stamps and other public welfare programs made necessary in part by the ultralow wages paid at most fast-food operations; the beef industry’s role in increasing antibiotic resistance, which costs, according to the [CDC], something like \$55 billion a year; some measure of *E. coli* illnesses; and land erosion, pesticide residues, direct corn subsidies, injury rates at slaughterhouses, and so on (Bittman).

Other governmental interventions which artificially lower the price of producing processed and fast foods include “the use of hormones and antibiotics to promote rapid animal growth; market deficiency loans; cheap immigrant labor; and special tax breaks” (Freeman 2242). Though mentioned in passing, Bittman does not fully factor in the considerable added cost of the federal subsidization of the neoliberal diet as an externality. Nor does he mention the monumental costs associated with federally funded research supporting the neoliberal diet such as federally funded research into increasing commodity crop yields and developing agricultural biotechnologies. He also neglects lucrative legislated production allowances to producers and trade restrictions on foreign agricultural products as additional externalities. He does, however, rightfully conclude,

Industrial food has manipulated cheap prices for excess profit at excess cost to everyone; low prices do not indicate “savings” or true inexpensiveness but deception. And all the products of industrial food consumption have externalities

that would be lessened by a system that makes as its primary goal the links among nutrition, fairness and sustainability (Bittman).

Ultimately, most Americans could not afford the neoliberal diet if the price of its foods reflected the true costs of the sundry of health, environmental, and tax supported federal support externalities connected with them (Freeman 2242).

### Agrobiotechnology

The primary technological construct of the agricultural sector of the past three decades, and central to neoliberal restructuring of agriculture, is the rapid advancement of agricultural biotechnology or agrobiotechnology (aka: the biotechnology revolution), through which organisms are manipulated for a particular purpose—with that purpose primarily being maximized profits. Agrobiotechnology largely “refers to recombinant DNA techniques that use organisms, their parts, or their processes to modify or create living organisms with particular traits. This technology includes genetic engineering and tissue culture techniques” (Fitting 143). The products of these techniques include GMOs or transgenic organisms, such as crop plants, with genetic material from other plants and even other species inserted into their genomes (Fitting 143). Simply stated, GMOs are organisms (plants, animals, or microorganisms) whose genetic material (DNA) has been altered through genetic engineering to carry novel traits optimal for commercial agriculture production. Newer methods of genetic engineering include New Breeding Technologies (discussed below). Agrobiotechnology bioengineers the genetic material of plants, animals, and microorganisms mainly to significantly improve the bottom line of producers through increasing crop yields, decreased loss due to disease and insects, and other measures. It radically capitalizes agriculture and is closely allied with the consolidation of agrifood corporate power on the oligopolistic transnational scale (Otero 171). Neoliberal

agrobiotechnologies, with GMOs at the forefront, fortify the neoliberal diet and are the central component of the neoliberal global food system.

At the center of the energy-dense, ultraprocessed, nutritionally compromised neoliberal diet are transgenic (genetically engineered/modified) crops, such as corn and soybeans, which happen to be two of the most highly federally subsidized crops in the U.S. (Otero 81).

Agrotechnology, agripolicy, and agrifood processing are intricately entwined with “the industrial production” of neoliberal diet food *choices* (Otero 16). A majority of subsidized crops are produced for livestock, such as corn-fed beef, or processed food, such as high-fructose corn syrup, rather than direct human consumption, though they ultimately comprise a majority of human caloric intake as ultraprocessed foods (Otero 16).

As Otero explains, the U.S. is the “undisputed leader in development and adoption of biotechnology,” with 1.8 billion acres adopted, some 39% of the global total (60). According to sociologist Bill Winders, using 2014 data, up to 94% of U.S. agricultural lands is dedicated to genetically modified (GM) crops (113). The U.S.’s primary GM crops include corn, cotton, soybean, canola, alfalfa, papaya, sugarbeet, and squash; however, the pipeline is increasingly expanding to include other grains, fruits, and vegetables, including wheat, rice, strawberries, lettuce (Raman 196). Corn, cotton, soybean far exceed per capita modification in the U.S. Using 2019 data, the USDA estimates 92% of all corn, 98% of all cotton, and 94% of all soybeans planted in the U.S. are GM crops (“Adoption”).

Advantages of GMOs include enhanced production and quality through production of high yields and increased abiotic stress resistance. Supporters of agrobiotechnologies believe improved efficacy of crops is not only highly profitable but may help increase access to food and

alleviate poverty as the global population increases to an estimated 9.7 billion by 2050 (a 50% increase from 2013),<sup>185</sup> greatly increasing demands of the food system under varying environmental conditions, including significant decreases in arable lands (Raman 196). Bringing additional acreage under cultivation, however, requires bigger yields, necessitating larger agriculture inputs, such as water, fertilizer, water, herbicides, and pesticides, as well as genetic improvements/interventions (Zhang et al. 118).

Complicating factors associated with these amplified demands include:

Increased demand for biofuel and feedstock production; accelerated urbanization; land desertification, salinization, and degradation; altered land use from staple foods to pasture, driven by socioeconomic considerations; climate change; [and,] water resource limitation (Zhang et al. 118; bullets removed).

While supporters of GMOs tout them as saviors of the human race, there are parallel risks to their broad use.

Though advocates of agrotechnology point to more than 3,000 international studies which indicate foods produced from GM crops are safe and argue “there is no legitimate scientific controversy over the safety of GMOs,” the credibility of many of these findings can be called into question due to improper influence (Norero; Novella; Diels et al. 197). In consideration of “the high financial stakes involved, concerns are raised over the influence that conflicts of interest may place upon articles published in peer-reviewed journals that report on health risks or nutritional value of genetically modified food products” (Diels et al. 197). For example, a 2010

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<sup>185</sup> Explosive population growth is a major contributor to global malnutrition.

study examining international safety findings on GM crops and food products found nearly half of the results (47%) were associated with researchers with clear financial and or professional conflicts of interest (COI) and in 44% of the articles, “at least one of the study authors was connected with industry” (Diels et al. 200). The study concluded “a combined analysis of COIs through professional affiliations or direct research funding are likely to influence the final outcome of such [GM] studies in the commercial interest of the involved industry” (Diels et al. 202). In a similarly designed 2015 study, though specific to the efficacy and durability of GM Bt crops,<sup>186</sup> researchers found “ties between researchers and the GM crop industry were common,” with 40% of the researchers considered to display COIs; about 20% of the articles had at least one author from a GM crop company (Guillemaud et al. 1). The study also found “compared to the absence of COI, the presence of a COI was associated with a 50% higher frequency of outcomes favorable to the interests of the GM crop company” (Guillemaud et al. 1, 8).

Further muddling confidence in agrobiotechnology research, 2016 *New York Times* reporting suggests “Scientists deliver outcomes favorable to companies, while university research departments court corporate support. Universities and regulators sacrifice full autonomy by signing confidentiality agreements. And academics sometimes double as paid consultants” (Hakim, “Scientists”). According to Hakim’s reporting, which includes naming U.S. researchers, the transnational agrochemical and agrobiotechnology corporation Syngenta “pays academics...

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<sup>186</sup> GM Bt crops are modified to express pesticidal properties by producing the same crystal protein (toxin) as *Bacillus thuringiensis*.

whose work has helped validate the safety of its products” with funding for research and handsome consulting fees (“Scientists”). According to Hakim’s 2017 reporting on unsealed federal court documents on GM safety and research practices, specifically relating to litigation concerning the link between non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and exposure to glyphosate, Monsanto, another transnational agrochemical and agrobiotechnology giant,<sup>187</sup> has “ghostwritten research that was later attributed to academics” (“Monsanto”). This reporting also identifies dubious interactions between the U.S. government and agrochemical and agrobiotechnology corporations, including showing that a senior EPA official “had worked to quash a review of Roundup’s main ingredient, glyphosate,” which was supposed to have been conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (Hakim, “Scientists”).

Other research has found that GMOs in the human food supply may produce toxic compounds putting human health at risk. Specifically, GMOs are associated with three major human health risks: toxicity, allergenicity, and genetic hazards (antibiotic resistance) (Zhang et al. 121). The potential sources of these risks arise through “the inserted gene and their expressed proteins per se, secondary or pleiotropic effects of the products of gene expression, and the possible disruption of natural genes in the manipulated organism” (Zhang et al. 121). In addition

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<sup>187</sup> In 2018, the global conglomerate Bayer acquired Monsanto (for \$63 billion) as part of its crop science division. On June 24, 2020, in one of the nation’s largest civil settlements Bayer “[agreed] to pay more than \$10 billion to settle tens of thousands of claims [against Monsanto concerning the links between Roundup and cases of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma] while continuing to sell the product without adding warning labels about its safety” (Cohen).

to creating human allergens, misfolded proteins in plants, resulting from the introduction of foreign genes, may cause prion diseases or cancers (Mathur 66). An example of a GMO “food hazard caused directly by the expression of the inserted gene” is StarLink corn,<sup>188</sup> wherein the “modified plant was engineered with genetic information from *Bacillus thuringiensis* in order to endow the plant with resistance to certain insects”; however, the inserted gene (Cry9c), meant to express pesticidal properties created strong allergenicity in humans (Zhang et al. 121). Not intended for human consumption due to concerns over digestibility and allergenicity, StarLink corn was approved only for animal feed or industrial use; however, in 2000, due to cross-pollination, non-GM corn was contaminated, and the GMO corn entered the food supply (Xu; Segarra and Rawson 4). Resultantly, food processing companies and grocery store chains “recalled all products suspected of containing Starlink corn at any level of presence, including McDonald’s French fries and Busch beer,” with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ultimately listing 300 different products on its mandatory recall list (Mercier and Halbrook 137).

Roundup Ready GM crops resistant to the glyphosate<sup>189</sup> herbicide Roundup, manufactured by Monsanto, are particularly problematic. Of all the herbicides used globally for both personal and commercial/industrial uses, glyphosate has the greatest production volumes

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<sup>188</sup> StarLink corn was the first test case of food system contamination by a GMO.

<sup>189</sup> “Glyphosate is a broad-spectrum, post-emergent, non-selective, systemic herbicide, which effectively kills or suppresses all plant types, including grasses, perennials, vines, shrubs, and trees. When applied at lower rates, glyphosate is a plant-growth regulator and desiccant. It has agricultural and non-agricultural uses throughout the world” (IARC 323).

(IARC 33). While Roundup Ready GM crops themselves are cause for concern, risks to human health are also related to the toxicity of Roundup (Mathur et al. 66).

The herbicide Roundup uses glyphosate as the active ingredient, which is safe for humans only in small concentrations. However, use of Roundup ready crops may increase glyphosate ingestion beyond safety limits for human consumption (Mathur et al. 66).

Glyphosate is extensively used on GM food crops designed to tolerate the specialized herbicide, including corn and soybeans, which account for more than 90% of the corn and soybeans planted in the U.S. (Landrigan and Belpoggi 51). Where the EPA classifies glyphosate as “practically non-toxic and not an irritant” (Toxicity Category IV under the acute toxicity classification system), which poses “no risks of concern to human health from current uses,” the World Health Organization’s (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) finds that glyphosate is “probably carcinogenic to humans” (Group 2A on WHO’s carcinogenicity ranking system) and is specifically linked to Leukemia and/or lymphoma cancers (EPA “Glyphosate”; IARC 130). Where some researchers find the link between glyphosate and risks to human health inconclusive or nonexistent,<sup>190</sup> others find very significant risks.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> See Meltem Asicioglu et al’s “Measurement of Genetically Modified (GM) Genes in Different Corn Products” (2017) in *Journal of Chemical Metrology*, Steven Novella’s “No Health Risks from GMOs” (2014) in *Skeptical Inquirer*, and Hembree Brandon’s “Yet Another Scientific Study to be Ignored: GMOs are Safe” (2016) in *Delta Farm Press*.

<sup>191</sup> See Gilles-Éric Séralini et al’s “Long Term Toxicity of a Roundup Herbicide and a Roundup-tolerant Genetically Modified Maize” (2012 retracted; 2013 republished) in *Food and Chemical Toxicology*, Aristidis M. Tsatsakis et al’s “Impact on Environment, Ecosystem, Diversity and Health from Culturing and Using GMOs as Feed and Food” (2017) in *Food and Chemical Toxicology*, Joël Spiroux de Vendômois et al’s “Debate on GMOs Health Risks after Statistical Findings in Regulatory Tests” (2010) in *International Journal of Biological Sciences*.

Recent advances in genetic engineering, known as New Breeding Technologies (NBTs), effectively circumvent GMO regulation. NBTs include Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR), Zinc-Finger Nucleases (ZFNs), and Transcription Activator-Like Effector Nucleases (TALENs) gene editing tools for the purpose of cisgenic breeding (specialized genetically engineered breeding); that is, gene editing which allows for the creation of new plant and animal varieties without requiring the insertion of foreign genes. For example, unlike other DNA bioengineering methods, CRISPR, the newest NBT on the scene, “does not insert foreign genes into plants, but uses the protein CAS9 enzyme to add or remove genes from DNA sequences and modify gene function in a more targeted manner” (Fitting 143). ZFNs and TALENs, on the other hand, “enable a broad range of genetic modifications by inducing DNA double-strand breaks that stimulate error-prone non-homologous end joining or homology-directed repair at specific genomic locations” (Gaj et al. 397).

The U.S. government does not regulate gene editing tools as they do not insert foreign genes into plants and animals (Fitting 143). Critics of agrobiotechnology consider NBTs to be “hidden GMOs and examples of ‘extreme engineering’” and push for regulation as GMOs (Nordberg et al. 57). Neoliberal deregulation, however, is prevailing. For example, Trump’s E.O. 13874, “Modernizing the Regulatory Framework for Agricultural Biotechnology Products,” further eases already miniscule regulation on and provides protections for GM and NBT agrobiotechnology. Specifically, the order requires federal agencies to streamline regulation and approval including further simplifying the review process and easing safety testing, giving corporations an even wider berth for developing and marketing GM and NBT products, further facilitating the entry of transgenic organisms, plants, and animals into the human food supply.

“In other words, Trump just ordered the federal government to turn America into a massive GMO experiment where anything goes” (M. Adams).

Additional risks associated with NBTs concern the lack of environmental control and irreversibility: once released into the environment they may be prohibitive to control; once percolated within a species, they may be impossible to reverse; and, they are presently unpredictable in terms of long-term efficacy and sustainability (B. Trump 93). As research social scientist Benjamin D. Trump, with the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, explains

Despite the promise of gene editing research, many scholars and policymakers have voiced concern regarding the technology’s risks... [with particular] focus on either the capacity of a careless or nefarious user to use gene editing approaches to create highly virulent diseases or dangerous engineered organisms or the potential for unintended secondary consequences associated with the release of gene-edited organisms into the environment (92).

Concerns of deliberate misuse (biosecurity) and unintended consequences (biosafety) are inextricably linked to these and future agrobiotechnologies. (B. Trump 89).

### Consumed

The independent film *Consumed* (2015), written by Zoe Lister-Jones and Daryl Wein, and directed by Daryl Wein, is a contemporary environmentally themed political thriller concerned with the production and consumption of GMOs and their believed associated risks to human health. The low budget, highly didactic film focuses on Sophie Kessler (Zoe Lister-Jones), a single working mother searching for the source of her young son Garrett’s (Nick Bonn) unexplained illness, presented as flu-like nausea, blistering rashes, and stomach pain, which doctors are unable to diagnose. Sophie becomes convinced her son’s mysterious sickness is

linked to his consumption of GMO-based foods, such as those which she brings home from the greasy spoon diner where she works as a waitress, and living near GM crop fields (which, of course, they do). While in pursuit of answers, Sophie finds herself in the middle of a dangerous conflict between struggling organic family farmers, opportunistic university researchers, and GMO profiteers.

### GMO Profiteers

Set in rural Illinois, *Consumed* opens on Hal Westbrook's (Danny Glover) organic vegetable farm, Prairie Organic Farms. Hal is being harassed by the "GMO-cops" who work for Clonestra, a Monsanto-esque transnational agrochemical and agrobiotechnology megacorporation with nearby GM test-fields. "GMO-cops" is Hal's epithet for Clonestra's very aggressive private security officers. Some of the actors playing the "GMO-cops" are also titled as such in the film credits. Clonestra GM seeds have drifted onto Hal's farm, contaminating his organic crops, yet Hal is being aggressively intimidated for his unlicensed "planting" of Clonestra's GMO seeds. Sophie, in a panic to find healthy food for her son, as well as answers, visits Hal's farm. Despite Hal first believing her to be a Clonestra decoy, he informs Sophie about the ubiquitousness and iniquitousness of commercial/industrialized GM farming and its associated negative impacts on human health and the environment. The strain of it all causes panic attacks in the fearful Sophie and leads to the beleaguered Hal's eventual death by heart attack.

The opening minutes of the film also focus on the globe-trotting do-gooder efforts of Dan Conway (Victor Garber), Clonestra's CEO and benevolent public face of the suspect agrobiotechnology giant. The film initially depicts him savior-like—a "miracle CEO" who will

end famine, and claims he “likes to be on the ground with the people... and puts the people’s interests first [ahead of profits]” (*Consumed*). Another few minutes in to the film, Mr. Conway and his entourage are in Maharashtra, India,<sup>192</sup> meeting with local farmers to promise them (initially) free Clonestera GM seeds and explain their great benefits but are driven off by grassroots “rebels” fighting against the local adoption of GM crops. (They are chanting “GMO virodh”—Marathi for “GMO opposition.”) Throughout the film, Clonestera’s CEO is depicted as foolish and naïve—unaware of, and therefore not responsible for, the vile actions of his corporation.

Clonestera is meant to exemplify the monumental global impact of agrochemical and agrobiotechnology leviathans like Monsanto, Bayer, Dow Chemical, Syngenta, Pioneer/Dupont, or BASF. Specifically, the film forces acknowledging the precariousness experienced by non-industrialized farmers—organic farmers (like Hal) or the Maharashtrian farmers—forced to deal with the corporatization, and many would argue corruption, of the world’s staple food crops, as well as the ruthless persecution and even prosecution of patent violators by Monsanto and others. *Consumed* criticizes the patenting of seeds—the means through which agrobiotechnology corporations safeguard their investments—as well as legal actions taken against farmers with GM contaminated fields, as happens to Prairie Organic Farms in the film; that is,

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<sup>192</sup> Maharashtra, India, is one of the states with high farmer suicide rates.

agroconglomerates suing and bankrupting farmers who use GM seeds without licensing agreements (whether intended or not).

### Opportunistic University Researchers

*Consumed* stridently opposes neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism as evidenced through the film's negative depiction of corporate sponsored university research (university-industry collaborations). Sophie's mother, Kristin Kessler (Beth Grant), is an administrative assistant to the local university's Molecular Biology<sup>193</sup> department head. Kristin connects Sophie with molecular biologists working with transgenic animals in hopes of alleviating her fears concerning GMOs, which she has come to believe are the root cause of her son's worsening illness. The department, which was once publicly funded, is now firmly in the pocket of Clonestra, benefiting from 15 years and multimillion-dollars of support, cash rewards given directly to researchers, and a currently underway major building renovation. Clonestra even has its own office on campus. The plotline focuses on two molecular biologists and their breakthrough research on rapid muscle growth (transgenic) broiler chickens: Dr. Leifman (Anthony Edwards), a corrupt Clonestra-funded head researcher, and Dr. Negani (Kunal Nayyar), Dr. Leifman's earnest and honest research assistant. Dramatic lab scenes suggest the rapid muscle growth experiment is going terribly wrong with the transgenic chickens going mad and turning violent in their cages.

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<sup>193</sup> It is presumed, it is the university's Molecular Biology department, though the film merely refers to it as the "science department."

In later a scene between Clonestra executives and Mr. Hardy (Howie Johnson), the head of a massive chicken conglomerate controlling 5,000 broiler chicken farms in the U.S., Mr. Conway explains how the time it takes to get a broiler chicken to market can be reduced from 16-17 weeks to a mere 5 weeks using Clonestra's transgenic chickens. Upon hearing this, Mr. Hardy marvels, "What is that? Some kind of divine intervention" (*Consumed*). When he asks how this could be, and specifically, about Clonestra's method, Mr. Conway's top associate, the smarmy Mr. Paul (Tim Hopper), sidesteps the question and replies, "All you need to understand are three things: efficiency, better production, and more profit" (*Consumed*).

Sophie also interacts with a disgraced university researcher who had a mental breakdown (conscious awakening) while developing GMOs, Peter Sullivan (Griffin Dunne), now a janitor at the university, who enlightens her on the "complications" (dangers) associated with GMOs, such as new food-related illnesses and new food-related allergies, and maintains GMOs are "in everything" (*Consumed*). He also explains to her that GMO products are not tested on humans—according to him due to the self-regulation of corporations, federal deregulation, and corporate control over university research. Resultantly, corporations "are the authority on the science [on GMOs].... We're the guinea pigs, Sophie, and your son is the independent study" (*Consumed*).

Midway through the film, satisfied with the results, Clonestra terminates the transgenic chicken experiments, reminding the researchers that Clonestra owns the patents.<sup>194</sup> Unbeknownst

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<sup>194</sup> Unlike natural foods, GMO seeds can be patented. Artificially modified (industrial) seed patents largely concern the world's largest cash crops (corn (maize), soybean, cotton, canola,

to Dr. Negani, he too is about to be terminated for not sufficiently towing the Clonestra-line. Ordered to close the experiment, Dr. Negani, discovers the transgenic chickens have all died apparently horrible violent deaths. Determined to learn why, he goes through Dr. Leifman's records and conveniently finds evidence of the experiment's actual failure, other similar failed experiments, dangers associated with the resultant meat products, Dr. Leifman's manipulation and misrepresentation of data, and presumably also the cause of Garrett's illness. Determined to share this information, beginning with Sophie, he copies the incriminating information. Dr. Negani ultimately dies in *Silkwood*-esque car crash<sup>195</sup> on his way to Sophie's home with the proof hidden in his trunk. He is killed when Clonestra's GMO-cops force him off the road into a telephone pole. Upon learning of the accident, Sophie goes to Mrs. Negani (Mouzam Makkar), Dr. Negani's widow. Mrs. Negani tells Sophie how her trusting husband dedicated his life to science to improve GMOs because his father grew Clonestra GM corn in India but committed suicide by drinking pesticides along with other failed local farmers when Clonestra's promises fell short of reality and their farms went bankrupt.<sup>196</sup>

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wheat). GMO patents equate with strict (protected) power and control over the world's food supply.

<sup>195</sup> The film *Silkwood* (1983), based on a true story, depicts the mysterious death of Karen Silkwood (Meryl Streep), a plutonium technician, union activist, and whistleblower who died in a car crash on her way to meet a *New York Times* reporter with proof of negligence (regarding worker safety) at the Kerr-McGee Cimarron Fuel Fabrication Site (outside Crescent, Oklahoma).

<sup>196</sup> This plotline relates to the very real farmer suicides in India of recent decades primarily due to indebtedness or bankruptcy. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India data, more than 300,000 Indian farmers committed suicide between 1995 and 2015, with, according to the United Commission on Sustainable

In a tense subsequent scene, Sophie retrieves the evidence of the university's and Clonetra's wrongdoing from Dr. Negani's vehicle seconds before it was to be destroyed in a junkyard crusher, including pictures of tumor-ridden Séralini-esque transgenic lab animals.<sup>197</sup> She takes the damning data and photos to a press conference announcing the FDA approval of Clonetra's transgenic chickens in order to confront Mr. Conway. After a game of cat-and-mouse with the GMO-cops, Sophie finds Mr. Conway and begs him to look at the evidence, asking why he would put their children in such danger. When Mr. Conway asks Mr. Paul why he has not seen this information, he replies that the research findings are "inconclusive and flawed" and directs the now troubled looking CEO to ignore Sophie's "activist rhetoric," misogynistically reducing her to concerns to those of a "hysterical woman" (*Consumed*). Near the end of the film,

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Development (UNCSD), an Indian farmer committing suicide every 32 minutes between 1997 and 2005" (Chauhan and Mann 281). Many researchers have tied these suicides to the adoption of GM cash crops, such as Bt cotton (*Bacillus thuringiensis*; a GM cotton plant which produces its own insecticide to prevent bollworm damage). According to cultural geographers Suman Chauhan and Kiran Mann, "Bt cotton may be economic in irrigated cotton, whereas costs of Bt seed and insecticide increase the risk of farmer bankruptcy in low-yield rainfed cotton. Inability to use saved seed and inadequate agronomic information trap cotton farmers on biotechnology and insecticide treadmills. Annual suicide rates in rainfed areas are inversely related to farm size and yield, and directly related to increases in Bt cotton adoption (i.e., costs)" (281).

<sup>197</sup> The Séralini controversy concerns the 2012 publication of "Long Term Toxicity of a Roundup Herbicide and a Roundup-Tolerant Genetically Modified Maize" in *Food and Chemical Toxicology*, its 2012 retraction, and 2014 republication by molecular biologist Gilles-Éric Séralini et al. The study "investigated the long-term effects in rats of consumption of two Monsanto products, a genetically modified (GM) maize and its associated pesticide, Roundup, together and separately" (Séralini et al. 357).

Mr. Conway, who happens to have a son on the autism spectrum, meekly resigns because he “[has] questions” about the true safety of GMOs (*Consumed*).

As discussed in Chapter 5, university-industry collaborations work as a neoliberal device of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism in service of legitimizing the neoliberal paradigm. Through the unscrupulous university-Clonetra collaboration, the film portrays the disaffected corporatized and commercialized ethos permeating U.S. higher education by focusing on negative aspects of neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism and its core tenets of capitalization, marketization, and privatization—and aligns them with greed and corruption. The film also overtly portrays neoliberal pathways towards overproduction and overconsumption, the global ubiquification of GMOs, and affirms the primacy of the neoliberal diet.

### *Consumed* as Social Commentary

*Consumed* works implicitly and explicitly as social commentary on the neoliberal economic doctrine: profit over people. Though the film is highhanded, it delivers a powerful message of caution regarding the neoliberal diet. The film offers many links to real-world problematics. There is no question where the film’s creators stand on the debate on GMOs, especially concerning aggressive agrobiotechnologies, oligopolistic transnational agrifood producers, corporate sponsored university research, and GMO food labeling.

The demand for labeling foods with ingredients derived from GMOs is the drum beaten the loudest in the 2015 film. GMO labeling concerns a standardized process for publicly disclosing bioengineered foods directly on packaging. Food studies scholar Nicole Welk-Joerger refers to *Consumed* as a “fictional ‘call to action’ for the federal labeling standard” (34).

Incidentally, GMO labeling will go into effect on January 1, 2022, as initiated in the 2016

National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard Act.<sup>198</sup> Instead of using the well-known, mainstream terms “genetically modified,” “GMO,” or “genetically engineered,” however, the USDA, under the Trump administration, will implement an alternative labeling standard, in which food products derived from GM crops will be labeled with the lesser known terms “bioengineered” or “BE,” which may confuse consumers, with some labels also using qualifying language such as “may be bioengineered,” potentially further confusing consumers (USDA, “BE Disclosure”). The design of the BE labeling has not been confirmed at the time of this writing. The three proposed designs are warm and welcoming-looking, incorporating innocent trustful bright smiling faces into them.<sup>199</sup> (The proposed designs look like cutesy children’s stickers.)

Though *Consumed* works to deliver an important and valid warning, it admittedly plays loose with facts such as Hal’s agonizing over the loss of his farm’s organic certification, which he says he has had for 30 years, yet the USDA’s National Organic Program tasked with regulating organic certification was not put into place until 2000. In another example, the transgenic chickens created through Clonestra supported research are quickly approved by the FDA and put into the human food supply, yet this process can take several years. For example, it took nearly

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<sup>198</sup> The National Bioengineered Food Disclosure Standard (2016) “required the [USDA] to establish a labeling standard for GM food... The law requires labeling only on bioengineered foods intended for human consumption that contain more than five [%] GMO ingredients. Instances where GMOs do not have to be labeled include: foods derived from animals [eggs, meat, milk]; refined ingredients [oils, sugars]; food served in a restaurant; foods manufactured and sold by very small manufacturers (local shops, etc.); [and,] any non-food products” (Illinois Agricultural Association).

<sup>199</sup> See: [ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/ProposedBioengineeredLabels.pdf](https://ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/ProposedBioengineeredLabels.pdf).

20 years for the FDA to approve AquAdvantage salmon, a transgenic fish variety created in 1989, which, much like the rapid muscle growth transgenic chickens in *Consumed*, “express[es] higher levels of a growth hormone than wild salmon” and can “grow to full size in 18 months rather than 3 years” (Ledford). Other approved transgenic food animals that are produced for agricultural applications with GM traits for milk composition, disease resistance, muscle development, growth rate, and meat composition, include cattle, chicken, carp, catfish, goats, pigs, sheep, and trout (Van Eenennaam 28).

*Consumed* focuses on affect, not accuracy. As Welk-Joerger explains, though the film is fictional,

This does not mean its inaccuracies do not make a serious impact. The film confirms popular fears held about corporate science and GMOs today. It unapologetically uses information and imagery that perpetuates fears about proper scientific testing and regulatory acceptance of biotechnology... [and] uses information and imagery that perpetuates fears about proper scientific testing and regulatory acceptance of biotechnology (35).

Welk-Joerger identifies *Consumed* as a “fictional extension” of food documentary tropes found in such films as *Food, Inc.* (2008) and *GMO OMG* (2013), arguing *Consumed* “recapitulates the fears of dangerous food from greedy corporations inherent in these documentaries” but “[gives] them faces, names, and emotional purpose” (35). She also suggests *Consumed* may be “more purposeful than its non-fiction counterparts because it was specifically created to advocate for the food labeling standard. While *Food, Inc.* and *GMO OMG* were made to inform, *Consumed* was made to intervene” (35).

In addition to utilizing food documentary tropes, the paranoia-driven film attempts to scare its audience into action by using classic science fiction and horror film genre tropes. Some of the tropes evidenced in *Consumed* include: alien invasion (with GMOs supplanting natural

organisms and ultimately displacing natural functions; *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)), the *only sane man* (with everyone around Sophie at the end of film seemingly unaffected by the impending GMO doom; *Jaws* (1975)), assimilation (GMOs are fully assimilated into the American diet; everyone is seemingly on board as in the closing scene when everyone around Sophie is happily eating concession stand junk food; *Brave New World* (1980)), genetic experimentation (right on the nose here, there are literally genetic experiments being conducted on animals at the university; *Frankenstein* (1931)), virus/plague/pandemic: GMOs cause Sophie and Garrett to physically and mentally transform as evidenced through Garrett's symptoms and Sophie's panic attacks; those who consume GMOs become subservient to them (willingly ingest them); *28 Days Later* (2002)), the Cassandra curse (from Greek mythology wherein the priestess is cursed with the ability to prophesize truths/warnings but they are not to be believed/heeded; Sophie is not believed by doctors, people at the university, and others; *12 Monkeys* (1995)), and mass surveillance (Clonestra's GMO-cops who surveille anyone of interest, and who cause the death of Dr. Negani; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984)).

### Contextualizing Perverse Nostalgia

Through the precarity depicted in *Consumed*, the film works to contextualize perverse nostalgia. In the film, perverse nostalgia is the vector through which the discourse of neoliberal superiority, in this case, as embodied in the neoliberal diet, is expressed. It signals supremacy and entitlement to consume American-style while eschewing (destroying) perceived wrongness (dirty hippy food) with impunity, while simultaneously assigning blame to this wrongness. The destructive restraints of neoliberal political discourse empower perverse nostalgia and deepen precarity and precariousness, especially concerning food security and human health. In the film,

perverse nostalgia, as subtly depicted in the closing scene of university football fans mindlessly consuming vast amounts of ultraprocessed foods—quintessential American-style nostalgic/concession stand foods that have been absorbed into and reengineered by the GMO-laden neoliberal diet. This subtle form of perverse nostalgia for American-style sentimental eating both accommodates and perpetuates the harmful effects of the neoliberal diet on people and spaces. The precarity and precariousness of the masses are temporarily masked, while Sophie, a singular soul, bears the burden of knowledge: the true terrible cost of neoliberalism to the American project.

### Conclusion

The U.S. thoroughly dominates the neoliberal globalized food regime and its attendant problematic dietary and health patterns, creating a severe dilemma at home: the U.S. has the most profitable and productive multinational agricorporations on the planet yet inflicts the deleterious neoliberal diet upon its precarious citizenry (Otero 80). Simply stated, the neoliberal diet exacerbates and perpetuates risks to human health and environmental devastation through federal deregulation, economic restructuring, global expansion, and the hegemonic domination of neoliberal political ideology—all risks effectively sheltered under the agrarian myth. Agrobiotechnology, with its associated triumphs and controversies, ultimately supports the neoliberal diet and extends the neoliberal agenda. The neoliberal diet is also hypocritically propped up by selective neoliberalism in the form of enormous annual and episodic/situational federal farm subsidies. In addition to creating crises of overproduction and overconsumption and facilitating ongoing devastation to human health and degradation to the environment, federal farm subsidies come at great cost to the America taxpayer.

Ultimately, Americans can pay for the production of commodity crops as many as three times: as consumers of the end product at the grocery store cash register or gas pump; as taxpayers funding federal farm subsidies; and as citizens bearing the environmental and public health costs of harms traceable in part to pollution from commodity crop operations (Breggin and Myers 506).

The exaltation of the market economy and the awarding of massive federal farm subsidies enhances corporate profitability to the detriment of the greater good. The U.S. has long provided handouts to *deserving*, yet demanding, agricultural producers—“happy and honest” American farmers with “a secure propertied stake in society... the best and most reliable sort of citizen[s]”—despite the hypocrisy, despite the duplicativeness, despite the lack of economic and ethical justification (Hofstadter 23). The neoliberal diet’s cheap eats have deleterious costs—diffused across the globe.

*Consumed* closes on Sophie and her attempt to regain normalcy, despite her panic attacks and presumed psychosomatic symptoms mirroring those of her son’s. At a university football game, she once again is overcome with anxiety when she looks around to the sound of her increasingly loud heartbeat and Jim Reeve’s “Welcome to My World,” taking in the crowd embracing the neoliberal diet: ultraprocessed foods manufactured with GMOs—hotdogs, popcorn, soft drinks: quintessential nostalgic American foods. The final scene is the early stage of Sophie’s (next) panic attack. As “Welcome to My World” continues, information about GMOs are displayed on the screen and troubling real-world news clips on transgenic plants and animals are presented as the film credits scroll. *Consumed* does not offer a happy ending. One wonders about our own.

## CONCLUSION

*What does it even mean to attack art?* —Robert Bennett, “Deconstructing Neoliberalism: Sledgehammering the End of History” in Lisa A. Dickson and Maryna Romanets’ *Beauty, Violence, Representation* (2014)

Monumentalizing the Agrarian Myth

On July 11, 2020, I attended the Society to Protect Indigenous Rights and Indigenous Treaties (S.P.I.R.I.T.) Sit-in for Indigenous Resistance at the site of the *Centennial Land Run Monument (Brand New State)* (2007)—a massive bronze art installation near downtown Oklahoma City meant to embody the “official story” of Oklahoma.<sup>200</sup> The monument commemorates the Land Run of 1889 into the Unassigned Lands towards Oklahoma statehood in 1907. Specifically, the peaceful sit-in/protest was organized to bring attention the monument’s glorification of settler colonialism and “the genocide of Indigenous people,” and to communicate (educate on) the harsh realities of Indigenous-U.S. history: forced removal, massacres, allotment, boarding schools, policies of termination, systemic racism, and misinformation about Indian Country—realities largely erased from Oklahoma’s “official story” (S.P.I.R.I.T.). The sit-in/protest organizers “coordinated with Black Lives Matter OKC in solidarity and recognition of

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<sup>200</sup> The *Centennial Land Run Monument* is in a tourist/entertainment district near downtown Oklahoma City called Bricktown. According to Lee Allan Smith, Chairman of Centennial Projects and Events, “The Land Run Monument is [Oklahoma City’s] answer to many well-known tourist attractions such as the St. Louis Gateway Arch” (qtd. in Oklahoma Centennial 2).

both groups' efforts to eradicate racism in Oklahoma" (S.P.I.R.I.T.). Participants in the sit-in/protest were highly diverse (peoples of many creeds and colors), though most participants were Native individuals from across Oklahoma and from other states. A counter-protest was also held at the site of the monument by several dozen armed white men with AR-15 assault rifles and various sidearms—a menacing group there to “protect” the 50-ton bronze monument.<sup>201</sup>

The Sit-in for Indigenous Resistance opened with a prayer from elder Ben Yahola (Muscogee (Creek)), followed by hours of music, poetry, speakers.<sup>202</sup> Speakers, educators, and performers spoke and sang about the Native peoples of Oklahoma—those indigenous to the area and those removed there—and about past and current injustices to these peoples. In a grove of

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<sup>201</sup> Shannon “MrBo” Collins, of nearby Moore, Oklahoma, an organizer of one of the counter-protests to protect the monument, encouraged bikers, militia members, and others to bring concealed firearms, as he anticipated vandalism and violence from the sit-in/protest participants. (There were at least two organized efforts publicly promoted: Collins’ “Protect the Land Run Monuments” and one by Calling on the Militia.) Collins describes the counter-protestors as “regular armed citizens with the right to protect themselves... [there] to keep the peace... and keep the agitators out” (qtd. in J. Green). Of protestors, Collins says “they usually use five or six people to jump on you at once. So, if you have to protect yourself you have to protect yourself” (qtd. in Brillbeck). The self-important organizer said to his Facebook followers: “I have put my life on the line I’m going to be the target there” (S. Collins). Where Collins promoted dressing like “average citizens conceal[ing] your weapons” so that they could “reveal [themselves]” if “something happen[ed],” other counter-protestors dressed aggressively in tactical gear and proudly displayed their firearms (S. Collins).

<sup>202</sup> In addition to S.P.I.R.I.T. organizers and advocates, speakers included leaders representing Black Lives Matter OKC, Matriarch, American Indian Movement (AIM), Oklahoma Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-OK), Civic Services Community Advocacy, Freedom Oklahoma, Empower Us Foundation, ACLU of Oklahoma, sovereign Community School, Oklahoma Community for Immigration Justice, Whites Against Racism (WAR) OKC, and Women’s March OKC (S.P.I.R.I.T.).

trees near the monument, they spoke and sang about the harm done by commemorative monuments and by misinformation and misrepresentation. They spoke and sang about ongoing (white) work to perpetuate oppression(s).<sup>203</sup> The speakers, educators, and performers sought to create community and collaboration towards the removal of the offending commemorative monument or, alternatively, to revise official information about the memorial to be truthful about land run narratives and to be inclusive of Native history and perspectives, and/or erect a monument of equal stature depicting Indigenous history in Oklahoma alongside the monument (S.P.I.R.I.T.). They also called improving the content and accuracy of Oklahoma public school curricula on Oklahoma land runs. On the greater purpose of the sit-in/protest, Bella Cornell (Muscogee (Creek)) said in her remarks, “We are all here today for more than just monuments. It is also because of the trauma and the harm they have caused us Indigenous people. It is about the lies that they feed us. It is about the fact that they glorify our genocide” (Cornell).

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<sup>203</sup> In an interview a couple days before the sit-in/protest, S.P.I.R.I.T. advocate Frances Danger (Muscogee (Creek)/Seminole) says of the *Centennial Land Run Monument*, “It’s hurtful because it erases us from existence. This monument is not a celebration of the ‘pioneer spirit’ to us. It represents the Westward Expansion of the settlers that, in their fevered zeal to realize, resulted in a calculated effort to eradicate the tribes. Our numbers didn’t dwindle all by themselves. Our ancestors died because of a concerted effort by the U.S. government to get rid of us. And make no mistake, it was intentional. The famous smallpox blankets? Given to us in an effort to ‘reduce’ us. Wars, massacres like Wounded Knee and Sand Creek (where disarmed tribes were slaughtered by U.S. soldiers to the tune of hundreds of deaths, most of which were elders, women, and children), removal from our ancestral lands, the culturally destructive ‘Kill the Indian, Save the Man’ policy of assimilation...it’s all genocide. And it’s cast in bronze in Downtown OKC for everyone to enjoy and cheer without a single mention of the murderous means it took to get there. If society at large wants history then they have to take all of history, not just the palatable parts” (qtd. in Fowler).

It was a powerful experience to be at the sit-in/protest. Academically and personally, it worked as a bookend for this project, with the other being attending the November 2018 Trump rally in Belgrade, Montana. Interestingly, the sit-in/protest occurred two days after the U.S. Supreme Court effectively declared most of the eastern half of Oklahoma to be Native land (*McGirt v. Oklahoma*); that is, the ruling that Congress never explicitly disestablished Muscogee (Creek) Nation 1866 land boundaries. There was a lot of emotion in the thick hot and humid Oklahoma air—emotion compounded by the aggressive armed presence of counter-protestors, the so-called monument *protectors*. The tensest moment occurred during Black Lives Matter OKC director Sheri Dickerson’s remarks. As Dickerson spoke to the theft of Native lands and the need for atonement, an angry counter-protestor repeatedly yelled at her “I didn’t steal nothing.” Other counter-protestors then tried (but failed) to start an “all lives matter” chant, while still others more fully circled and pushed into the sit-in/protest area and marched through it. Throughout the day, the counter-protestors, many aggressively displaying firearms, some also wearing tactical gear and bullet proof vests, were *posted* around the monument and at the periphery of the sit-in/protest. Some had camped out there the night before. When the hostility of the counter-protestors became more threatening and explicit, S.P.I.R.I.T. advocates, supporters, and allies placed themselves between Dickerson and the counter-protestors as she continued to speak. One of the most powerful things I saw that day was brave women Muscogee (Creek) elders quickly moving to stand protectively, shoulder-to-shoulder, in front Dickerson. The wall of people who then moved in front of them became as diversified as the sit-in/protest itself. (Police eventually intervened and diffused the situation).

Native peoples are pushing back and pushing back hard against erasure. Through song, poetry, and spoken word, they are performing *in real life* what Native American Studies literary scholar Matthew Herman terms “continuing” (as evidenced in Native American humanities). In Herman’s “Four More Indigenous Projects for the Native American Humanities” (2019)—an essay providing additional decolonizing processes (projects) to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s classic “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects” (1999)—is the project of “continuing.” Continuing is explained as “an Indigenous project that operates in full knowledge of [settler-colonial ruptural logics] and performs decolonization by working to expose and combat them” (Herman 34). Decolonization work, like the Sit-in for Indigenous Resistance protest against the *Centennial Land Run Monument* and its supporting and resultant cultural products, provide “proof of survivance, [the] recovering [of] erased legacies and genealogies, and [shine] a bright light on the ties that bind today’s practices, beliefs, values, and traditions to those of previous generations” (Herman 34). Activism and resistance as Indigenous projects of decolonization reestablish and empower agency, recovers invisibilized settler colonial histories, and dismantles mythologies. They are ongoing projects.

### The *Centennial Land Run Monument*

The *Centennial Land Run Monument (Brand New State)* (2007), by Oklahoma sculptor Paul Moore (Muscogee (Creek)),<sup>204</sup> commemorates the Land Run of 1889 into the Unassigned

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<sup>204</sup> “Moore... can relate to the land run because his great-grandfather mounted a mule in 1889 and participated. His great-great-great-grandmother was a Creek Indian who traveled to

Lands in Indian territory; that is, the opening on April 22, 1889 of some two million acres to white settlement in what is now central Oklahoma and the Oklahoma City metro area<sup>205</sup>. The Land Run of 1889 was the first of seven Oklahoma land runs. What came to be known as the Unassigned Lands, also known as “Oklahoma country,” were originally the ancestral lands of Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa, Osage, and Wichita tribes, and were later assigned to the Muscogee (Creek) and the Seminole through the Treaty of Okmulgee (1833) and the unratified Seminole Treaty (1833), respectively.<sup>206</sup> The Muscogee (Creek) and the Seminole were forcibly removed to Indian Territory under the Indian Removal Act (1830). After the Civil War, the lands were compulsorily ceded by the Muscogee (Creek) and the Seminole to the U.S. through the 1866 Creek Treaty as punishment for supporting the Confederate cause. Land-hungry whites believed these post-Civil War treaties entitled them to settle the so-called Unassigned Lands as public lands—a perceived entitlement that quickly expanded to demands to open all the lands in Indian Territory to white settlement. The Unassigned Lands, or vacant lands, were called as such because the federal government had yet to “assign” areas within the boundaries or create

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Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears” (Minty). Of the monument, Moore says, “This is my Mount Rushmore” (qtd. in Minty).

<sup>205</sup> Oklahoma City, Guthrie, Norman, and Stillwater were created the day of the 1889 land run.

<sup>206</sup> A treaty was made between the Muscogee (Creek) and the Seminole in 1856 (“Ratified treaty no. 303, treaty of August 7, 1856, with the Creek and Seminole Indians”), which transferred some Muscogee (Creek) lands to the Seminole.

reservations for Plains Indians and other tribes. The Land Run of 1889 led to the establishment of Oklahoma Territory under the Organic Act of 1890 towards Oklahoma statehood in 1907.<sup>207</sup>

The Oklahoma Land runs and land lotteries occurred at the end of the frontier settlement period. As in decades past, the frontier iteration of the agrarian myth, as applied to the Oklahoma experience, “offered a promise of rebirth and renewal,” with its powerful and persuasive “narrative [giving] a beleaguered [white] civilization another chance to triumph” (Kollin 90). For many hopeful (cash poor, landless) white homestead claimants participating in Oklahoma land runs, many of whom had failed proving up earlier homestead claims or had lost their land elsewhere, securing a homestead or town lot in Indian Territory was their last chance.<sup>208</sup> The monument embodies the desperation of white settlers to secure the last of the nation’s “free land.”

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<sup>207</sup> The twin territories (Oklahoma and Indian territories) of what is now the state of Oklahoma were often, and are yet, colloquially identified together as Indian Territory. The organized incorporated Oklahoma Territory, which existed from May 2, 1890 to November 16, 1907 (statehood), comprised the western part of what is now Oklahoma, including “No Man’s Land” (now the Oklahoma panhandle). Indian Territory, part of the unorganized territory established by the Indian Intercourse Act of 1834 and reduced by the Organic Act of 1890, until November 16, 1907, comprised the eastern part of what is now Oklahoma and is where the so-called Five Civilized Tribes were removed to in the 1830s under the Indian Removal Act (the Trail of Tears), with largely inaccessible lands also assigned to them in Oklahoma Territory, specifically, the Cherokee Strip.

<sup>208</sup> According to Oklahoma historian John Thompson, most Oklahoma homesteaders were poor. “Many of them had lost their land in Kansas or Texas, and some were blacklisted miners or unemployed laborers” (7).

A popular Oklahoma City tourism website describes the *Centennial Land Run Monument* as “one of the world’s largest bronze sculptures” capturing the “frenzied energy and emotion from one instant during the [land] run... featuring [47] heroic figures of land run participants, frozen in motion as they race to claim new homesteads” (“Oklahoma Land Run Monument”). These *heroic* figures include white pioneer settlers (men, women, and children)<sup>209</sup> walking and riding (on horseback, in covered wagons, buggies, or on a sulky) and soldiers, including one with a canon (representing the cannon shot that launched the land run). The massive \$6.2 million urban renewal public art project took 20 years to complete. Located on both sides of the Bricktown Canal (recreating crossing the nearby North Canadian River), the monument “declares that the 1889 land run and resulting white pioneer settlement formed the foundation for modern development” (Prescott 228). At 150% scale and 365 feet long by 36 feet wide, the larger-than-life finely detailed monument is meant to be *monumental*—in representative size and feat.

The racialized *Centennial Land Run Monument* works to legitimize Oklahoma’s master narrative of the state’s creation through indomitable (white) pioneer spirit: brave souls who conquered the wilds of Oklahoma for God and country. According to J. Blake Wade, once Executive Director of the Oklahoma Centennial Commission, the monument “recreates the great

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<sup>209</sup> Pioneer settler monuments, including Oklahoma’s *Centennial Land Run Monument*, primarily use “standard images of swashbuckling white pioneer men and sunbonneted white pioneer women” (Prescott 18). Though rare, when Native peoples are depicted in pioneer settler monuments, it is as “noble savages... as foil to white civilization” (Prescott 209).

spirit, bravery, and determination of Oklahoma’s early settlers, many of whom overcame obstacles of epic proportions to create a new life and a new state” (qtd. in Oklahoma Centennial 2). As historian Cynthia Culver Prescott explains “Images of white horsemen and wagons racing to claim homesteads or town sites in 1889 and in subsequent land runs [are] a central part of popular memory in Oklahoma”<sup>210</sup> (199). As we well know, “American memory of the frontier was and is overwhelmingly white” (Prescott 290). The story of settling Oklahoma, “the last frontier,” privileges white boomers, sooners,<sup>211</sup> and pioneer settlers while working to erase Native peoples indigenous to the area and those forced to remove to Indian Territory—Native peoples who were then further divested from their lands through (white land greed fueled) treating, federal legislation, and executive order, and (white land greed fueled) intimidation,

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<sup>210</sup> Oklahoma school children still participate in land run reenactments, though they are finally being questioned, reimaged, or discontinued. The Oklahoma Historical Society offers resources on how to conduct a land run reenactment, such as their “Make a Land Run!” activity guide. (<https://www.okhistory.org/kids/landrun6.php>). In 2014, Oklahoma City Public Schools banned reenactments of the Land Run of 1889, though other cities, especially in rural areas, still put them on (specific to their area’s land run). This video shows a 2017 land run reenactment by 3<sup>rd</sup> graders at Northern Hills Elementary in Edmond, OK (part of the Oklahoma City metro area): <https://youtu.be/H2yrzA0U2BQ>. At the S.P.I.R.I.T. sit-in/protest discussed above, Bella Cornell (Muscogee (Creek) spoke powerfully of the shame and confusion of being forced to participate in land run reenactments as a child. “I felt confused. I felt angry. I felt sad and embarrassed. It just felt wrong” (Cornell).

<sup>211</sup> Boomers (Boomer Movement participants) were white settlers who believed the Unassigned Lands were public lands (as defined in the Homestead Act of 1862) and thus open for white settlement. They attempted to settle/occupy the Unassigned Lands for more than a decade before the lands were opened in the Land Run of 1889; that is, they were squatters. Sooners were white settlers who entered the Unassigned Lands early; that is, *sooner* than allowed before the official April 22, 1889 official opening; that is, they were cheaters. Oklahoma is known as the Sooner state.

deception, and fraud. *The Centennial Land Run Monument* commemorates white dominance over Native lands and peoples and erases the near total exclusion of African American and other people of color from homesteading and land acquisition.<sup>212</sup> Prescott argues pioneer settler-themed monuments like *Centennial Land Run Monument*, work to commemorate white settlement and “enshrine settler colonialism” (200, 210). They also work to celebrate white conquest, legitimize white supremacy, and reinforce traditional white cultural norms and dominance. They signal Native peoples are of the past; they signal associated Black and (O)ther history(ies) are not important; and, they signal descendants of white pioneer settlers are righteously deserving of their power and privilege now and forever.

Like all cultural products, commemorative monuments respond to social conditions, social change, and, more recently, culture wars. As discussed in Chapter 3, there were two distinct periods when Confederate monuments were erected: at the turn of the last century as “as Southern states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise African Americans and re-segregate society after several decades of integration that followed Reconstruction” towards the revival of the Ku Klux Klan; and, in the mid-20th century modern civil rights movement (SPLC). Similarly, the erecting of pioneer settler monuments (celebrations of early white

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<sup>212</sup> There is a woeful lack of scholarship on the African American land run experience. While it is clear Blacks were discriminated against participating in the land runs, some did take part and managed to stake claims. Ron Jackson’s reporting in *The Oklahoman* states 42 Blacks filed claims in the 1889 land run; however, the article does not provide citations or other scholarly information (“Blacks among Boomers”). The Oklahoma Historical Society offers very little public information about African Americans in land runs.

settlement, white progress, and white civilization) aligns with moments of white anxiety over rapid social change. As Prescott explains, pioneer settler monuments of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century correlate with white Americans embracing the “growing national trend of rural nostalgia” in response to “[d]eclining availability of homesteading lands,” and “dramatic shifts in American society” (51).

Urbanization, increasing immigration from Asia and southern Europe, falling birth rates among native-born Americans, new public roles for women, looser attitudes toward sexuality, and the highest divorce rate in the world all convinced many that the American family was in crisis. These fears inspired efforts to shore up white civilization by promoting more conservative domestic roles for white native-born women even as they tended toward nostalgia for an idyllic rural frontier past (Prescott 51).

In the 1970s, pioneer settler monuments began portraying “highly traditional depictions of white pioneer women and couples persisting in the face of a farm crisis and rapid social change”; that is, the shift from Cold War era celebrations of traditional nuclear families towards counternarratives of American life, with its associated protests concerning “racism, sexism, and U.S. imperialism” and culture wars (Prescott 209). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pioneer settler monuments “sparked controversy in ethnically diverse and politically progressive communities, while more homogenous and conservative communities clung to traditional forms of frontier commemoration” (Prescott 209-210). Later, pioneer settler monuments became capitalist means for attracting residents and visitors, while continuing to signal white supremacy. As with earlier heritage tourism sites, today’s pioneer settler monuments persist in directing “visitors to view westward expansion as central to the American national story in a way that justify[s] white dominance and reinforce[s] traditional cultural values” (Prescott 215). In the current neoliberal moment, pioneer settler (myth-appeasing) monuments link neoliberal capitalism with neoliberal marginalization. As with Confederate monuments, which honor the Confederate leaders and

soldiers who fought to preserve slavery, perverse nostalgia is well-evidenced in the ardent defense by white Americans to honor white pioneer settlers. White pioneer settlers as the embodiment of (white) American progress. White pioneer settlers as the embodiment of white supremacy. White pioneer settlers as the (white) embodiment of the agrarian myth.

Like other neoliberal cultural products discussed in this project, the *Centennial Land Run Monument* none too subtly works to provide shelter under the agrarian myth for systemic marginalization and, less directly, to hazards to human health and the environment, as these are all connected in this neoliberal moment. The monument reinforces precarity and contributes to the insinuation of neoliberal capitalism into our nation's cultural production. Racialized pioneer settler monuments also further perverse nostalgia dynamics of inequality—especially in this zero-sum (fixed pie) moment when “wins” by people of color and (O)thers are perceived as threats to whites and their privileged past and present. Queue Gordon Gekko: “It’s not a question of enough, pal. It’s a zero-sum game: somebody wins, somebody loses” (*Wall Street*).

### Zero-sum Thinking

At his July 3, 2020 “Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration” in Keystone, South Dakota—on land sacred to the Lakota of the Great Sioux Nation and others—Donald Trump promised the creation of a “National Garden of American Heroes.” The heroes garden being Trump’s so-called patriotic response to the sanctioned and otherwise 2020 removals of Confederate and other problematic monuments across the country in the wake of the May 2020 police killing of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter and other protests. In his speech, Trump describes protests and subsequent actions concerning vandalized and/or toppled monuments, as

well the legislative actions of state and local governments to remove Confederate symbols,<sup>213</sup> as attacks “on our liberty, our magnificent liberty” (“Remarks... South Dakota”). As Trump decries, “Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values, and indoctrinate our children” (“Remarks... South Dakota”). He says further,

Angry mobs are trying to tear down statues of our Founders, deface our most sacred memorials, and unleash a wave of violent crime in our cities. Many of these people have no idea why they are doing this, but some know exactly what they are doing. They think the American people are weak and soft and submissive. But no, the American people are strong and proud, and they will not allow our country, and all of its values, history, and culture, to be taken from them (Trump, “Remarks... South Dakota”).

As listed in Executive Order (E.O.) 13934, “Building and Rebuilding Monuments to American Heroes,” the proposed monument garden, honoring 33 of “the greatest Americans to ever live,”<sup>214</sup> includes just five African Americans (Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackie

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<sup>213</sup> From Trump’s “Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence” (June 26, 2020): “[State and local governments] have surrendered to mob rule, imperiling community safety, allowing for the wholesale violation of our laws, and privileging the violent impulses of the mob over the rights of law-abiding citizens. Worse, they apparently have lost the will or the desire to stand up to the radical fringe and defend the fundamental truth that America is good, her people are virtuous, and that justice prevails in this country to a far greater extent than anywhere else in the world. Some particularly misguided public officials even appear to have accepted the idea that violence can be virtuous and have prevented their police from enforcing the law and protecting public monuments, memorials, and statues from the mob’s ropes and graffiti” (E.O. 13933).

<sup>214</sup> “The National Garden should be composed of statues, including statues of John Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Daniel Boone, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, Henry Clay, Davy Crockett, Frederick Douglass, Amelia Earhart, Benjamin Franklin, Billy Graham, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, Douglas MacArthur, Dolley Madison, James Madison, Christa McAuliffe, Audie Murphy, George S.

Robinson, Harriet Tubman, and Booker T. Washington), no Native Americans, no Latinxs, no persons of Asian descent, not to mention, no persons associated with the modern Democratic Party, but does include the modern archconservative Republican figures of Ronald Reagan, Billy Graham, and Antonin Scalia (Trump, “Remarks... South Dakota”; E.O. 13934).

Trump’s 4<sup>th</sup> of July remarks are indicative of zero-sum thinking—wherein if one “wins” another must “lose.” A prime example of similarly marginalizing zero-sum thinking, which has stuck in my mind throughout working on this project—first shared with me by Matthew Herman—is Becky Beard’s comments at a Montana House legislative hearing (education session) on House Bill 514, “An Act Renaming the Columbus Day Commemorative School Day” (introduced February 24, 2017). The intent of the bill was to recognize and honor Indigenous peoples of Montana—past and present—as a commemorated school day wherein all public school districts in Montana would conduct “appropriate exercises during the school day” on this topic rather than exercises on Christopher Columbus and the myth of discovery (Montana House, “HB514”). Beard, a fiscal and social conservative Republican Montana state representative, could not conceive of replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a commemorative school day because, to her, it meant giving up *her* (Irish/German/Scottish) heritage so that the Indigenous peoples of Montana could have an observed day of recognition in

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Patton, Jr., Ronald Reagan, Jackie Robinson, Betsy Ross, Antonin Scalia, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Tubman, Booker T. Washington, George Washington, and Orville and Wilbur Wright” (E.O. 13934).

the state's public schools (Montana House, "House Education Committee"). Beard's zero-sum thinking concerning honoring Montana's Indigenous peoples was voiced after another representative put forward a motion to amend (greatly diminish) the bill to change Columbus Day not to Indigenous Peoples' Day but rather to a more palatable (appropriable) Montana Heritage Day.<sup>215</sup>

On the importance of language, federal Indian law scholar Kristin Ruppel explains at the March 22, 2017 Montana Senate hearing on House Bill 514 in her request that the committee revert the observed holiday name back to Indigenous Peoples' Day (rather than Montana Heritage Day) because "the name Montana Heritage automatically says we're looking back, [that] this is a matter of history, and, yes, it is a matter of history, but Indigenous peoples are a powerful presence in the present" (qtd. in Montana Senate). Ruppel argues that the discussion must remain focused on Columbus versus "Indigenous Peoples... as a point of reference... and a way to raise awareness about our lack of knowledge about our own history" (qtd. in Montana Senate). Otherwise, like a microcosm of settler colonialism, the *Indigenous* would be subsumed

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<sup>215</sup> In support of amending House Bill 514 regarding the renaming of the Columbus Day commemorative school day to Indigenous Peoples' Day to instead renaming Columbus Day to Montana Heritage Day, Beck Beard says "I am old fashioned enough and not quite ready *to give up so much heritage* that *my* background has brought with me with the several generations that have lived here in Montana up in North Central Montana. It means a lot to me to have *my* heritage. I've been proud of it, including my Irish and German heritage and my Scottish heritage, so forgive me if I am a little reticent at coming along but this good group of legislators and people who testified here today show what good will can do without trying to be in disharmony with one another" (Montana House, "House Education Committee"; emphasis mine).

by (white) *Montana heritage*. Anthropologist and historian and Crystal Alegria drove this point home at the hearing through listing a litany of already existing white-centric heritage days and festivals in Montana, which “for the most part exclude Native American Indigenous history” arguing “Indigenous Peoples’ Day would celebrate our shared histories” (qtd. in Montana Senate).

In the House, Becky Beard voted yes to the House Bill 514 amendment and yes to change Columbus Day to Montana Heritage Day. With the exception of the Montana Knights of Columbus state secretary (for reasons that should be obvious), opponents at the Senate hearing argued against passing the bill with the name Montana Heritage Day and requested it be amended back to Indigenous Peoples’ Day and passed under that name. House Bill 514 was not amended and ultimately died in the Senate committee. House Bill 514 came on the heels of House Bill 322 “An Act Renaming the Columbus Day Holiday” (introduced January 26, 2017), which would have changed Columbus Day, a legal state holiday, to Indigenous Peoples’ Day. (House Bill 322 also included a section changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day as a commemorative school day.) Like House Bill 514, House Bill 322 failed in committee. The latest attempts in Montana to officially change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day occurred in the 2019 Regular Session: House Bill 219 “Establish Indigenous Peoples Day in Montana” died in committee; and, Bill Draft LC 1257 “Allow Option of Indigenous People’s [sic] Day to Replace Columbus Day” died in drafting.

Zero-sum mindsets are toxic—especially when linked with (white) nostalgia for an idealized mythical past and perverted by neoliberal realities (aka: perverse nostalgia). As a cognitive bias, zero-sum bias fabricates competition for a something (a resource, a status, access)

that is presumed to be restricted, or in limited supply, but in reality, is unrestricted and freely available—or should be: equality, opportunity, advancement. Zero-sum thinking exacerbates and accelerates neoliberal sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical conflict. As a primitive means of processing information, it limits consideration of diverse information sources, data, and evidence, and disallows rational thinking. For example, white Americans in the throes of perverse nostalgia perceive racism a zero-sum game—a game they are presently losing. This is well-evidenced in their complaints of “reverse racism,” in their belief that antiwhite bias is more prevalent and problematic than bias against Blacks and (O)thers, in their rabid defense of overtly white supremacist symbols, in their belief that lawful same-sex marriage hurts their heteronormative marriage, and in their unwavering support for race-baiting politicians and pundits. A prime example of such zero-sum thinking is Trump’s fearmongering rhetoric about Mexican immigrants: “They’re taking our jobs. They’re taking our manufacturing jobs. They’re taking our money. They’re killing us” (qtd. in Chreckinger). Another example, this one from Michele Bachmann (former U.S. Representative (Republican) of Minnesota), as she voices opposition to legislating against hate crimes and the discrimination of LGBTQ+ peoples:

When you’re part of a favored group then you get special benefits that nobody else gets. That’s the very form of tyranny. Because when government supposedly “gives something,” which government has nothing to give. They have to take it away from other people. So when they “give” it to that certain group that means by definition they’re taking it away from you (qtd. in Barton).

One more, from Jeff Sessions (former Attorney General in the Trump administration): “Empathy for one party is always prejudice against another” (qtd. in U.S. Senate).

Zero-sum encourages fear of (O)thers and fear of change. Zero-sum thinking encourages racial, ethnic, and xenophobic aggression and violence. Zero-sum thinking encourages closed minds and closed borders. Zero-sum thinking equates with zero progress.

Neoliberal realities aggravate zero-sum thinking about (O)thers. Proclaimed inequality(ies) of (O)thers can be easily dismissed as not arising from or pertaining to race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, and (O)ther identities, but rather from personal failings, per color-blind, gender-blind and other *blind* neoliberal logic, which mandates responsabilization, hyper-individualism, and hyper-competitiveness. Perverse nostalgia sustains and strengthens the damaging effects of zero-sum thinking and provokes a vicious regressive (mythical) spiral: *America made white again, made straight again, made Christian again, made great again.*

#### Avenues for Further Research

As mentioned in the Introduction to this project, the discipline of American Studies is interested in the creation, dissemination, and consumption of American cultural products. While this project focuses only on the creation of neoliberal cultural products through the lens of the agrarian myth and the socioeconomic, sociopolitical, sociocultural contexts in which the cultural products were created, future research could focus on the diffusion of agrarian(rural)-themed cultural products and/or how various audiences have interpreted and/or used (consumed) them. Distribution, consumption, and audience analysis of American cultural production are research areas ripe for future American Studies and other scholarship. It would be particularly interesting to explore audience analysis of agrarian(rural)-themed cultural products in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, national origin, and (O)ther identities as a means for understanding the neoliberal structures of sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical domination and subordination.

Material culture, public art, and commemorative monuments are also logical avenues for future research into the intersections of neoliberal cultural production and perverse nostalgia,

especially through an agrarian myth lens. A particularly interesting method for studying neoliberal cultural production is the material culture of consumption through economists Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold's systems of provision approach to the study of consumption—specifically their 10Cs, which encompass the notion that material culture is “*Constructed, Construed, Conforming, Commodified, Contextual, Contradictory, Closed, Contested, Collective and Chaotic*” (Bayliss et al 335; emphasis in the original). Though originally conceived to investigate material culture of financialization, it could be applied in this neoliberal era to study the consumption of agrarian myth-themed/inspired material culture products, especially pioneer settler myth-appeasing monuments and the potential myth-dispelling monuments of the future. The application of this interdisciplinary approach to the material culture of consumption in relation to the consequences of neoliberalism would provide valuable new perspectives on the consumption of neoliberal cultural production, agrarian(rural)-themed cultural products, and controversial and/or potentially new progressive commemorative monuments.

Another interesting area of potential future inquiry is the intersections of neoliberal cultural production and perverse nostalgia and the burgeoning “cancel culture”; that is, the notion and practice of “canceling” (boycotting, culturally blocking, withdrawing popular/professional support) polarizing someone(s) or something(s) which have reached a populist tipping point of offensiveness—think Michael Jackson and R. Kelly (allegations of pedophilia), Louis C.K. (allegations of sexual harassment), and Roseanne Barr (racist public comments). Specific to cultural products, think Christopher Columbus (statue) toppled and tossed into Baltimore's Inner Harbor (July 4, 2020), the June 2020 canceling of the reality television show *Cops* (FOX, 1989-2020), the Lego Group's removal of police-themed toys from the U.S. market, and the

controversy over Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* (2020) (a novel written by a white woman about the modern Mexican border/immigrant experience). Cancel culture can be thought of as the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of the *Scarlet Letter*. Though largely associated with social media platforms (#cancelculture), cancel culture can be studied through various aspects of social, public, and professional life. Inquiry along these lines could incorporate Red Dreher's notion of soft totalitarianism; that is, an emergent form of totalitarianism based on cancel culture wherein liberties are restricted "by corporations and other institutions run by managerial elites, enabled by the vast network of surveillance technology that is already in place, thanks to the ubiquity of the Internet, smartphones, and smart devices," rather than by the state (Ruse). Though dystopian in tone, soft totalitarianism, with its consideration of cancel culture, is an intriguing concept to consider in this intractable neoliberal era.

Coming back around to the above epigraph, literary and cultural scholar Robert Bennett's important question of "what does it even mean to attack art?,"<sup>216</sup> another area of inquiry could look into the cross sections of cancel culture and the destruction of controversial neoliberal cultural products, such as racist commemorative monuments and similar racist/biased symbols presented as art, in relation to further dismantling America's pernicious and persistent myths (141). Bennett also asks "Can some alternative concept of art or beauty emerge from such a

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<sup>216</sup> Bennett asks this and the other quoted questions in his inquiry into "acts of aesthetic violence," as advocated in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) as aggressive criticisms of late 20th century neoliberalism.

brutal aesthetic?... Can acts of violence and works of ugliness themselves produce new forms of beauty and art?" (141). Inquiry into cancel culture and the destruction of controversial neoliberal cultural products could be further narrowed to interrogate "acts of violence" against racist/biased art and "works of ugliness" (vandalized or destroyed racist/biased art) and their resultant impacts on those raging against the racist/biased art (vandalizing, destroying), those compelled to protect the racist/biased art (such as those in the throes of perverse nostalgia), and subsequent public response not only to the first two scenarios but any new forms of art created as a result: "activist" works created by "artists." Vandalized controversial neoliberal cultural products, especially monuments and statues, are emerging as canvases for sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical performance and protest—as new forms of public art, as well as new sites of pilgrimage. Such an inquiry could also look closely at how new forms of public art might specifically work to dispel nation-centered exceptionalist, exclusionist, imperialist, and hegemonic myths towards (eventually) dismantling systemic marginalization.

Lastly, future research could center the Anthropocene, anthropogenic climate change, and its related and resultant impacts on agrarian(rural)-themed American neoliberal cultural production. Inquiry could focus on overtly Anthropocene-centric agrarian(rural)-themed literature, art, film, and/or material culture; that is, cultural products that evidence anthropogenic problematics such as agricultural pollution, overproduction, and overconsumption, and local or summative ecological impacts. Methodologies employed could include ecocriticism and environmental humanities, in conjunction with key and emergent theories of the Anthropocene. Such inquiry could juxtapose earlier thinking on challenges to the pastoral, as evidenced in such classic works as Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and Raymond Williams' *The*

*Country and the City* (1973), with modern cultural products responding to the dark imaginings and dark realities of the environmental-dystopian, as explored in works like Adam Trexler's *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (2015) and evidenced in such contemporary cultural products as Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015) and Alexis Rockman's "Manifest Destiny" (2004), oil and acrylic on wood.

### In Closing

In "Manifest Americans," I examined the modern-day appropriation and representation of the American agrarian myth in this challenging neoliberal era along with associated sheltering of systemic marginalization and hazards to human health and the environment. I argued that persistent agrarianism rhetoric, perverted by neoliberal realities and its devices (neoliberal legislation, neoliberal academic entrepreneurialism, aggressive agrotechnology), lies at the core of these problems. Specific to this neoliberal moment, my conception of neoyeomanship encapsulates the embrace of both classic American yeomanship dogma and the modern neoliberal economic doctrine towards the realization of Manifest Americans, with Manifest Americans being the idealized persons(products) of the agrarian myth—created in the minds of republican agrarians, propelled forward by Manifest Destiny, and consolidated through generations of white settlement and cultivation of stolen Native lands. Manifest Americans believe themselves to be the backbone of American society and the embodiment of American democracy. Neoyeomen as Manifest Americans are the neoliberal reification of the nation's most *American American*.

This project also presented a new framework for analyzing the neoliberalization of American society, culture, and cultural production, with emphasis on impacts to agrarian(rural)

people and spaces. Specifically, I explored neoliberal cultural production (through art, literature, film—and, above, material culture)—particular cultural products that work to either appease or disrupt the agrarian metanarrative in modern society. To accomplish this, I brought together cultural studies and ecocritical approaches as methodology for cultural criticism, with additional consideration of affect theory and nostalgia criticism to read the agrarian myth in this age of neoliberalism.

In this project, I also introduced the concept of perverse nostalgia, my original theoretical contribution to the academy. Perverse nostalgia dynamics of inequality are highly raced, classed, gendered, sexed, and faithed and facilitate the transfer and acceptance of false information(reality), which creates space for consolidating or disrupting identity—especially in this zero-sum moment when gains by (O)thers are perceived as threats to white Americans and their privileged status quo. Perverse nostalgia explains how simple nostalgia, which normally works to mitigate disruptions in the meeting of core human needs, can become perverted by modern neoliberal realities, which in turn creates discontinuity and exacerbates existential fears, resultantly triggering perverse nostalgia for an idealized(mythical) past—an *America made great again*.

“Manifest Americans” also expands myth criticism. Their overt associations with nation-centered exceptionalist, exclusionary, imperialistic, and hegemonic thinking and symbolism, notwithstanding, American foundational myths have endured and play a crucial role in projecting, informing, and affirming dominant modern-day ideologies and identity(ies). Far from being mired in history, the nation’s myths are well-evidenced in modern America and help us to understand and explain the nation’s complex contemporary ideologies and longings for an

idealized(mythical) past. They also perpetuate sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical factionalism. This is particularly true concerning the agrarian myth and its rhetoric, which has largely evaded criticism and condemnation. The agrarian myth is alive and well in 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal America—and hides a multitude of sins.

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