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ABSTRACT

Drawing from queer and feminist methodologies, *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia* engages rhetorical analysis of popular culture texts, specifically the film *The Power of the Dog* (2021) and television shows *Schitt's Creek* (2015-2020) and *Reservation Dogs* (2021-), and material spaces, specifically Yellowstone National Park, to develop a framework for tracing how particular constructions of rural nostalgia (such as “the small town,” “the frontier,” “the cowboy,” “the Indian Other,” “the wilderness”) circulate back and forth across widely consumed digital texts, collective imaginaries, political structures, and material spaces. As my dissertation pulls up and examines the tangled roots of rural nostalgia—roots that take us to the very origin stories on which the nation was built—I ask who is invested in nostalgic narratives of rurality, why, and to what ends. In conjunction, I map the ways rural nostalgia and its rhetorical constructions (such as “the cowboy,” “the noble savage,” and “the hick”) contribute to the composition of our social and political realities—from land use and management to the intersectional structures of gender, race, and class. Further, I ask what pedagogical possibilities we might find modeled in contemporary popular culture texts and in the composition of rural spaces. What might we—as researchers, writing instructors, and community members—learn about deploying rhetorical and narrative tactics in ways that revise our deepest, and most divisive, stories? Ultimately, this work contributes to conversations across rural, narrative, queer, feminist, settler colonial, and rhetoric and composition studies; proposes new ways of understanding and responding to the past times, places, and ways of life that rhetorics of rural nostalgia attempt to bring into the future; and perhaps most urgently, points to possibilities for suturing harmful divides across rural, urban, and suburban communities.

PULLING UP THE TANGLED ROOTS OF RURAL NOSTALGIA:
A RHETORICAL STUDY OF STORY AND SPACE, NATURE AND NATION

by

Emily Pifer

B.S., Ohio University, 2014
M.F.A., University of Wyoming, 2017

Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric.

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I offer my gratitude to the stolen and occupied Native lands on which this dissertation was written, lands stewarded past and present by the peoples of the Onondaga Nation, firekeepers of the Haudenosaunee; the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Crow, and Shoshone peoples; and the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, along with other Indigenous peoples for which the expansive Rocky Mountain region is home.

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During the later stages of this project—the stages where it becomes difficult to see the forest through the trees, and where it becomes much easier to question what it is you are doing and why—reading Barbara Kingsolver’s *Demon Copperhead* returned me to the emotional terrain, and political and pedagogical urgency, with which I began this project. Thank you to Eileen, Molly McConnell, and my mom for suggesting that I read it at just the right moment.

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INTRODUCTION

**“THIS SHIT WAS EVERYWHERE”: RECKONING WITH THE RHETORICAL
ECOSYSTEM OF RURAL NOSTALGIA**

Tommy was watching TV these days and seeing finally how this shit was everywhere you look. Dissing the country bumpkins, trying to bring us up to par, the long-termed war of trying to shame the land people into joining America. Meaning their version, city. TV being the slam book of all times, maybe everybody in the city was just going along with it, not really noticing the rudeness factors. Possibly to the extent of not getting why we are so fucking mad out here.

– Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*

Barbara Kingsolver’s *Demon Copperhead* (2022) is a Pulitzer prize-winning novel that explores rural Appalachia through the lens of her protagonist Demon’s life—from birth to adulthood as he navigates poverty, the foster care system, the death of his mother (and many others) to Opioids, and his own path through addiction and recovery. As the epigraph above demonstrates, interwoven with Kingsolver’s narrative is an examination of the complex divides across the urban and rural, and importantly, an investigation into the ways popular culture, and television in particular, has contributed to those divides through a constant reproduction and circulation of harmful and reductive stories about rural communities and cultures (i.e., as “the slam book of all times”).¹ In this way, *Demon Copperhead* offers an argument for the entangled relationship across the stories we tell about rural people and the mediums through which these stories circulate; the social, political, and economic realities through which rural people live; and stark divides between “the rural” and “the urban.” These divides are complex and difficult to understand, especially as they are largely the result of external forces, such as political rhetoric and government intervention invested in the division of marginalized people.² And importantly, though marginalized rural and marginalized

¹ Also see pages 317-318 in *Demon Copperhead* for another significant passage toward Kingsolver’s exploration of the relationship between mainstream television and representations of rural communities.

² See Ian C. Hartman’s “West Virginia mountaineers and Kentucky frontiersmen: Race, manliness, and the rhetoric of liberalism in the early 1960s” (2014) for an interesting exploration with particular relevance to Appalachia and *Demon*

urban communities certainly face different challenges, they also often experience similar oppressions and inequities, such as poor funding for education and low access to quality food and healthcare. With these complexities in mind, scholars across the disciplines have worked to make sense of the social, political, and economic divides across rural and urban communities and cultures—divides that are made visible across our television and computer screens on election nights as many metropolitan districts turn blue while much of the rest of the country fills up with red, making the whole swath of land appear as if it is an open wound.³ This stark polarization results in a myriad of harmful implications, many of which I explore across this dissertation, but in short, as Kingsolver’s *Demon* gets at above, there is a dangerous reduction and even rejection of humanity taking hold on all sides.

As a graduate student and scholar in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric, and as a person with a complex relationship to rurality—complexities that began with my parents’ decision to leave rural West Virginia in order to raise their children in suburban Ohio, and later intensified by my decision to spend most of my adulthood living in the (largely rural) region known as the American West—I am interested and invested (to perhaps put it lightly) in these divides and the, seemingly related, all-tangled-up relationship (i.e., the knot) between rural stories and rural realities. In fact, I began working on the project that became this dissertation with a sense of personal, political, and pedagogical urgency to, in a sense, use the tools of rhetorical study to detangle the knot and pull up the roots of the divides. I was interested in asking and seeking answers to questions like: How do the stories we tell about the rural impact rural lives? And how do these stories impact, or even produce, divides across the rural, suburban, and urban? In asking these questions—or, to return to my

Copperhead. Also see Nell Irvin Painter’s *The History of White People* (2010) for an examination of this phenomenon that is both thorough and broad.

³ See Carr and Kefalas 2009, Corbett 2016, Herring 2010, and Wuthnow 2013 for scholarship relevant to this study. See the *Pew Research Center*’s “Partisanship in Rural, Suburban, and Urban Communities” (2024) and Savat’s “The divide between us: Urban-rural political differences rooted in geography” (2020) for recent data and in-depth analysis.

metaphor, in poking and tugging at the knot that these questions imply—I began to notice that the stories that circulate about rural life all seem to be taking part in a vast, dynamic performance of longing for a romanticized, mythologized version of the rural past. I noticed, too, this longing within myself. I connected this cross-genre, multimodal constellation of rural longing—which I have come to term the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia—with a subtle, but persistent, strand of conversation across rural and regional studies: the question of what to make of (and what to do about) the high volume of nostalgia for (often imagined) rural ways of life. In other words, to evoke *Demon Copperhead*, this rural nostalgia shit was, and is, everywhere. To put it in a more scholarly way, background reading revealed that rural nostalgia is baked into the collective imaginary that makes up our national consciousness, and circulates externally through our social practices, popular cultural texts, policies and legal system (see Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 2018, Ladino 2012, and Pruitt 2006 for examples). In this way, rural nostalgia bears (rhetorically and materially) on cultures, communities, and land as it travels across spatial and temporal boundaries—it is written on and across our lands and bodies.

Curiously, widespread longings for the rural—or imaginations of the rural—slam right up against harmful and reductive representations of rural people; social and political divides between rural, suburban, and urban communities; and policies and practices around land use and ownership. In other words, to put it more plainly, for a country full of people that claim to love and long for the rural, we have a funny (i.e., upside down, inside out, darn near twisted) way of showing it. Despite the political implications of rural nostalgia as it circulates rhetorically, as it carries and is carried by cultural stories that reveal shared perceptions and values, and as it contributes to present and future relationships across humans and the more-than-human world, nostalgia—not to mention, a specifically rural nostalgia—is under-studied across rhetoric and composition (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 88-90; Ladino et al. 2). In response, I set out to use the tools of rhetorical analysis to

better understand the relationship across rural stories, realities, and nostalgia; to trace the origins (i.e., pull up the tangled roots) and implications of this relationship; and to uncover paths for learning from and working with (rather than against) the ubiquity of rural nostalgia.

Across my dissertation research and writing, I have been propelled by the work of scholars such as Jennifer Ladino, who has spent much of her career theorizing and modeling the ways in which we might take up nostalgia as a force for progress; and Maggie Nelson's commitment to and model for moving beyond critique in *On Freedom: Four Song of Care and Constraint* (2021), a model that spoke to me and my project as freedom, like nostalgia, is a concept and tool most often and most harmfully waged by the conservative right. Early in the process of writing this dissertation, a combination of background reading, noticing and noting—or what Kathleen Stewart refers to as ethnographic attention—and personal experience convinced me that rural nostalgia is a powerful rhetorical, affective, and narrative force that is often deployed toward the stabilization of dominant narratives but importantly, it can also be repurposed toward the destabilization of these often-violent stories. Herein lies the significance of nostalgia, and further, the importance of using the tools of rhetorical study to better understand not only how it works, but how it can be harnessed toward positive transformation in and beyond rural spaces across the United States.

Project Overview

As I have begun to explore, scholars concerned with rural cultures have found that nostalgia for rural ways of life is baked into our national consciousness and circulates externally through our social practices, cultural texts, and legal system (Pruitt 9-11). Importantly, nostalgic narratives and representations of rural life freeze rural spaces in an imagined version of the past and, as such, contradict the political, social, and economic realities many rural communities experience and contribute to ideological and material divides between urban and rural communities. For, despite what rural nostalgia might have us believe, rural spaces and communities are dynamic and diverse,

and the futures of rural lands, communities, and cultures are interdependent with, rather than divided from, that of suburban and urban lands, peoples, and cultures here in the United States and across the globe (Rowlands and Love 2021). Relatedly, just as a romanticization of urban cultures and spaces often reflects anti-ruralism, nostalgia for rural cultures and spaces often veils anti-urban biases and their entanglements with white supremacist ideology.⁴ And further, rural nostalgia—though rooted and ever-present in the U.S. national consciousness—is currently on the rise across our entangled social and political spheres (Hajdik). This makes it particularly urgent to study right now, and more specifically, to study using the tools of rhetorical analysis—as rural nostalgia circulates as a rhetorical and narrative force with material implications. In response, rather than trying to ignore or avoid the presence (and saturation) of rural nostalgia, and rather than surrender its force to the conservative right, *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia* asks what rural nostalgia makes possible (and what, on the other hand, it makes impossible), and how it impacts the land and communities for which it purports to long.

Through a reparative rhetorical analysis of popular culture texts, specifically film and television, and material spaces, specifically national parks, my dissertation studies how particular figures of rural nostalgia (namely, “the small town,” “the frontier,” “the Indian Other” and “the wilderness”) circulate back and forth across widely consumed digital texts, collective imaginaries, political structures, and material realities. As my dissertation pulls up and examines the tangled roots of rural nostalgia—roots that take us to the very origin stories on which the nation was built—I illuminate the rhetorical and narrative tactics through which rural nostalgia is reproduced and repurposed, revised and refused. Relatedly, I take up Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus’ framework for

⁴ Herring’s *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010) offers a critical discussion of anti-ruralism and anti-urbanism, briefly noting the white supremacist “nostalgic code speak” that is often tangled up with celebrations of rurality (5). Through Herring’s lens, it is important for my dissertation to consider practices of rural nostalgia as not only tied up in perceptions of rural life, but also in perceptions of urban (and suburban) life.

rhetorically analyzing nostalgia to uncover who is invested in nostalgic narratives of rurality, why, and to what ends. Further, I engage Sedgwick's framing of reparative reading practices to consider what pedagogical possibilities we might find modeled in contemporary digital, popular culture texts. What might we—as researchers, writing instructors, and community members—learn about deploying rhetorical and narrative tactics in ways that revise and refuse our deepest, and most divisive, stories? As I will explore in more depth in my methodologies section, I situate this combination of rhetorical analysis and reparative reading as reparative rhetorical analysis.

Following Donehower, Hogg, and Schell and the work of their contributors in *Reclaiming the Rural*, this study calls on teachers and scholars (myself included) to see the rural, to notice our relationships to rurality, to investigate the ways our relationships to rurality are reproduced, and to chart the implications of these reproductions in our personal and collective pasts, presences, and futures—all with an awareness of and analytical attunement to the complex histories of rural spaces in the United States, which “are inflected by relations of class, race, gender, power, institutional authority, and the environment” (5). Through this work, my dissertation invites scholars in and beyond rhetoric, composition, and literacy to place analyses of nostalgia and rurality at the center of attempts to understand how relationships to time and place are performed through rhetorical and narrative practices that circulate with material implications. Joining and extending conversations circulating across research, art, and activism, *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia* reckons with the stark divides between the urban and the rural, the desires and tensions that emerge across both anti-ruralism and anti-urbanism, and what those desires have to do with settler colonialism; to the realities of climate change and environmental destruction; to senses and experiences of displacement, loss, and the threat of loss; and to nationalism and white supremacy. More broadly, *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia* is an invitation to place questions of rural nostalgia at the center of our attempts to understand the ways relationships to time and place are performed

through rhetorical and narrative practices that shape our lives and the environments we dwell in, move through, create, and destruct.

As noted above, by centering my dissertation on a rhetorical study of nostalgia, I work to fill a gap marked by Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus in their 2018 *College English* article, “‘Coal Keeps the Lights on’: Rhetorics of Nostalgia for and in Appalachia.” From their review of forty rhetoric and composition journals and presses, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus found only twelve articles or chapters focused specifically on nostalgia, and no books (90). From my more recent review, while rural nostalgia is nearly always mentioned and at least briefly considered in rural studies scholarship across and beyond our discipline (such as the generative conversations about rural nostalgia featured in Jolliffe, et al.’s *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project*), there are still no book-length projects specifically focused on rhetorical studies of rural nostalgia. This said, there are a handful of recent dissertation and thesis projects across the field, especially those by Analisa Skeen (2023) and Mathew Warner (2021), which engage conversations related to rural nostalgia in ways vital to my work in this project and beyond. Joining Skeen and Warner in attending to the gap in rhetorical studies of rural nostalgia, my dissertation will work from and through unsettled conversations around the positive potential and negative implications of rural nostalgia and its rhetorical power (Edmondson 2003; Hogg 2007; Jolliffe, et al. 2016; Kelly 2009; Ladino 2012; Pruitt 2006; Schell 2007). As I connect and contribute to these conversations, my work will provide an opening for further studies focused on the rhetorics of rural nostalgia, as well as a model for rhetorically analyzing nostalgia across texts, practices, and spaces more broadly. Further, *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia* has pedagogical aims, as I investigate and highlight the particular rhetorical and narrative tactics through which we may work with, against, and through the rural nostalgia that is, as I’ve argued, very much here, and likely here to stay, continuing to impact not only our collective imagination, but also our individual and collective material realities, across the United States and beyond. Ultimately, this work

contributes to conversations across rural, narrative, queer, feminist, settler colonial, and rhetoric and composition studies; proposes new ways of understanding the past times, places, and ways of life that rhetorics of rural nostalgia attempt to bring into the future; and perhaps most urgently, points to possibilities for suturing harmful divides across rural and urban communities.

Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia participates in and expands on the work of scholars such as Kim Donehower, Charlotte Hogg, Eileen Schell, Jane Greer, Katrina Powell, Marcia Kmetz, Sara Webb-Sunderhaus, David Jolliffe, and Robert Brooke who have built bridges between rural studies and studies in rhetoric, composition, literacy, and pedagogy. My study also contributes to the field of rhetoric and composition from a methodological perspective as I bring together methodologies across feminist rhetorics and queer theory—learning from and blending methodological approaches from writers and scholars such as Adrienne Rich, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam, and Kathleen Stewart to ultimately propose and employ a combination of rhetorical analysis and reparative reading that makes it possible to illuminate the uses of rural nostalgia rather than focusing solely on an analysis that does little more than prove why it is a problem, who it is a problem to, and the like.

I believe this project will offer important contributions to the discipline partly because, across my two years of coursework here at Syracuse, there were many conversations and assigned readings that addressed the large, structural violence and inequities that I have mentioned above. Unfortunately, one of the only conversations about rural communities that I can recall from my time in coursework included generalizations and degrading language with little understanding of the legacies of social and political inequity that have impacted rural communities (as examined, for example, by Lewis, et al. in *Colonialism in Modern America*). Though our program is only one slice of the broader discipline, and though there is much important and exciting work happening at the intersections of rural studies and rhetoric and composition, I also believe that my experience in

coursework likely speaks to silences and gaps that cut across the field (and the academy more broadly). These silences and gaps negatively impact graduate and undergraduate pedagogy and contribute to senses of disconnection and unbelonging for rural students (see Sohn, Bradbury and Mather, and Donehower for related studies). These silences and gaps regarding rurality also limit our field of vision, making it more difficult to answer the questions we raise about historical and contemporary social and political injustice. My dissertation works alongside rurally-focused rhetoric, composition, and literacy scholars to bring the rural closer to the center of our disciplinary conversations—not so that concerns with the rural overshadow other concerns, but so that we can more effectively think about rural cultures and communities in relation to other concerns and communities, revealing their connections and interdependence. Importantly, in *Reclaiming the Rural*, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell take up Burke’s notion of “identification” to consider the “mutual identifications” that connect rural, suburban, and urban communities and cultures (3).

While each individual chapter of this dissertation features its own literature review specific to the terrain being traversed in that chapter (such as, for example, the small-town imaginary in chapter one and frontier mythology in chapter three), the section below continues to map the broad conversation surrounding rural nostalgia, extending across the disciplines while also attending specifically to the intersection of scholarship in Rural Studies and Rhetoric and Composition. Interwoven with this mapping, I situate and contextualize key concepts and frameworks employed across *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots* and position popular culture texts as pedagogy that have much to teach us about the stabilization and destabilization of dominant, and often harmful, narratives.

Mapping the Conversation and Contextualizing Key Frameworks

Working across disciplinary fields such as psychology, sociology, literary theory, and philosophy, Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* serves as a robust and generative foundation for nostalgia-

related studies, especially those concerned with the ways nostalgia circulates rhetorically and narratively. In this text, Boym traces nostalgia back to its seventeenth-century roots as a medical disorder (3) and defines nostalgia as “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii). Importantly, Boym goes on to write, “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii). This fantasy, as Boym goes on to show, is often entangled with notions of heritage, home, and belonging—it often feels personal but is, as she explores across her study, rooted in the political, the collective, and as I’ve begun to argue, the nation-state. In the United States, through origin stories that weave together home and rurality, nostalgia for the rural is nostalgia for an imagined rural, original, pure home to which we are told that we (i.e., settlers) belong—in other words, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, or at least restorative parts of it, draw from settler creation myths. Importantly for my project, *The Future of Nostalgia* examines the ways nostalgia is both a dividing and a connecting force, and makes a case for the ways depictions of the past are used in the present and come to bear on the future. As I’ll examine in more depth in chapter two through the lens of settler colonialism and what Tuck and Yang critically refer to as “settler moves to innocence” (21), Boym suggests that particular forms of nostalgia (i.e., what she calls restorative nostalgia) are entangled with the problematic drive to release feelings of guilt, shame, and responsibility while affirming national origin stories and senses of belonging, home, and the construction of a collective identity (xiv-xv). While longing (*algia*) can be unifying and progressively transformative, it is the returning home (*nostos*) part of nostalgia that divides us, as it produces an imagined and original home where some but not all belong. From this breaking down of nostalgia into its Latin roots—*nostos* and *algia*—Boym devises her typology of nostalgia—reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia—which I draw from across this dissertation. In short, reflective nostalgia dwells in practices of longing while restorative nostalgia dwells in the reconstruction of a phantom home or identity, and most dangerously, does not recognize itself as

nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia is anchored in false ideals, truths, and traditions; reflective nostalgia calls truth into doubt as it considers ambivalences and contradictions. Restorative nostalgia attempts to reconstruct “emblems and rituals of home and homeland,” while reflective nostalgia attends and brings awareness to “shattered fragments” of past times, spaces, and memories. Aligning with the Boym’s work, in *The Politics of Home*, Duyvendak investigates the interrelated politics of home, belonging, and nostalgia in the United States and the Netherlands, focusing his gaze largely on the aftermath of 9/11, when interestingly, rhetorics of “homeland” security first emerged (104). His study examines the ways rises in nationalisms in Western Europe are connected to notions of home and emotions of feeling at home in the nation-state, and he is largely concerned with the ways nostalgia is used toward these nationalistic political ends. In response, Duyvendak argues that our politics and symbols of home need to become more open and hybrid (124), aligning with Boym’s call for reflective (rather than restorative) nostalgia.

Speaking to findings across *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots*, Boym writes about the ways displaced and marginalized communities have long taken up nostalgia in creative and reflective (rather than restorative) ways—as a “strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming” (xvii). Further, much like I do in the opening of this introductory chapter, Boym acknowledges that there is an over-saturation of nostalgic artifacts circulating through entertainment industries (xvii). However, like me, Boym sees this as proof that we need to study nostalgia, rather than to try to avoid it, attempt to cast it into the shadows, or dismiss its power.

As my epigraph and opening section gesture toward, because nostalgic representations of rural people and communities are so frequent in popular culture, and are often damaging and degrading, much of the scholarship in rural and regional studies has necessarily worked to resist, disavow, and move beyond nostalgia. However, as collaborators Jolliffe, Goering, Oldham, and Anderson explore in *The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project*, because of this resistance to and even

dismissal of nostalgia, there is also a gap in our current understanding of why (and to what ends) rural nostalgia is produced and circulated. As Joliffe and his collaborators write in their introduction, rural nostalgia should not be dismissed because “the sense of loss that examinations of rural America often embody” and the “epideictic, celebratory discourse” that often captures this loss can combine to uncover parts of a “region’s life and culture that are worth preserving” (xvii). Toward this end, the authors draw from Ursula A. Kelly’s “Learning to Lose,” which calls us to face, rather than deny, our senses of loss by embracing the possibilities nostalgia opens (2). Because nostalgia reveals “a strongly felt desire for a better world,” Kelly argues, it “should command our critical attention so that we might understand its inclination and consider how best to tap into its potential in order to promote change” (2). Similarly, in *Reclaiming Nostalgia*, Ladino examines environmental literature to argue that, despite the ways nostalgia has been viewed negatively by scholars, and despite the ways it can be used problematically to construct decontextualized narratives of the past, nostalgia can also be a tool for activism. To this end, Ladino proposes the notion of “counter-nostalgia,” a framework I use across my study but in chapter two especially, to signify a “tactical reappropriation” of nostalgia that is critically reflective toward dominant and decontextualized historiography (15-16). Like Kelly, Ladino argues nostalgia is complex and full of progressive potential, and operationalizing counter-nostalgia, which “envisions the ‘home’ as fractured, fragmented, complicated, and layered” where the past is dynamic and official narratives can be exploited or inverted to challenge dominant histories (105) is critical toward these ends. Rather than justifying the present and stabilizing history, counter-nostalgia is strategically deployed to tactically reappropriate dominant strands of nostalgia through creative means. Counter-nostalgia can be restorative and reflective (Boym), in that it “mimics totalizing or coherent narratives in order to challenge or reinvent them for its own ends” (Ladino 15). Further, “When the counter-nostalgic text envisions a home that is a pure origin—a cohesive site or event constructed by simplifying and

romanticizing a complex past—it has devised that origin in a performative, strategic manner” (Ladino 15). As I examine across my dissertation but in my second chapter especially, counter-nostalgic narratives toy with dominant narratives of nostalgia to destabilize and subvert them in ways that we can and should learn from.

While perspectives on nostalgia and its progressive potential are critical to this study, it’s also important to contend with the fact that many practices of rural nostalgia do not align with Ladino’s notion of counter-nostalgia, and the “better world” much rural nostalgia envisions is not always (and perhaps not often) better for everyone. As several scholars show, this is especially true when nostalgia is generated from outside the community and culture it purports to long for. Central to my understanding of this side of the debate around rural nostalgia is Pruitt’s “Rural Rhetoric,” an examination of the ways rural places, communities, and ways of life have been and continue to be constituted and transformed by judges and lawmakers that, increasingly, form their views of the rural from a distance, and because of this distance, are more likely to rely on stereotypes to fill in the gaps of their direct experience (164). In *Reclaiming the Rural*, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell speak to the problems highlighted by Pruitt’s study when they note the importance of avoiding “celebratory rhetorics of rural life that rely too much on nostalgia for their power” (5). Relatedly, in *Rural Literacies*, Donehower, Hogg, and Schell consider the possibilities opened and closed by nostalgia for rural ways of life. Drawing from Edmondson’s *Prairie Town* in “The Rhetorics of the Farm Crisis,” Schell considers the tragedy rhetoric that circulates by way of mystery and misinformation about agricultural life, generating what Edmondson calls a “traditional rural literacy” that “reads rural life through nostalgia for the past and efforts to return rural communities to the way they once were” (Edmondson 15). This nostalgic reading of rural life can lead to preservation practices, but rhetorics and logics of preservation often rely on and reproduce essentialism and isolation (Schell 78-9). Similarly, in “Beyond Agrarianism,” Hogg considers how nostalgia can act as a force that enables a

“re-seeing” of rural space, but that it can also create a binary between either celebrating *or* being critical of rural life and culture (127-8). This binary, Hogg argues, is what needs broken down if we are to practice “critical, public pedagogy that moves toward sustainability” (128). In *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia*, I learn from the work of these scholars to employ analytical methods (i.e., reparative rhetorical analysis methods) that attempt to hold together the complex and seemingly contradictory potentialities of rural nostalgia and its rhetorical power.

Drawing from Boym’s restorative versus reflective typology of nostalgia in “Coal Keeps the Lights On,” Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus review the ways nostalgia has been researched and theorized across history, geography, social psychology, cultural studies, marketing, and political science. Similarly to Boym, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus discuss the history of nostalgia from its coining by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in 1688 (89). Interestingly, Hofer examined soldiers and the ways their nostalgia served as a form of “identity recovery in the face of upheaval” because it functioned as “a life-changing desire to return to a place” where they had previously constructed their identities (89). In this way, nostalgia functions differently than collective memory (upon which there is far more research in the field) as it is necessarily rooted in and with notions and feelings of home and belonging and origins that may feel personal but are, in reality, rhetorically entangled with national identity and narratives. Across their article, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus focus on complicating conceptions of nostalgia while simultaneously constructing a framework for studying rhetorics of nostalgia. This framework, or rhetoric of nostalgia, asks rhetoricians to continually ask, “Who wants whom to remember what and why?” (94) Breaking down this framework further, they argue that rhetoricians of nostalgia should ask what audiences long for (90); who is the past “we” that is being longed for, and what this “we” reveals about both the present and possible futures (91); who is being blamed for the change or loss (92-93); and where there might be instances of neostalgia—a term which aligns closely with Boym’s definition of reflective nostalgia (93, 105).

In addition to my use of this framework, explored in my methods section, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' framing of the rhetorical process of "nostalgic othering" is central to my study. While many scholars have studied this phenomenon, it's Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus who most usefully define it as "the simultaneous embrace, disgust, and rhetorical use of Appalachian identity" (95).⁵ In my project, I take up this term and extend its analytical capacity beyond Appalachia and toward trans-regional figures of rurality—such as the small town (chapter one), the Indian Other (chapter two), the frontier (chapter three), and the wilderness (chapter four). As Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus explain, "Nostalgic others differ from other 'others' of scholarly discourse (e.g., Said's *Orientalism*) in that their alterity is not primarily based in race or ethnicity. Rather . . . the nostalgic other is distinguished from the rhetor by time" (95). In other words, nostalgic othering is a powerful rhetorical construct that allows a person or collective of people to freeze their perception of a person, community, or place in a past that they have (likely) imagined or internalized from the imaginations of others. From this position as frozen, the nostalgic other can then be taken up and repurposed to serve the present and, as it follows, impact the future. For example, explaining the rhetorical purpose and impacts of the nostalgic othering of West Virginians, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus argue, "The creation of the nostalgic other allows mainstream populations to commodify the [imagined] racial purity and stability of the past (the mountaineer) but refuses the community agency to change in the present by highlighting its negative traits (the illiteracy, poverty, and insularity of the hillbilly)" (95). As I found across my chapters, the continual reproduction of rural nostalgia relies on the process of nostalgic othering, and nostalgic othering is to blame for much of the negative implications of rural nostalgia, as it is this freezing in time and place that makes it nearly

⁵ See, for examples, Edmondson's *Prairie Town* and her conception of the "traditional rural literacy" (15), Bateau's *Appalachia On Our Mind*, Massey's "Appalachian Stereotypes," Hartman's "West Virginia Mountaineers and Kentucky Frontiersman," and Bell and York's "Community Economic Identity" for an exploration of the phenomena Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus label as "nostalgic othering."

impossible to imagine rural spaces and communities as dynamic, diverse spaces where change is not only possible but happening. Relatedly, nostalgic othering prevents an awareness of what Donehower, Hogg, and Schell critically term “mutual identification” (5), as the process of nostalgic othering continually renews the mythologized separation across the rural and urban, and across marginalized rural and urban communities in particular. As I explore in each of my remaining chapters, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia relies on nostalgic othering as a process through which dominant narratives of the rural travel. And as evidence of the ways rural nostalgia is entangled with settler colonial logics, the process of nostalgic othering connects quite directly to Walter D. Mignolo’s theorization of the colonial matrix of power. According to Mignolo, the colonial matrix of power operates through a “rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality” that characterizes and celebrates the “progress” and “development” of one (dominant) group while silencing and problematizing the other group as “impoverished,” “corrupt,” and in need of the dominant group’s intervention and uplift (viii).

Though my study does not focus specifically on Appalachia, I have learned from the ways Appalachian-focused scholars such as Batteau, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus, Bell and York, Massey, Hartman, and Gottlieb speak to the debate around the use and value of rural nostalgia, and the specific ways the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia functions across Appalachia. Though they (with the exception of Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus) do not center rhetorical analyses of nostalgia in their projects, they do discuss the ways nostalgia travels through the symbolic field that surrounds (and seeps into) a region. In other words, the rhetorical phenomenon of nostalgic othering is produced from the outside—by, for example, the extractive industry (Bell and York 2010)—through rhetorical means and with rhetorical ends—such as to, for example, draw boundaries around normative race, class, and gender identities (Massey 2007, Batteau 1990). Together, these scholars trace the ways nostalgic rhetorics travel to the inside of places and communities, dwelling there and

generating what Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus refer to as a “community of nostalgia” (95), or the result of externally-produced nostalgic narratives working their way to the inside of a particular community, and once there, becoming internalized and taken up as their own. Communities of nostalgia can and do, for a variety of rhetorical and narrative purposes, participate in processes of their own nostalgic othering. Importantly, my study extends outward from the spaces these scholars open by carefully describing and analyzing what popular culture texts can teach us about how the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia travels from the outside to the inside of rural communities, and further, how rural communities deploy rhetorics of rural nostalgia to their own ends, circulating them back outward through their own rhetorical practices. As I trace these movements, I pay particular attention to when and how taking up rural nostalgic narratives and rhetorics shores up boundaries between the inside and outside of rural communities, and when it works to make those boundaries more porous.

In review, with collective perceptions of the past as its reference point, rural nostalgia draws from these perceptions in a way that circulate stories about who, where, and how we desire to be in the future—these stories, in turn, also reveal something about who, where, and how we are (or how we see ourselves) in our present place and time. In this way, as education scholar Ursula A. Kelly argues, nostalgia is fueled by dissatisfaction (2). Rural nostalgia, then, combines senses of loss, displacement, desire, and romance for experiences, imaginations, and perceptions of rurality. Rural nostalgia is a feeling, of course, but it is also a rhetorical, narrative, and material practice. Thinking with rhetoric scholars Lisa Bickmore and Anis Bawarshi, I use the term the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia to acknowledge the complex and intersecting set of texts, genres, stories, structures, policies, and practices that comprise the regenerative rhetorical, narrative, and material force of rural nostalgia (Bickmore 2016, Bawarshi 2001). We find evidence of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia in the contemporary country and western song coming through the speakers of the large

truck the teenager drives through his suburban neighborhood. We find it in the trillion-dollar outdoor recreation industry (“Commerce’s Bureau”), the weddings in the barns, the reality shows about surviving in the wilderness, and unfortunately, in the deaths of tourists gored by bison at national parks as they attempt to capture the bison’s image with their phones.

As I’ll continue to explore across my study, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia relies far less on actual population density and government definitions of what counts as rural space and far more on the signs, symbols, and stories that circulate around and rhetorically construct spaces, communities, and cultures as “rural” (or, in opposition, as “urban”). This aligns with Donehower, Hogg, and Schell’s consideration of the way “rural” is often used as “a marker of identity, regardless of demographic criteria or current location. People may self-identify as rural or identify others as rural, and by so doing invoke a complex chain of associations and ideologies” (7). Further, as Scott Herring explains in *Another Country*, terms such as rural and urban “subsist as structures of intense feeling,” because, as he explains, “Space and place are as much act and experience as they are dirt and rock, concrete and steel” (Herring 13). In addition to Herring’s consideration of space and place, my dissertation also draws from Malea Powell’s definition of space as “a place that has been practiced into being through acts of storied making, where the past is brought into conscious conversation with the present and where—through those practices of making—a future can be imagined” (388). In ways similar to Powell, place-based education scholar David Grunewald frames place as “social constructions filled with ideologies,” and argues that our experience of a place shapes our cultural identities, narratives, and ways of living (4). Relatedly, as Powell and her collaborators describe in “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics,” place and culture and rhetoric are inextricably linked, as “cultures are made up of practices that accumulate over time and in relationship to specific places” (Powell, et al. Act I). In Skeen’s words, this accumulates into an “intensely rhetorical” and “complex ecology” of relations across “lands, bodies,

practices, and texts” (12). I work to attune and attend to this complex rhetorical ecology across my dissertation, and terms such as the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and the aforementioned definitions of space and place hold me accountable to these efforts.

As this project explores, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia is knitted with constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For example, as Geoff Mann’s “Why Does Country Music Sound White?” examines, taking up the cultural politics of nostalgia—one of the genre’s most dominant tropes—as a lens, Mann argues that country music constructs and reproduces an idealized past (or what he calls a “used to”) that is gripped in racism and whiteness that ignores its diverse cross-regional and cross-cultural circulation and, importantly, its Black heritage (74-5). Mann argues that popular music, and country music in particular, has played and continues to play a “crucial ideological role” in the “cultural politics of race” (84). In this way, rural nostalgia has played a similarly crucial role in processes and politics of racialization. Though my study focuses on popular film and television rather than music, Mann’s research lays a foundation for understanding the ways rural nostalgic texts often pit rural and urban life against one another (85), and in doing so, offers a particular imagination (i.e., white) of rural life as an antidote to perceptions of the present and the urban. This finding tracks with those across my dissertation. For example, in my third chapter I explore the ways the rhetorical construction of the frontier is deeply rooted in conceptions of the western region of the United States as an individual and collective “cure” for the ailments of modernity, especially for gendered ailments such as neurasthenia, a focus of that chapter (Cram 35-36). In conversation with Boym’s concept of restorative nostalgia, Mann argues that, because popular country music is unconscious of its use of nostalgia, it is unable to become reflective or critical towards it. In this way, it cannot and does not offer paths or visions of an “alternative future” (89). In his analysis of the genre’s entanglement with nostalgia, Mann draws from Stewart’s theorization of nostalgia as a narrative practice (86-7). Lyrically, Mann finds that the

rural nostalgia expressed by and through country music sounds like dehistoricized innocence, naive victimhood, and performances of authenticity (89-91)—all findings which parallel my own as I pull up the roots of rural nostalgia, and the construction of nostalgic others in particular, across my remaining chapters. The kind of rural nostalgia offered up through popular country music—by artists sometimes from rural backgrounds but increasingly from more sub(urban) upbringings and lifestyles—aligns with what Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus describe as the makings of a “community of nostalgia” (95), a phenomenon explored above and in greater depth in my next chapter. And though *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots* focuses largely on television and film—mostly because I felt that they offered more in the way of pedagogical models for the destabilization of dominant nostalgic narratives—Mann’s study offers a great deal to our understanding of the ways rural nostalgia circulates and the consequences of its circulation, especially consequences related to racism and whiteness.

Relatedly, as my exploration has begun to reference, and as I will explore across each chapter, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia is deeply entwined with the projects of settler colonialism and nationalism in the context of the construction and stabilization of the United States. In “Wilderness, Freedom, Firearms,” Patrick Belanger considers the nation as a rhetorical community, drawing from a shared history, collective project, and unifying story. Drawing from conceptions of the nation from across rhetorical and communication scholarship, Belanger cites Anderson’s argument nations are imagined communities constructed by “shared narratives and correlated amnesias” (204).⁶ As examined across the remainder of this study, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia makes significant and lasting contributions to these narratives and amnesias—or what scholars such as Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki (2005) and Stuckey (2011) consider as

⁶ Similarly, in *Strategies of Remembrance: The Rhetorical Dimensions of National Identity Construction*, Bruner argues that national identity is a flexible, adaptable fiction that is continually negotiated through the histories that are made accessible (or, conversely, inaccessible) (3).

processes of selectively remembering and forgetting, processes which contribute to what Cram (2022) refers to as “memory cultures of violence.” Further, as Stephanie Rutherford contends, “Communication is not only about language, or what we say, don’t say, or can’t say. It is also about actions, sites of production, practices, embodiments, and images” that make possible or impossible particular habits of mind and particular modes of expression (xxiii). With this in mind, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and its entanglements with the dominant national identity and storytelling machine aligns with what Scott Lyon’s refers to as rhetorical imperialism—a process which attempts to silence, erase, and marginalize the stories and voices of communities constructed as “Others” (452). Together, rural nostalgia works with nationalism in an attempt to stabilize white settler American identities and origin stories regarding settler claims to untouched, pure rural land (Combs 724). As I explore below and across my dissertation, this narrative and rhetorical project is especially powerful throughout periods of transition and insecurity, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and conflicts with the Middle East (Carpenter 1977; Goulding 2000; Jones 2011; Ladino 2012; Stuckey 2011). Ultimately, claims of “the rural roots of U.S. culture” continue to reproduce national identity myths that fuel what many scholars refer to as nature-based nationalism (Cram 2022, Rutherford 2011).

Cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo’s conception of “imperialist nostalgia” (1989) emerges as significant across my study, but in my later chapters in particular, as a lens through which to understand the relationship across rural nostalgia, nationalism, and settler colonialism. As Rosaldo observed, imperialist nostalgia emerges when “people destroy their environment and then worship nature” (Rosaldo 107). Rhetorically, imperialist nostalgia turns what is actually the result of “brutal domination” of land and its inhabitants into what is felt as innocent longing for nature (Rosaldo 107). As I find, popular culture texts with aims to destabilize the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia must often engage rhetorical and narrative tactics in ways that first make visible and then

challenge imperialist nostalgia. Because of the saturation of imperialist nostalgia and the histories and contemporary realities it shields, attempts to poke and prod at widespread imperialist nostalgia are critical, and as it follows, learning from these attempts in our work as scholars, teachers, and community members is just as critical.

When I have described this project casually to family, friends, and colleagues, their first response is often something related to the way they are noticing, much like *Demon Copperhead*, more and more rural nostalgia lately. Each of my chapters will explore this phenomenon through the lenses of different constructions of rurality, but what is clear is that no matter what lens we look through, nostalgia surges in times of cultural transformation and social tumult. In uncertain, challenging times (i.e., a global pandemic, widespread political polarization, intensely rapid technological change, environmental catastrophe, and wars across Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East), a collective “we” looks to the past in order to make sense of the present and in hopes of controlling for or predicting the future. In terms of the collective national imaginary constructed in the United States, looking to the past necessarily means looking back to the (or “our”) mythologized rural past, and the many stories about the “wild,” “untouched,” and “pure” space where “we” mark “our” origins. Anna Thompson Hajdik, a Film Studies scholar whose work has focused on representations of the rural, wrote recently about the resurgence of rural nostalgia happening right now. Tumbleweeds, an “iconic symbol of rural dissolution if ever there was one,” she offers as an example, sell for as much as \$200 a piece and are used as home décor. And while it can be easy to assume that rural nostalgia, as well as our current political rural and urban divides, are contemporary phenomena, as I’ll explore from chapter to chapter of this dissertation, the roots of rural nostalgic rhetoric go much deeper—to the very narratives on which the United States was constructed. Though Hajdik does not trace the roots of rural nostalgia back this far, she usefully

marks 1920 as one moment in time when the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia began gathering force, as this was the first time the Census reported that more people lived in urban (51.2%) than rural spaces (48.8%) in the United States. Then, fifty years later in the eighties, environmental catastrophe and financial disaster converged into what is known as the Farm Crisis, followed quickly by the worst drought rural America had seen since the Dust Bowl. Meanwhile, as Hajdik points out, popular culture reflected an uptick in the romanticization of a rural life that was, in reality, on the decline. From films such as *Country* (1984) to *Field of Dreams* (1989), “Hollywood simultaneously reflected the dire economic circumstances of American farmers and romantically cast the farm family as noble and heroic.” Across our streaming platforms and best-seller lists, a similar phenomenon is brewing right now, as many yearn for what rural nostalgia promises to “a slice of the American populace”—an idyllic escape that is simultaneously a return “home.” And of course, this uptick in rural nostalgia is not confined to our textual and imaginative dimensions—in chapters three and four I consider the more direct material implications as, for example, more and more people visit or buy land in rural areas. Like nearly every other scholar who takes up rural nostalgia, Hajdik reminds us that nostalgia is often problematic, as it is a “form of essentializing rural people and places without truly engaging in more substantive conversations about so many of the challenges facing rural America today,” such as poverty, population loss, and feelings of isolation (Hajdik). While Hajdik does not necessarily pull up rural nostalgia at its roots, her tracing of the relationship between cultural surges in rural nostalgia and their relationship to and reflection in popular culture is trenchant, as it constructs bridges from our political and imaginative dimensions to the textual and material. In this way, Hajdik makes a case for my study of popular culture texts alongside material spaces and public policy. In the subsection below, I map the relationship across

narrative, rhetoric, and mythology in more depth, and in doing so, lay the foundation for an understanding of the ways popular culture can serve as pedagogy.

From Rhetoric to Narrative to Mythology

As I've argued, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia travels through and traffics in narratives and mythologies that construct particular figures of rurality (such as the hillbilly or the cowboy), contribute to the material realities of life in rural spaces, and more broadly, continually generate an "imagined relation to the past that *also* invites particular action in the present" (Cram 15). In considering all of this, my study finds purchase in frameworks that attend to the relationships across rhetoric, narrative, and myth. For example, Jason Vincent A. Cabañes' "Digital Disinformation and the Imaginative Dimension of Communication" operationalizes Arlie Hochschild's concept of "deep stories" as an analytic tool to understand where "identities, feelings, and passion stem from, how they are created and sustained" and why they are expressed in the particular ways that they are, especially in terms of political action (444).⁷ Cabañes argues that while there is much communication scholarship about our contemporary political divides, there is a lack of understanding of the ways deep stories inform those divides. As compared to many other studies of digital disinformation and the people who are exploited by it, Cabañes' approach is useful because it asks complex questions rather than relying on assumptions—it's through questioning, it seems, that Cabañes' lands on his conception of the "imaginative dimension of communication"—a complex dimension layered with emotionality and sociality, along with ritual and story and mediation. Because I understand rural nostalgia as a rhetorical ecosystem that is fuel for and fueled by narratives deeply embedded in the

⁷ Hochschild describes deep stories as the stories people tell themselves about who they are, what values they hold, and, ultimately, what their place in society is. As Hochschild's ethnographic research reveals, deep stories shape our ideas, decisions, and actions.

collective national imaginary, deep stories are an especially useful tool, alongside and in conjunction with rhetorical analysis, for “probing what people are nostalgic for, why, and to which ends” (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 89-90).

Throughout my dissertation, I use both *rhetoric* and *deep stories*—as analytical tools and interrelated terms that allow for a generative investigation into the ways the texts and spaces I analyze reproduce, disrupt, and make porous the dominant archetypes of the rural. Through the guidance of Amanda Hayes and *The Politics of Appalachian Rhetoric*, I see these terms—*rhetoric* and *deep stories*—as closely intertwined, as Hayes defines rhetoric as “how we tell and use our stories and the stories of those around us to decide who we are and what we stand for” (9). In this way, deep stories are rhetorical, and rhetoric is driven by the deep stories that contribute to “the process and means by which identity and values are shaped and conveyed” (Hayes 13). Relatedly, connecting across culture, rhetoric, and story in “Becoming Relations: Braiding an Indigenous Manifesto,” Andrea Riley Mukavetz and Malea Powell usefully assert, “Culture is, after all, a storied practice. And the practice of culture is rhetorical” (201). With these understandings of rhetoric and narrative in mind, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia consists of texts, practices, spaces, structures, and policies that traffic in deep stories about what the rural is and who does and does not inhabit it. Relatedly, Stephanie Rutherford argues that narratives cluster into ecosystems of discourse that “have material dimensions and effects” (xxiii).

In situating the relationship across rhetoric and deep stories, my dissertation learns from a variety of diverse Indigenous scholars and leans toward Thomas King’s articulation of narrative in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*—stories, King assures, make and unmake our worlds. They matter, by which I mean, they materialize. King compares Christian to Indigenous storytelling practices by examining the way the Bible constructs a “hierarchical relationship between God, man, animals, and plants,” while Native storytelling practices work toward co-operation and balance (23-

24). In response to the impacts of Euro-Western storytelling practices, King's work suggests that we should take seriously the relationships, structures, and worlds constructed by our dominant cultural narratives. As Kimberly G. Wieser usefully examines in *Back to the Blanket: Recovered Rhetorics and Literacies in American Indian Studies*, storytelling is a rhetorical practice that “highlights communal meaning-making systems” (12). Further, storytelling, according to Jo-Ann Archibald in *Indigenous Storywork*, is a form of pedagogy. Similarly, Robin Wall Kimmerer positions stories as “user manuals” (343). And as has been extensively explored in many contexts, stories have connective power, and more particularly in the context of many Indigenous narrative practices, “Stories unite people in relationships with the land and with each other” (Jackson and DeLaune 38). Through this formulation, we can also surmise that stories can disconnect people from their relationships to land and to each other.

Scholar of cultural mythology, Britta Bushnell (2020) maps the ways storytelling as pedagogy—as a means through which we learn—is becoming more understood through the lens of Western medicine and science, and neuroscience in particular. Story and metaphor are sticky—we remember them, and especially when we are emotionally connected to them, we understand them in ways much more meaningful than facts and figures. This aligns with Jennifer Clary-Lemon's argument in *Planting the Anthropocene* (2019), as well as findings across psychology and sociology, that reveal that we must story data related to climate change, rather than continuing to place false hope in offering more and more data that is not rooted in, or is abstracted from, story (Kelly). Stories are, Bushnell writes, how we remember, especially when they generate an image or motion picture in our minds. Through these lenses, nostalgia—a mode of and force for personal and collective remembering and forgetting—is deeply entwined with the (re)production and circulation of stories that offer lasting and emotion-stirring images. All told, this dissertation and the arguments

developed herein hinge on the belief that, “Narrative shapes our world—both the narratives we rehearse and the narratives that are hidden from us” (Harper).

As I made my way through the literature related to rural nostalgia and particular figures of rurality, such as the frontier, the terms *myth* and *mythology* continued to emerge. Below, I connect these terms to related terms such as rhetoric and narrative. In brief, I situate myths as rhetorical structures that are built with and fueled by stories. In this way, not all stories are myths, but all myths are entangled with particular narratives. Belanger’s examination of sacred rhetoric is helpful for my conceptualization of myths and their connection to rhetoric. Myths, Belanger asserts, connect rhetoric and shared ideals, such as those around nature and the wilderness in the context of the United States. Drawing from the work of communication scholars Rowland and Frank, Belanger positions myths as “sacred stories that inspire action” and cultivate “communal identification and division” (42). Like Boym’s framing of restorative nostalgia, sacred stories generate power from claims to absolute values and truths (such as those constructed about the pure, untouched, wild origins of the United States, for example).

Claude Levi-Strauss forwarded the notion of myth as a strategy for “reconciling the deeply held conceptual binaries that lie at the root of any culturally legible form of meaning” (Bishop 61). Myth, by Barthes’ formulation, is a depoliticized and dehistoricized language that becomes more and more powerful as it transitions from history to nature—in other words, as the story of history becomes naturalized. As Patin writes in *Observation Points: The Visual Poetics of National Parks* (2012), “Myth accomplishes this effect through the use of compromise, distortion, inflection, or a variety of other ways, in other words, through rhetoric” (Patin xv). Through this lens, myths are deeply rhetorical, as they shift and shape our collective and individual identities, beliefs, and narratives. As it follows, then, I understand mythology as a collective of interrelated myths that shape who we understand ourselves to be. Through a variety of lenses across the remaining chapters of this

project, I analyze the relationship between various cultural mythology related to the rural and the circulation, reproduction, and repurposing of rural nostalgia.

What's perhaps most interesting and important about mythic rhetoric in terms of this study, though, as Burkholder writes about in their study on the agrarian myth, mythic appeals can sometimes "transcend diverse political ideologies" (293). Looking across my dissertation, the nostalgic others of rurality that I study from chapter to chapter—the small town, the Indian Other, the frontier, and the wilderness—circulate, and inspire action, back and forth across political divides. As chapter three zooms in on, the mythic figure of the cowboy and mythologies around frontier masculinity, for example, are alive and well in every sphere and side of our culture. In this way, mythic rhetoric poses possibilities for connection across the right and left, and as it follows, the rural and urban. This is another reason why I assert that it is important and even urgent to rhetorically study rural nostalgia—it is both a connecting and dividing force, it is felt across the political spectrum, and rhetoric and communication scholars and instructors are well positioned to learn how we may use rhetoric and narrative to harness its connective powers and disrupt its divisive ones. In the following subsection, I build off this assertion to position popular culture texts, and television and film in particular, as pedagogical avenues through which we can learn how widely-circulated, widely-consumed texts are making moves toward this critical work through an engagement with the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

Pop Culture as Pedagogy

In *Nationalism, Popular Culture, and Everyday Life* (2002), Tim Edensor argues that understanding nationalism requires studying popular culture, as popular culture reflects and contributes to national identity and vice versa. Further, as Barbara Kingsolver examines through *Demon Copperhead*, and as scholars such as Andrew Harkins have explored in *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*

(2005), J.W. Williamson in *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (1995), Tara McPherson in *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (2003), and Anna Thompson Hajdik in “Cinematic Representations of ‘Flyover Country’ in the Twenty-First Century” (2019), mainstream cultural texts, particularly film and television, have long been the primary vehicle through which the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia lives, grows, and spreads—moving back and forth across the textual to the imaginative to the political to the material. This is perhaps explored most thoroughly and convincingly in my third chapter, where I study the history and presence of the Western genre, noting its market dominance and how the very first film was, in fact, a Western. As Rutherford writes in *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power*, “sites of popular culture...generate scripts that define, circumscribe, and limit how nature is understood” (xi), and as it follows, illuminate the way that we, individually and collectively, tell the “truth” about rural space and the “natural” world.

In taking up and taking seriously pop culture, my project also participates in a rich intellectual tradition across feminist and queer theory and rhetorical scholarship, wherein the boundaries across “high” and “low” culture are blurred in a way that disturbs “the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing” (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 2), and through this disturbance, insists on the inseparability of our everyday material realities, the texts and stories we consume, the pasts and futures we can and cannot imagine for ourselves and others, and the political and economic structures under which we persist and, perhaps, resist.

Mainstream television and film rely on an instant sense of recognition and affirmation to draw large audiences into their imaginative terrain. This is where deep stories and mythology come in, and this is why mainstream film and television offer a generative investigation into the production and circulation, and possibilities for stabilization and destabilization, of the deep stories and mythology that fuel and are fueled by the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. Because the

reproduction of deep stories allows popular culture texts to generate feelings of authenticity, emotionality, connection, and identification; it is no surprise that mainstream popular culture texts draw from, rely on, and reproduce the deeply-storied divides between rural and urban communities and cultures.

Relatedly, my project also finds and asserts that popular culture texts, especially film and television can function—like museums, artifacts, and archives bent overtly toward memorialization—as “powerful rhetorical sites in which the past is selectively presented” (Armada 236). This selection of the past is then used as a vehicle through which to settle, sustain, and continually negotiate individual and collective identities and the mythology on which those identities—including national identities—are built. Film and television, in this way, acts as a deeply rhetorical intersection of nationalism, public memory, and the imagination of future possibilities (Biesecker 2024). Popular culture texts are also necessarily entangled with capitalism and the capitalist marketplace, as the narratives represented in popular culture are those deemed marketable to a large, mainstream audience. But importantly, as José Esteban Muñoz describes in *Disidentifications*, art and media can and does serve a politically pedagogical role, as it can provide audiences with models of resistance (xi). Though not always, and perhaps not often, mainstream popular cultural texts can and do offer opportunities for counterpublic interventions, even as mainstream media is “usually hostile to counterpublic politics” (151). This hostility, and the struggle it generates, is made evident in the art and media we consume and have access to, as the state, the market, and the artist all have different goals (Muñoz 199). And yet, the artist, the state, and the market “have the audience as their common target” as “they aim to make worlds” (Muñoz 199). It often feels like a miracle (and in many ways, it is) when a narrative that destabilizes deep stories and disturbs the circulation of dominant mythology breaks through the mainstream capitalist marketplace. Of the pop culture I study in *Pulling Up The Tangled Roots*, I think especially of *Reservation*

Dogs (analyzed in chapter two) as this kind of miracle text that has much to teach us about revising deep stories *and* bringing counterpublic politics to mainstream audiences. Learning from Munoz' argument, I also situate popular culture as pedagogy, or as a possibility for pedagogy—where we can learn from the rhetorical and narrative tactics engaged in these texts, and further, use them as models in our community work and classrooms and scholarship—broadly, in our own attempts to destabilize deep stories that are reductive, divisive, and even destructive. When I consider the positioning of pop culture as pedagogy, I consider Freire's critical pedagogy formulation of "reading the world" (1998). Reading the world means taking up the "texts" of our lives, including our own experiences, as political texts worthy of studying, reflecting on, and learning from (Grunewald 4). In a society that consumes large amounts of film and television, I position "reading" widely-circulated and widely-consumed texts (such as *Schitt's Creek*, *Reservation Dogs*, and *The Power of the Dog*) as an urgent rhetorical and political project, as carriers of stories, they play a critical role in making and unmaking our worlds. In other words, as Rutherford articulates, discourse distilled through popular culture "does not leave the land untouched: it makes and remakes nature for consumption by particular people at specific times" (xix). And yet, crucially, "materiality matters. The biophysical world writes back, as it were, shaping how discourses can be imagined and deployed" (Rutherford xix). For this reason, while I position and take up pop culture as pedagogy in chapters one through three of my dissertation, in my fourth chapter, I study the material space of Yellowstone National Park as its own multi-species composition that, alongside film and television, is critical and urgent to read, reflect on, and learn from as a dynamic political, rhetorical, pedagogical text. In the next section, I offer an exploration of my methods and methodologies, followed by an overview of each of the remaining chapters of this project.

Method(ologie)s: Reparative Rhetorical Analysis

My primary method across this dissertation is a reparative rhetorical analysis—a combination of Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus’ rhetoric of nostalgia, which provides a step-by-step method for rhetorically analyzing nostalgia by “probing what people are nostalgic for, why, and to which ends” (89-90), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reparative reading and weak theorizing, a methodology for turning our attention away from evaluating whether a text, narrative, or representation is good or bad and toward a study of how that text, narrative, or representation moves—and how we move among it (129). However, each chapter represents a renegotiation of methodology and conceptual tools, as I navigate the rhetorical analysis of different texts in different genres, but also my different positionality in reference to those texts and the bodies of knowledge I draw from to make meaning of them throughout my analysis.

To summarize, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus’ rhetoric of nostalgia asks rhetoricians to attend to: what people long for, how past models of community—or models for who “we” are—stabilize the present and urge collective action—or moves toward who we should be. Then, the rhetorician should uncover and catalog the ways communities of nostalgia blame outsiders who have caused the community’s loss. Lastly, rhetoricians of nostalgia look for pride, longing, and hope that resists, counters, or appropriates dominant forms of nostalgia to create new identities, and by my own extension, relationalities. This last step—the looking for moments and models for resistance or countering of dominant nostalgia (i.e., restorative nostalgia) aligns in useful ways with what Sedgwick characterizes as reparative reading and weak theorizing.

As noted, Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading asks that we turn our attention away from evaluating whether a piece of meaning is good or bad and toward a study of how that meaning moves—and how we move among it (Sedgwick 129). Reparative reading plays out through what Sedgwick calls weak (as opposed to strong) theory—theory that leans on and to description,

variance, epistemological uncertainty, and resistance to the foreclosure of alternative possibilities or understandings. Throughout my project, I take up reparative reading as a guiding methodological tool that will help me steer my rhetorical analysis away from evaluating rural nostalgia as good and bad and steer toward proposing new understandings of what rural nostalgia is, what it does, and how it moves.

This set of methods and methodological tools is especially useful for the analysis of nostalgia—an affect that is largely labeled (and often dismissed) as bad (i.e., present but without use). This sense of what a rhetorical study of nostalgia calls for has been sharpened by Kathleen Stewart’s work in *Ordinary Affects*. For Stewart, ordinary affects are “public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of” (5). Through this lens, I understand nostalgia as an ordinary affect—a feeling that circulates rhetorically in and across the personal and the public. Like my interest in rural nostalgia, Stewart is not interested in deciding whether ordinary affects are good or bad but is instead interested in “creating an idiosyncratic map” that reveals “where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things” are present within them (3-4). Relatedly, my thinking in this project has been shaped and inspired by communication scholar E Cram’s *Violent Inheritances: Sexuality, Land, and Energy in Making the North American West* (2022). While I draw from Cram’s text more thoroughly in my third chapter, across my dissertation I draw methodological inspiration from Cram’s call to “bury your nose down deep and smell the blood in the soul,” and then from this practice, to ask, “What can be done with violent inheritances” (xv)? As I have found, reparative reading combined with rhetorical analysis is an effective way to take up this kind of question.

As noted, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia has largely been studied through the lens of what Sedgwick might refer to as paranoid readings—or readings that mainly attempt to point

out what is wrong with rural nostalgia. Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading (as adapted from psychoanalyst Melanie Klein), on the other hand, emphasizes an openness toward possibilities for new ways of knowing and understanding. These possibilities are, in Sedgwick's view, often foreclosed by paranoid readings. Considering her own application of weak theory, Kathleen Stewart writes that it is, "Theory that comes unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters, or becomes undone by its attention to things that don't just add up but take on a life of their own as problems for thought" (72). Weak theory, especially when held together with reparative practices of knowing, pulls us off the well-trodden path so that we might end up somewhere different, having learned something different than we planned or expected. Sedgwick's framework for weak theorizing shares resonances with Halberstam's notion of low theory—a "model of thinking" that emphasizes "getting lost over finding our way" and finds meaning in "an ambulatory journey through the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising" (*The Queer Art of Failure* 16). In this way, low theories are "a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an undisciplined zone of knowledge production" (18). Weak and low theories do not, like their more dominant and better disciplined counterparts, find their meaning in epistemological knocking out, pinning down, and holding still—habits of mind that would not extend our understandings of how we might use and learn from the circulation and reproduction of rural nostalgic stories and texts. In alignment with my reparative goals for this project, Stewart writes:

For me, then, the point of theory now is not to judge the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation 'right' but to wonder where they might go and what

potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance. (73)

This analytical, methodological purpose is also present across rhetorical scholarship, particularly those that work in and across disability, feminist, queer, Indigenous, comparative, and cross-cultural studies. For example, in Luming Mao's "Thinking Beyond Aristotle: The Turn to How in Comparative Rhetoric," Mao calls for a move away from questions such as, "What is the rhetoric of the Dao?" and toward questions such as, "How does [the rhetoric of Dao] guide human conduct? How does the rhetoric of the Dao arise? What meanings does it convey? And how does this rhetoric shape and inhabit the world?" (Mao 451) Rhetorical studies that pin down "questions of fact" (i.e., "What is the rhetoric of Dao?") can be traced back to Aristotle through the EuroAmerican Tradition, but "questions of usage" (i.e., "And how does [the rhetoric of Dao] shape and inhabit the world?") challenge this dominant intellectual tradition and strike me as part of the project scholars such as Sedgwick, Stewart, Halberstam, and Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus propose. Considering the ways reparative readings reflect and sustain queerer habits of mind and ways of being, Sedgwick writes:

No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (150-151)

I commit to attempting this stance and the reparative reading practices that support it for this project for the ways it speaks to how rural communities and cultures have been represented across

culture, including and perhaps especially popular culture. I use the word “attempting” in the sentence above, however, to speak to Sedgwick’s recognition that strong and weak theory, reparative and paranoid reading practices, can and do often exist together (145). And further, to acknowledge that the paranoid habit of mind is one that is learned and that must be, as it follows, continually unlearned. That said, I found myself engaging more paranoid (i.e., this is what rural nostalgia is and this is why it is bad) readings of rural nostalgia when it felt most useful for contextualizing a particular construction or function of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. However, I attempt to engage the more reparative habit of mind throughout my rhetorical analysis, as this is where it felt most critical to engage with my chosen artifacts in a way that made it possible to uncover rhetorical and narrative tactics that may be writing alternative stories or mapping alternative relationalities.

Reparative rhetorical analysis allows and encourages me, across chapters, to ask questions such as: What do we do with all this rural nostalgia? What are others doing with it? How might we learn from what they are doing? What kinds of possibilities or potentials are being opened up? What is being imagined? Modeled? What is being made and unmade? Though simple, these questions point to my attempt to illuminate models for hope, progress, and change through continued engagement with rural nostalgia. In this way, reparative rhetorical analysis engages hope as a critical practice. Though, as Sedgwick notes, paranoia places its faith in exposure, we know that rural nostalgia is everywhere. Instead, as Graham articulates, “In a time of perilous and catastrophic ecological collapse fueled by the world of the powerful, we must seek openings for alternative modes of encountering what’s now and what’s to come” (3). Alongside (and because of) my commitment to reparative rhetorical analysis and its seeking for alternative models, Adrienne Rich’s concept of re-vision, a critical feminist rhetorical and compositional method, characterized by “the act of looking back...of entering an old text from a new critical direction...not to pass on a tradition

but to break its hold over us” (18-19) emerged as significant. I found that I was, through a reparative lens, attuning to models for re-vision as I studied *Schitt's Creek*, *Reservation Dogs*, *The Power of the Dog*, and the “wildlife jams” of Yellowstone National Park. Re-vision, Rich contends, is as an act of survival (18), and reparative rhetorical analysis enables and urges this study to look out for models for re-visioning the deep stories that animate the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and its contributions to these “disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times” (Haraway 1).

Chapter Overview

Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia consists of four chapters that work both together and separately toward the purposes of the project described above. My first chapter, “To Leave or Not to Leave: *Schitt's Creek* and The Small Town as Nostalgic Other,” examines how nostalgic constructions of the small, rural town lie at the very roots of the colonization and configuration of the land claimed and occupied by the United States (Hoelbling 1996, Robinson 2007, Wuthnow 2013); and investigates how the nostalgic construction of the small town continues to circulate across our imaginative, digital, and material dimensions (Carr and Kefalas 2009, Pruitt 2006). I then rhetorically analyze how the small town, as a construction, is both reproduced and re-visioned throughout the popular television series *Schitt's Creek* (2015-2020) and consider the implications of these reproductions and re-visions. As a widely beloved and broadly circulated artifact of contemporary popular culture, and as a complex text that engages the interrelated dualisms that have long animated the rhetorical construction of the small town (i.e., the small town as either safe haven or trap), *Schitt's Creek* opens rich terrain for rhetorical scholars interested in and driven to understand how deeply embedded narratives circulate, often in veiled ways, in contemporary pop culture texts. Ultimately, by offering their audiences a queered utopia, narratives that unbind conceptions of rural

belonging, and characters that blur binaries between staying and leaving, I find that *Schitt's Creek* illuminates the many different experiences and possibilities of living in a small, rural community. Importantly, in *Schitt's Creek*, audiences are offered a narrative of a small, rural town that is not frozen in an illusion of its past, and in this way, challenges the construction of the small town as a nostalgic other. Rather, the small town is re-visioned as a space of possibility and porosity. This text, though imperfect, is ultimately a model of Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' conception of neostalgia, or "pride, longing, and hope that resists, counters, and/or appropriates the dominant nostalgia to create new traditional identities" (93). This creation of new identities—and as it follows, relationalities—has important implications for the decisions people make around staying or leaving the places where they are from.

My second chapter, "Humor, Haunting, and Counter-Nostalgia: Rhetorical Tactics of Refusal in *Reservation Dogs*," analyzes the complex range of rhetorical tactics deployed throughout the television series *Reservation Dogs* (2021-), finding that these tactics revise, repurpose, and ultimately refuse the nostalgic narratives that have long circulated about Indigenous peoples and cultures. Like the rhetorical figure of the small town, the rhetorical figure of the "Indian Other," or "Indianness," fuels and is fueled by the rural imaginary—an imaginary that contributes to structures of amnesia and delusion, and that is central to some of our deepest national stories, ideologies, practices, and policies (Deloria 1998, Calderon 2014, King 2008, Rosaldo 1993, Smith 2012, Tuck and Yang 2012, Watts 2013). As I examine in the introductory pages of the chapter, popular culture texts, such as television series and films, have long served as vehicles through which white Americans have attempted to settle our individual and collective identities through the imagination, rhetorical construction, and representation of Indigenous identities. However, after decades of popular culture texts made about Indigenous peoples, but not by or for Indigenous peoples, *Reservation Dogs* is the first mainstream (as an FX on Hulu production) television series about a community of Indigenous

people and their cultures, created and produced by Indigenous creators and producers. As a text produced primarily by and for Native communities, *Reservation Dogs* offers a pedagogical model for contemporary practices of rhetorical sovereignty, and perhaps just as urgently, generates precedence for the existence and success of mainstream Indigenous popular cultural texts. From humor and counter-nostalgia (i.e., a tactical reappropriation of nostalgia), to nonlinear narratives and various forms of haunting (i.e., a critical engagement with the history and presence of settler colonial practices and logics), to careful and intentional visual rhetorics, my rhetorical analysis finds that *Reservation Dogs* models rhetorical tactics of survivance (Powell 2002) and a reclamation of rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons 2000). As *Reservation Dogs* connects with its primary audience of Indigenous viewers, it also encourages settler (or non-Indigenous) audiences to reexamine the stories we have long been told about Indigenous peoples, land, and knowledges. Because of the cultural significance of *Reservation Dogs*, along with its complex and innovative deployment of rhetorical maneuvers, the text opens important terrain for rhetorical studies scholars to continue to investigate, deepening our understanding of contemporary practices of survivance, rhetorical sovereignty, and perhaps what Muñoz would identify as “worldmaking” (200), as the series tactfully reappropriates and refuses some of the United States’ deepest, most damaging stories, and the nostalgia that fuels them.

My third chapter, “Re-visioning Frontier Mythology: ‘Old West’ Nostalgia Meets *The Power of the Dog*” investigates the ways the film *The Power of the Dog* (2021) makes space for alternative representations and understandings of the past, present, and future of the American West, a rhetorically constructed terrain that continues to animate national narratives with profound implications in and beyond the western region of the United States—especially related to constructions of gender, race, and class; land and resource use in the context of settler colonial logics; and constructed relationalities between humans, animals, and nature (Bishop 2005; Budzyńska 2016; Combs 2021; Cram 2022; Deloria 1998; Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki 2005; Ladino

2012; Town 2004). In this chapter, I ask and uncover how *The Power of the Dog*, as a revisionist text, models alternative relationalities, possibilities, and narratives related to frontier mythology and frontier masculinity in particular, and I consider what the impacts of these alternatives might be for different communities invested in narratives, representations, and realities of life in and beyond the western region of the United States. Analyzing *The Power of the Dog* in relation to the novel from which it was adapted, Thomas Savage's *The Power of the Dog* (1967), as well as the broader Western film genre, I theorize writer and director Jane Campion's methods of adaptation as a rhetorical practice of making space for the revision of our deepest, most nostalgic stories (i.e., those about what the frontier was and is, and what the frontier means for who "we" were and are). Through my rhetorical analysis, I find that the film offers models for the destabilization of frontier masculinity, especially through tactical deployments of both nostalgia and anti-nostalgia, as the film traverses themes of gender, sexuality, and class; education and labor; civilization versus nature; and settler colonial versus multispecies relationalities. Ultimately, this chapter offers pedagogical models for the deconstruction of widely circulated and deeply embedded rhetorical constructions (such as the cowboy, the frontiersman, the ranch wife), as well as the practices of genre destabilization made possible in the transfer from print to digital media (Bickmore 2016).

My fourth chapter, "Wildlife Jams in an Unfinished World: From Wilderness Nostalgia to Re-Creation at Yellowstone National Park" builds a conceptual bridge across the textual and material, theorizing how the deep stories that circulate about rurality become mapped onto spaces designated as rural wilderness. In doing so, this chapter examines the rhetorical construction of the wilderness as a nostalgic other (DeLuca 2001; Graham 2012; Patin 2012; Rutherford 2011; Spence 2000) and analyzes the multispecies material composition of "wildlife jams" (traffic jams caused by, in short, tourist and animal migration on crowded roadways) at Yellowstone National Park. As my analysis across this chapter works to show, because the composition of a wildlife jam offers such a

sharp and poignant confrontation—a disturbance to the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia in which Yellowstone exists, and in which tourists turn up expecting—they open powerful possibilities toward the re-vision of wilderness nostalgia and the re-creation of human and nonhuman relations (Clary-Lemon 2019; Kimmerer 2013, Mukavetz and Powell 2022; Pflugfelder and Kelly 2022; Watts 2013)—especially when paired with more systemic, institutional re-visionary, re-creational, and decolonial moves. Aligning with my methodological commitments to reparative rhetorical analysis, this chapter takes up Yellowstone as a site of intervention and importantly attends to the gap in rhetoric and composition scholarship focused on the National Park Service as a national, colonial storytelling archive that contributes to national rhetorical efforts (Ladino 2019; Skeen 2023; Warner 2021).

Lastly, in my conclusion chapter I offer a reflective review of my findings and contributions, as well as a consideration of implications, connections, and limitations. I also map paths for future studies invested in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

CHAPTER ONE

TO LEAVE OR NOT TO LEAVE: *SCHITT'S CREEK* AND THE SMALL TOWN AS NOSTALGIC OTHER

Schitt's Creek (2015-2020) is a television series that tells the story of a very wealthy family, made up of parents Johnny and Moira Rose and their adult children Alexis and David Rose, who lose all their money and assets, and as a result, end up living together in two conjoined rooms of a rundown roadside motel in the small, rural town of Schitt's Creek—a town that Johnny bought for David as a “joke.” Though the Roses are outsiders to Schitt's Creek—far more comfortable in the life of hustle and bustle, wealth and leisure offered by their more metropolitan past—their lives in the small, humble town pick, poke, and prod at nostalgic narratives about what it means to live in and with rural community.

Roland Schitt, the mayor of Schitt's Creek, and his wife Jocelyn Schitt host “Hawaiian Night” in their backyard each year. The party, according to Roland and Jocelyn, is “massive,” and yet Johnny and Moira Rose, still new to Schitt's Creek, do not make the initial guest list. However, when Roland and Jocelyn bump into Johnny and Moira at Café Tropical—the only restaurant in town—they reluctantly extend an invitation. When the Roses ask why they had not yet been invited in the first place, Roland says it is because they are “hoity-toity,” and as Jocelyn explains, “We didn't think you'd want to hang out with ‘regular people’” (“Honeymoon” 07:49-09:15).

Later at the barbecue, Moira and Jocelyn sit together on a swing in the Schitt's backyard. Night has fallen and many guests continue to congregate in the background. Both women are high on weed Roland pulled out of the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt earlier in the evening, and they quickly fall into their easy way with one another. Their easy connection and growing bond transcends their differences (largely stemming from their different class identities and performances), the temporal limitations of their relationship (having known each other for less than

a year), and even Moira's snobbish attitude toward the small, rural town of Schitt's Creek and the community of people who live there. Moira, looking skyward, tells Jocelyn, "I've been with these people before. I know them all . . . I was with them in my other life." She then lowers her voice, goes on in her signature (and fabricated) accent, "I'm going to tell you something. I'm from a small town, just like this." Jocelyn smiles and says she doesn't buy it. Then, after a beat, she looks over to Moira and asks her why she would ever leave. "Oh god, I couldn't wait to get out," Moira says. "I was dying there. Have you never dreamed? Of a life *beyond*?" Jocelyn expresses that, sure, she has what ifs: "What if I had joined the military? What if Roland wasn't such a smooth talker?" Both Moira and Jocelyn share the sense that their whole lives would be different if they had not met their husbands.⁸ At the end of the scene, Jocelyn looks around her backyard with a smile that seems to contain, all at once, happiness, sadness, and curiosity ("Honeymoon" 15:00-16:12). In this exchange between Moira and Jocelyn, we—by which I mean, viewers of *Schitt's Creek*—are exposed to the dualism that has long traveled in and alongside imaginaries of small-town life: the small town as a safe haven and saving grace, and the small town as a trap to escape. For example, in 1980, Richard Lingeman concluded *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620-The Present* by describing the figure of small town as both "sanctuary" and "the home to which you can't go again." In this chapter, I will investigate how this dualism emerges—through what rhetorical means and to what ends—throughout *Schitt's Creek*, a widely beloved, broadly circulated, and complex artifact of contemporary popular culture.⁹ Although *Schitt's Creek* is licensed by the Canadian Broadcast Company (CBC), it aired on networks in both Canada and the United States and has been available internationally through Netflix and more recently, Hulu. As I elucidate across my dissertation, television, and mainstream comedic sitcoms like *Schitt's Creek* in particular, are culturally significant

⁸ Jocelyn also implies that, now that Moira lives in Schitt's Creek, she knows what her life would be like if she had never left her small hometown in the first place.

⁹ The series has won several Emmy awards, along with many other nominations, awards, and recognitions.

for their wide reach, rhetorical power, and intensified reliance on deep stories for recognition and relatability.¹⁰ And as a widely acclaimed and celebrated series about life in a rural community, *Schitt's Creek* as an essential object through which to study how the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, and the rhetorical construction of the small town in particular, circulates through, and is reproduced by, contemporary popular culture. Further, as a text often celebrated for its engagement with queerness in the context of rural community, I was driven to uncover how *Schitt's Creek* may serve as a pedagogical model for a re-visioning of the small-town imaginary.

In this chapter, I examine the small town as a rhetorical, narrative construct that serves particular purposes and stories (i.e., the small-town imaginary) as part of the broader rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. Toward this end, I do not mean to assert that there is no corollary relationship between “small town” as a signifier and the sort of place that “small town” signifies. However, even if I *were* aiming to nail down and define what does and does not count as a “small town,” I would soon run into trouble. To explain, the United States Census Bureau designates any incorporated or unincorporated place with at least 50,000 inhabitants, or more than 1,000 people per square mile, as “urban.” Then, places the Census would not classify as “urban” are, by default, classified as “rural” (The Urban and Rural Classifications 12-1). There is no Census classification for what counts as a “town” or “small town,” as every state has their own policies for categorizing such places and defining such terms. In Wyoming, where I lived on and off from 2015 to 2023, there are only two cities (Casper and Cheyenne) that the Census would classify as “urban.” All other places, by default, are considered rural (no matter if they are classified as incorporated or unincorporated, or

¹⁰ In this chapter and throughout my dissertation, I draw from Jason Vincent A. Cabañes “Digital Disinformation and the Imaginative Dimension of Communication” and Arlie Hochschild’s *Strangers in Their Own Land* to operationalize the notion of “deep stories” as an analytic tool. Hochschild describes deep stories as the stories people tell themselves about who they are, what values they hold, and, ultimately, what their place in society is. As Hochschild’s ethnographic research reveals, deep stories shape our ideas, decisions, and actions.

as cities or towns). But don't bother telling this to University of Wyoming students who move to Laramie (population 31,000) from places like La Grange (population 376) and Pinedale (population 2,000). To these students, and to their often-worried parents, Laramie is considered "the big city." On the other hand, while teaching at the university, my students from cities like Fresno, CA and even close-by Fort Collins, CO struggled to adapt to what they often referred to as "the small-town life" of Laramie. Relatedly, as Scott Herring explains in *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, though the Census classifies and defines what is considered "urban" and "rural," these terms "subsist as structures of intense feeling . . . Space and place are as much act and experience as they are dirt and rock, concrete and steel" (13). My study in this chapter, then, is interested in investigating how "the small town" circulates as a structure of feeling, rhetorical construct, and deep story.¹¹

The same rhetorical maneuvers that position the urban in opposition to the rural position the big city in opposition to the small town. Drawing from the work of rural communications scholar Russell Frank, "If the big city is a cultural oasis, then the small town must be a cultural wasteland. If the big city is dangerous, then the small town must be safe" (214). As scholars of both rural and urban cultures have long tracked, the perception of small, rural communities as idyllic is intimately connected to white supremacist ideology, contributing to anti-urban biases that are grounded in and reproduce racist, colonial views of the city as a "defilement of nature and moral scourge" (Logan 19). In *Another Country*, Herring offers a critical discussion of anti-ruralism and anti-urbanism, noting the white supremacist "nostalgic code speak" that is often tangled up with

¹¹ In understanding how I mean to study the figure of the small town and its reproduction in *Schitt's Creek*, it may be useful to connect to Shapiro's examination of Appalachia as an invention of the urban imagination. As Shapiro asserts, it is no longer useful to evaluate whether it is good or bad that Appalachia was politically and socially constructed. Instead, Shapiro writes that we should study the region "only by assessing its consequences in action" through attempting "to understand its history and its function by asking what problem it solves and whose interests—intellectual as well as practical—it thereby serves" (265). Though Shapiro does not frame *Appalachia on Our Mind* as rhetorical study, this question—what problem it solves and whose interests it serves—demands the attention of rhetorical analysis. My study is certainly interested in a parallel question: What problem does the construction of the small town solve and whose interests does it serve?

celebrations of rurality (5).¹² At the same time, writing *The Left Behind* during and after the 2016 presidential elections, Robert Wuthnow considers the way dominant media vacillates between romantic depictions of the rustic and negative depictions of the backwards rural voter (2-3, 160). Supporting Pruitt's argument related to the misinformed legal decisions that impact rural space and communities (164), Wuthnow notes, "reportage interpreting rural America . . . has nothing to do with the communities in which rural Americans live" (160). Because of the ways the urban and the rural have been constructed as binaries, the view of rural people from small towns as backwards, ignorant, bigots reinforces the perception that city people are progressive, in-the-know, and more socially just or politically conscious.¹³ The construct of the small, country town can be rhetorically repurposed, then, to either signify "all that is right" or "all that is wrong with poor, white, irrational America" (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 96-7).¹⁴ Importantly, demographic data drawn from the 2020 Census upends long held mythologies—tangled up in the very roots of rural nostalgia—that conflate rural spaces with white people, as many rural areas across the United State have long been home to a majority population of people of color (such as those across the South—due, in part, to histories of slavery, Jim Crow, and continued social, political, and economic inequities that impact mobility), and others are becoming more and more racially and ethnically diverse. In fact, in 2020, 24% of rural Americans were people of color. As such, narratives that conflate rurality with whiteness erase this

¹² Also see Walter Hoelbling's survey of the small town in 20th century literature, where he found that the small town represented an "image of 'the good community' from which greed, factionalism, poverty, and inequality have been banished and where people can find their 'home'" (97-100). Similarly, as Pruitt argues from her survey of rural rhetoric in law and policy, the rural imaginary is a "repository of the values that we fear have been lost in our cities and suburbs: hard work, family, community, nature, and safety" (168). And, as Carr and Kefalas suggest, the "typical imagery of the countryside" comes to symbolize "all that is right" in the United States, while the city often symbolizes "all that is wrong" (25).

¹³ Relatedly, in *The Politics of Home*, Duyvendak considers the ways Americans who stay emplaced (i.e., do not leave the places where they are from) are seen as old-fashioned or misguided, and experience less upward social and economic mobility (18).

¹⁴ This is, as Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus point out, despite the liberal and progressive histories of many rural regions and communities (96-7), and I would add, despite the history and presence of Indigenous people and people of color in rural areas (see Rowlands and Love 2021).

population, further invisibilizing their needs and continuing to lend “rhetorical priority to the concerns of an imagined white rural monolith” (Rowlands and Love).

While it can be easy to assume that much of the small-town imaginary, including the dualistic framing of the small town as either utopia or dystopia, emerged alongside the 2016 presidential election, it is tangled up in the very roots of colonization and nation building. In a dissertation titled *Far from Simple: Nostalgia for America’s Turn-of-the-Century Small Town in Film and Television 1940-1963*, Linda A. Robinson traces dualist constructions of the small town as both an ideal community and a dystopian trap to nineteenth century American fiction. As Robinson notes, “both views of the American small town recognized the same qualities in the American small town but gave those qualities opposing characterizations” (40). This giving of opposing characterizations is, at its foundation, the work of rhetoric, and the ways in which the figure of the small town is flexed depends on the rhetorical purpose of the rhetor. One purpose the figure of the small town serves is that of national unification, as the small town is not rooted to any particular region (like “the frontier,” as I examine in chapter three, for example).¹⁵ Unlike regionally-rooted archetypes that disperse the collective national identity, the very notion of “Small-Town America” relies on imaginations of homogeneity and normativity, and in this way, as I began examining above, parallels rhetorical constructions of whiteness (Robinson 66). Similarly to Robinson, Wuthnow draws from his cross-regional ethnographic work to find that the figure of the small town “claims an iconic place in the American psyche” (vii) and is central to the construction of American character, culture, and identity (5-6). In these ways, the dualist construction of the small town aligns with Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus’ concept of nostalgic othering, introduced in my previous chapter. As a reminder,

¹⁵ As Robinson examines, large segments of the United States, especially in New England and the Midwest, were settled small town by small town (this excludes the American South, which was settled by large estates—i.e., plantations—and county seats). Across the Midwest and West, settlement happened through a combination of small towns and large estates as people (and policy) migrated west from both the south and east (71-74).

nostalgic othering is a powerful rhetorical construct that allows a person or collective of people to freeze their perception of a person, community, or place in a past that they have (likely) imagined or internalized from the imaginations of others. From this position as frozen, the nostalgic other can then be taken up and repurposed to serve the present and, as it follows, impact the future.¹⁶ For all of these reasons, it is important that scholars across and beyond rhetoric take up and take seriously the circulation and reproduction of the small-town imaginary.

As I've begun to map, this chapter sets out to examine the relationship across small-town nostalgia, the dualistic framing of the small town as saving grace or trap to escape, and narratives related to leaving versus staying. In an interview with *NPR*, Pulitzer-prize winning author Richard Russo notes that the story of the small town—any small town, he asserts—is the story of the people who stay and the people who leave (Russo). Here (and in many of his novels), Russo presents us with another long held, deeply internalized, and dualistic story about what it means to live in, or to have left, a small town. As Carr and Kefalas found in their interviews with young people from the small and rural town of Ellis, Iowa (pseudonym), “the biggest question facing anyone who grows up in a small town is whether [they] should leave or stay” (xii). This question—to leave or not to leave—and the decision people do or, importantly, do not have the chance to make in the face of it, is complex. Both the question and its outcome are driven by the kinds of rhetorical maneuvers and internalized narratives I have so far explored, but they are, of course, also driven in conjunction by complicated and entangled geographic, social, economic, cultural, and political structures. In the United States and elsewhere, these include the much tangled up structures of capitalism, racism, and settler colonialism. And as I will later analyze through the character of David, questions of leaving

¹⁶ For example, explaining the rhetorical purpose and impacts of the nostalgic othering of West Virginians, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus argue, “The creation of the nostalgic other allows mainstream populations to commodify the [imagined] racial purity and stability of the past (the mountaineer) but refuses the community agency to change in the present by highlighting its negative traits (the illiteracy, poverty, and insularity of the hillbilly)” (95).

versus staying in rural areas have particular complexities and challenges for queer people—complexities and challenges that range from physical and emotion safety; (in)visibility and erasure; and navigating longings for the acceptance, pleasure, and opportunity promised by cities alongside realities of (im)mobility, loss of familiarity, and mourning (Avashia 2022; Baker 2012; Halberstam 2005; Glasby, Gradin, and Ryerson 2020; Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016; Jerke 2011; Shepard 2021). It is also important to note, while young people living in rural areas have a situated relationship to leaving versus staying, complexities and challenges around staying or leaving the place one is from extend far beyond young people in small, rural communities across America.¹⁷ And more particularly, young people in cities, especially those from historically marginalized communities, experience questions of leaving versus staying in ways that are different but just as urgent, difficult, and consequential as their rural counterparts. In both contexts, the personal and political stakes are high. In this way, narratives and realities regarding staying or leaving unify, rather than divide, the lives of young rural and urban people. As such, better understanding both the stories and structures that impact and inform these (non)decisions across geographic, political, and social contexts is vital. Toward these ends, this chapter attends to the ways deep stories about leaving versus staying impact the decisions people make (or do not make) about whether to stay, leave and return, or stay gone for good.

As a widely consumed and (perhaps surprisingly) complex text that takes up these questions and the dualistic framings that fuel them, *Schitt's Creek* opens rich terrain for rhetorical scholars, like me, interested in and driven to understand the relationship across space and story—across imaginative dimension and material reality. This is important terrain, as the stakes of the stories we tell about places are high, and contribute directly to their making and unmaking, and to the material

¹⁷ I think here of the millions of people displaced by climate catastrophe, imperialism and settler colonialism, land and resource scarcity, and war.

realities of those who inhabit them. Places, Carr and Kefalas remind us, are fragile, and though the iconic figure of the small, rural town persists in the popular culture imaginary, “the rural downturn” happens in “what amounts to splendid isolation” (ix). The problem Carr and Kefalas’ research investigates is the out-migration of young people from rural areas, i.e., “the brain drain” (4). Young people, they said at the time of their writing, “are now rural America’s most precious declining resource” (9), and in response, small towns (and the state and national policies that impact them) must “create new sorts of conservation efforts to invest more efficiently” in the young people who stay, i.e., those who “will be so critical to the countryside’s survival” (9). In extension of Carr and Kefalas study, I believe working toward a deeper, more complex and rhetorical understanding of the deep stories we tell about small town and rural life is an important step toward more critically reflective conservation efforts—that is, conservation efforts that lean away from attempts to restore the past as it is imagined and toward attempts to think critically about what it is we long for and why.

In this chapter and throughout my dissertation, I use interrelated terms *rhetoric* and *deep stories*—which Hochschild describes as the stories people tell themselves about who they are, what values they hold, and, ultimately, what their place in society is—as analytical tools that allow for a generative investigation into the ways *Schitt’s Creek* reproduces, disrupts, and makes porous the dominant archetypes of the small, rural town. As gestured toward above, investigating the reproduction and disruption of deep stories is particularly important when studying popular culture texts, as these texts rely on the instant sense of recognition and affirmation deep stories produce to draw large audiences into their imaginative terrain. The production of deep stories allows popular culture texts to generate feelings of authenticity, emotionality, connection, and identification. It is no surprise, then, that mainstream popular culture texts like *Schitt’s Creek* draw from, rely on, and reproduce the deeply storied divides between rural and urban communities and cultures. Further,

when it comes to comedic television (and the twenty-three-minute format of sitcoms in particular), deep stories are especially important, as they allow audiences to feel as if we are “in on the joke.” In these ways, television, and comedic sitcoms specifically, are culturally significant objects of study due to their wide reach, rhetorical power and adaptability, and increased reliance on deep stories for recognition and relatability, which are key elements of comedy.

In *Sitcommentary*, Mark A. Robinson examines the social and political potential of the sitcom genre, arguing for the ways it has influenced the breaking down of barriers related to race, gender, and sexual identity, as well as many other divisive topics, by offering audiences characters with which to empathize and story lines that offer opportunities to imagine the lives of others in contexts far outside our own (195). With Robinson’s argument in mind, the sitcom genre has the powerful potential to strengthen or suture divides across the rural and urban; to generate restorative or reflective rural nostalgia. Aligning with Robinson’s study, in her study of the North American sitcom, Amelia Chisholm argues for the significance of the sitcom genre in the development of Western media, insisting that it has so far been understudied. Not only do sitcoms offer glimpses of “how humans drive and subsequently react to societal change,” but “the genre’s creativity, versatility, and pedagogical potential” has only increased with time (Chisholm 225). In other words, not only do sitcoms have the rhetorical power and potential to reproduce deep stories, but they also hold the potential to disrupt these deeply embedded narratives, and to offer alternative stories (and as it follows, alternative actions and relationalities). For these reasons, sitcoms such as *Schitt’s Creek* offer rich and important terrain for scholars, students, and, and instructors across and beyond rhetoric, composition, and writing studies.

Welcome to Schitt's Creek

As I have noted, *Schitt's Creek* (2015-2020) is critically acclaimed and widely celebrated, especially for its representation of queerness in the context of a small, rural North American town (i.e., the town of Schitt's Creek). Despite this, there is very little academic research focused on the show, and even less focused on the show's engagement with the figure of this small, rural town. At first, this struck me as strange, as the text's rural setting is certainly a key element of the story and its reliance on the fish-out-of-water trope. However, as I continued to consider this gap, it began to make more sense: the reproduction of deep stories related to rural cultures and communities is widely accepted and normalized—baked right into our collective national consciousness (Pruitt 158).

In the very first moments of the series, the small town is positioned as a saving grace, though importantly, one that is temporary and economically valueless. When the Rose family's business manager makes some "bad investments," the Roses' wealth and assets—largely generated from patriarch Johnny Roses' company, Rose Video—are confiscated by the federal government. There are suddenly no more luxury vacations, mansions, and private jets. No more staff to serve their needs and desires. With no other choice, the Roses move to Schitt's Creek, a 4,500-acre town that Johnny once purchased for his adult son David as a "joke." The government, according to the Roses' lawyer, saw no value in the town, and so it was left to the Roses as their last remaining asset.¹⁸ "To Johnny's credit," the lawyer says, "this town may just be your saving grace, at least for a little while . . . You can live there for next to nothing, at least until you get on your feet" ("Our Cup Runneth Over" 01:49-02:42). Though the notion of buying, owning, and selling a town is both strange and complex, especially in the context of historical and contemporary struggles for rural land access and ownership, the series itself does not critically engage with the strangeness or complexity

¹⁸ The remaining chapters of my dissertation offer more in-depth considerations of land ownership in rural spaces. Interestingly, *Schitt's Creek* opens the terrain of land ownership (and town ownership more specifically), but largely skirts around the complexities and implications of this terrain.

of what it means to “own” an entire town. However, the fact of the Roses’ ownership of Schitt’s Creek calls to mind normalized rhetorics many of us who grew up in small, rural communities likely grew up hearing, i.e. “The Jones’ own this town,” rhetorics which emphasize the often impossible-to-ignore asymmetrical power dynamics present within a given community.

Daniel Levy, who co-created *Schitt’s Creek* with his father, actor-writer-producer Eugene Levy, has said that his idea for the show was inspired by popular culture representations of extreme wealth (such as *Keeping up With the Kardashians* and the *Real Housewives* franchise), and he felt drawn to explore the story of a super wealthy family that loses all their money (Dresden). It is fascinating to consider how Daniel Levy’s idea to portray an extremely wealthy family who loses all their money led him to the creation of the small, rural town of Schitt’s Creek. Why was this particular setting crucial to the stories he wanted to tell, the characters he wanted to bring to life? On which deep stories, whether consciously or unconsciously, did Levy’s development decisions rely?¹⁹ Though this particular study cannot offer direct or exact answers to these questions, they inspired much of my initial interest in the series as an object of study, and further, informed my rhetorical analysis in particular ways (i.e. the small town produced by and in *Schitt’s Creek* is necessarily the result of and a response to the small town imaginary and the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia).

While there is, so far, a very small amount of academic literature on the series, scholars Stephanie Patrick, Katharine Schaab, Amelia Chisholm, and Nicole A. Foss offer generative studies

¹⁹ A Netflix documentary about the series, *Best Wishes, Warmest Regards: A Schitt’s Creek Farewell*, includes footage from the writers’ room in Los Angeles as well as footage from filming on set in Orangeville, Ontario. The Los Angeles writers’ room was occupied by a small group of people, all of whom I perceived as white and in their twenties or thirties (i.e., “millennials” like me). Though I watched the documentary most interested in how the creators, actors, and producers of the show might consider the setting of the series—a small, rural, anywhere town called Schitt’s Creek, I was surprised this element of the show was not discussed. I thought about the writers’ room, and about father-son co-creators Eugene and Daniel Levy, and felt my mind tugged by discussions of the ways stories and representations of small-town and rural life are largely written from a distance of that embodied experience. While there is much important and urgent discussion about media representation related to gender and sexuality—for example, calls for queer stories and characters to be written and performed by queer-identifying people—these conversations do not seem to be happening in regard to place. This being said, it is also possible that a number of the writers in the *Schitt’s Creek* writers’ room grew up in small, rural communities, and that this was simply not mentioned in the documentary.

of *Schitt's Creek* from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Focusing on *Schitt's Creek* in the context of narrative trends in the North American sitcom, and the cultural significance of the sitcom more broadly, Chisholm writes, "It is worth noting that in 2016, the year of Trump's election, ratings for the second season of *Schitt's Creek* increased by 26%" (221). Relatedly, as Chisholm points out, the final episodes of the show were released during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, the show's final messages related to "community and actionable kindness could not have been more pertinent" (225). In this way, Chisholm's work draws connections across television, politics, and the pandemic—making a case for the text's political and social significance and rhetorical power.

Analyzing *Schitt's Creek* and its production through its political, geographic, and economic contexts, Patrick places the show in conversation with neoliberalism and considers the way it "speaks directly to concerns over economic uncertainty, crisis, community, and family" (312) in Canada and across the globe, building on "retreatist texts" that tell the story of community and family as paths toward stability in uncertain times (297-302). Though Patrick does not focus on rural nostalgia specifically, her analysis certainly speaks to cross-disciplinary findings that there is a direct correlation between collective uncertainty and nostalgia, and more specifically, between broad societal change and nostalgia for the rural imaginary.

In contextualizing the series and considering its broad appeal, it's important to note that I was initially drawn to study *Schitt's Creek* for its resistance to regionalism. As Patrick details, "Although the show stars known Canadians, the scenarios and places depicted on *Schitt's Creek* stand in for 'Anytown, North America.'" (312). I was intrigued by this decision and wondered how it might reaffirm the homogenization of the small, rural town that is so central, as I've discussed, to the nostalgic othering of the small town. On the other hand, I wondered how it might disrupt

“regional identity traps” identified by a range of scholars.²⁰ Rather than falling into these traps, Herbert Reid suggests a move from essentialism and enclosure to an awareness, analysis, and praxis of interdependence with other regions, communities, and cultures across place and time (165), paralleling Donehower, Hogg, and Schell’s call for an awareness and praxis of mutual identification across urban, suburban, and rural spaces (3).²¹ As opposed to previous perceptions and ways of studying regionalism, Douglas Reichert Powell’s *Critical Regionalism* pursues a way of viewing regions as networks that are relational, embedded, evolving, porous, and generative rather than isolated and fixed (4-5)—not only social constructions but social inventions, rhetorics (“a set of language practices”), poetics, and actions (6, 24-31). Powell refers to region-making as a “practice of cultural politics” (8). Approaching my study of Schitt’s Creek, I wondered, what kind of cultural politics does *Schitt’s Creek* practice through its resistance to regionalism? Whose interests are served by *Schitt’s Creek*’s resistance to regional specificity? In what way does a resistance to regional identity affirm, disrupt, or make porous the oppositional rhetoric of nostalgic othering? And in lieu of regional identity and memory, what binds the Schitt’s Creek community together?²² However, as I pulled up the roots of small-town nostalgia, I came to understand the rhetorical purpose and impact of situating Schitt’s Creek in “Anytown, North America” differently—as this decision directly reproduces the small-town imaginary and its entanglements with national narratives of sameness and normativity. This being the case, a reparative lens urges me to keep open the questions I’ve outlined

²⁰ Scholars such as Batteau, Reid, Powell, and Stewart have wrestled with the struggle to write about regions in ways that do not reproduce insiders versus outsider traps (Batteau 186-7), which contribute to practices of “self-enclosure” that are understandable in the face of marginalization and oppression, but can lead to exaggerated senses of “Otherness” and a “de-historicizing trap” that occludes coalitions across regional boundaries (Reid 164).

²¹ Reid argues this approach toward regionality is especially important for scholars and texts concerned with the Appalachian region because it intervenes in the ways studying Appalachia in isolation reproduces the othering and us-versus-them boundaries that constructed the region in the first place (164-66). Though, I’d argue that, at least on some level, us-versus-them boundaries are part of the ingredient list for the making of any region.

²² Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus examine how regional memory includes the way the region has been rhetorically employed by outside forces, and in turn, how that region-making rhetoric has generated a community of nostalgia. Communities of nostalgia, as Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus describe, are united by heritage and identity, and are so united that they work to foreclose alternative histories and identities (94-100).

above—to consider how the text’s resistance to regionality circulates and what it may make possible, even with its rootedness in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, as well as the current global market and its drive toward delocalization (Patrick 312).

On another note, even without situating the town of Schitt’s Creek in an explicit national and regional identity, there are a myriad of ways in which these identities are likely assumed, felt, or implied by differently situated viewers of the show. For example, *Schitt’s Creek* draws from American Dream mythology, i.e., Johnny Rose started Rose Video with \$2,000 to his name, which he says he earned as a child laborer at a button factory. Though not confined to the United States, American Dream mythology is a “universal signifier” for the United States (Weber 46) and an “imagined conception of what both America and its capitalist system stand for” (Patrick 313). In this way, the show (and the town) may be read as American, especially to audiences based in the United States. Further, several elements of the show, including its visual rhetoric, would likely feel familiar to viewers located in the Heartland region of the United States (i.e., “the flyover states”).²³ And even though *Schitt’s Creek* resists regional specificity, the show draws from a range of regionally-specific stereotypes (such as “the hillbilly,” largely through the character of Roland Schitt) to promote quick identification with the deep stories that travel within these stereotypes.

Toward a discussion of the limitations of this chapter, it is important to note that my analysis of *Schitt’s Creek*, which begins just below, draws from observational data I drew from across the six seasons of the series. Though I wondered if I should have narrowed my study to only one season, I also felt strongly that my analysis should attend to the broader arc of the show, which follows the Roses’ arrival and eventual departure from the town—with the important exception of queer character David Rose, who stays in Schitt’s Creek at the end of the series; a rhetorically significant

²³ As Carr and Kefalas write, Heartland states like Iowa represent a particular kind of middle ground, “a reassuring typicality in the national self-perception” (10). It’s the so-called Heartland, Carr and Kefalas assert, where we perceive that the “real” and “authentic” people reside (10).

decision in the context of conversations across queerness and rurality. Because of the urgency I felt to attend to this critical arc of the series, my analysis is necessarily limited to key pieces of data, as it spans the Roses' entire time in Schitt's Creek. This also means that much of my analysis in this chapter is informed by data that did not make its way onto the page, and while I strived to choose the most complex and significant pieces of data to support and challenge my evolving understandings of nostalgic othering and its relationship to narratives of leaving versus staying, I have no doubt that there are many complex and significant pieces of data on the cutting room floor. My hope, though, is that I have, in the words of Annie Dillard, looked at enough trees to see the forest (129). In the following sections I rhetorically analyze *Schitt's Creek* as a critical case study in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia—as a contemporary, widely consumed, and largely beloved example of how the small town, as a rhetorical construct, is continually reproduced and sometimes re-visioned. In conjunction with this work, I theorize the implications of the particular ways *Schitt's Creek* takes up this rhetorical and narrative task—with the guidance, as my introductory chapter examines, of Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' rhetoric of nostalgia, a framework for “probing what people are nostalgic for, why, and to which ends” (88-89), and Sedgwick's framework for reparative analysis, which leans away from “judg[ing] the value of analytic objects” or attempting “to somehow get their representation ‘right’” to, instead, “wonder[ing] where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance” (Stewart 73).

Schitt's Creek as a Community of Nostalgia

Nostalgia travels through the rhetorical ecosystem that surrounds (and seeps into) a region. In this way, nostalgic othering is produced from the outside—by, for example, the extractive industry—

through rhetorical means and with rhetorical aims—such as to, for example, draw boundaries around normative race, class, and gender identities. In this way, nostalgic rhetorics travel to the inside of places and communities, dwelling there and generating what Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus refer to as a “community of nostalgia” (95). Communities of nostalgia can and do, for a variety of rhetorical and narrative purposes, participate in processes of their own nostalgic othering.

Throughout *Schitt's Creek*, there are several key moments that feature direct engagement with the small-town imaginary, rhetorics of nostalgia for rurality, and processes of nostalgic othering from both the inside and the outside of the small-town community. These moments reveal that the show's producers and writers likely have an awareness of the rhetorics of rural nostalgia their text is inevitably entangled with. And in including the community's engagement with small town nostalgia as central plot points, the text offers viewers narratives through which to understand how the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia works from the outside in—not only impacting rural communities, but also offering them opportunities for taking the deep stories constructed about who they are, what they do, and why into their own (rhetorical) hands.

To begin examining this phenomenon, I'll first turn our attention to an early moment in the series—one that reveals an important mechanism of nostalgia, and its relationship to mobility and immobility. As soon as Alexis Rose, Johnny and Moira Rose's adult daughter and David Rose's younger sister, arrives in Schitt's Creek with her family, she begins to plot her escape. Her plan is to get airlifted out by her celebrity-adjacent boyfriend, Stravros, who will take her to an island vacation in the Caribbean. Because she knows she will soon have the opportunity to leave, Alexis views the town differently than her family members. She remarks that the dilapidated motel rooms where the Roses will be living are “cute” and the cafe is “sweet.” Cheerful, she refers to the town as “charming and quaint—like out of a storybook.” Meanwhile, her mother Moira exclaims that the town is “gruesome,” “disgusting,” and repeatedly threatens suicide (“Our Cup Runneth Over” 11:33-13:15).

However, as soon as Alexis knows she is stuck in Schitt's Creek—her escape plan foiled by an ill-timed breakup—she is no longer able to view the town through a nostalgic lens. This nostalgic lens—which enabled her to “see” the small, rural town through a lens constructed by the small-town imaginary—is shattered (“Our Cup Runneth Over” 19:00-20:00).²⁴ Alexis' short-lived nostalgic view of Schitt's Creek illustrates the way our access to mobility—the possibility or even promise of “getting out” of a place—impacts the way we see, feel, and inhabit that place. In this way, the text begins teaching viewers about the important relationship between distance and nostalgia, revealing that even the potential of distance (from a rural place) increases the likelihood of feeling and acting from an affect of (rural) nostalgia.

Later in the series, in an episode that feels in direct conversation with examinations of metronormativity and queer anti-ruralism (Halberstam 2005; Herring 2010), one of David's exes, Sebastien Raine, visits Schitt's Creek from New York City.²⁵ Sebastien—who serves as a sardonic archetype of the queer urban hipster artist—claims that he would like to photograph Moira, who starred in a soap opera called *Sunrise Bay* for much of her career. As Sebastien walks into the motel lobby, he looks around and says, “This is exactly how I pictured it,” directly referencing the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and the collective images it circulates. He then looks at David, who is standing in the lobby of the motel, where he still lives with his family, and tells him that he cannot believe he actually lives here, and that he is “so brave” (“Sebastien Raine” 02:06-3:22). While

²⁴ Afterall, as Boym writes, “Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (xiii).

²⁵ In *Another Country*, Herring frames queer anti-ruralism as the representation of urban space as a de facto “beacon of tolerance” for queer people, while the country is a de facto “locus of persecution and gay absence” (13). Queer anti-ruralism works usefully alongside Halberstam's notion of metronormativity, which describes the deep story that migration from rural spaces to urban spaces is, for queer people, the one and only way to find oneself in “a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy” (36). Like Herring, Halberstam is critical of the circulation of metronormative narratives, as they reproduce limiting beliefs that the city is the only place where queer people might find community, happiness, and safety—beliefs that, albeit rooted in complex realities for queer people in rural areas, ultimately strengthen rural versus urban stereotypes and divides.

it's possible to read this comment in reference to often dangerous realities for queer people in rural spaces, Sebastien's tone seems more likely to suggest that he considers David "brave" for living in a place he views—through the lenses of nostalgic othering and metronormativity—as a cultural wasteland. Later, Sebastien walks into Café Tropical where Moira is waiting for him. "Is this place not funny?" Moira remarks, revealing her shame to the audience. Sebastien looks around whimsically and says he loves it because, "It's so unassertive" ("Sebastien Raine" 03:30-04:30). Again, this is a sort of backhanded compliment that implies "the city" (i.e., New York City) is, in opposition to the small town, assertive. Moira and Sebastien then go for a walk along an empty dirt road flanked by an empty field. Sebastien says it is cathartic to "get away and step into someone else's world." Here, Sebastien references mythologies related to the disconnected, independent (rather than mutually interdependent) relationship across urban, rural, and suburban environments. Then, with Moira dressed in her typical couture, Sebastien pulls out his large camera and asks Moira to pose on a wood fence, then to go further into the field. Moira, unprepared for the session, asks him to stop, but he tells her that it is not her but the backdrop he is most interested in. There is a "provincial romanticism" to "all this" that is "terrifying and important," he says. He tells Moira to, "Let the field reveal itself to you" ("Sebastien Raine" 07:08-09:09). Afterwards, he assures her the photos are "haunting" (luckily for Moira, David steals and destroys the memory card from Sebastien's camera later that night after they hookup).²⁶

In addition to the ways the character of Sebastien Raine gestures toward one iteration of the relationship between queer culture and rural nostalgia, Sebastien's visit aligns with Calvin Beale's contention, "For generations in our national life, progress was the preserve of the cities . . . The

²⁶ A similar storyline is explored when a group of Alexis' old friends from "the city" come to visit Schitt's Creek after they see it on a *Vice* list of the most random towns in North America ("Baby Sprinkle"). Alexis' friend tells Alexis to pack her bags because she is "getting out," and even offers her a (albeit vague) job "in *the* city," but Alexis ultimately decides she is not yet ready to leave Schitt's Creek.

countryside was a time machine in which urbanites could see the living past, and feel nostalgic or superior, as the sight inclined them” (Carr and Kefalas 1). Further, Sebastien’s narration of his experience in Schitt’s Creek, and especially of walking along the dirt road with Moira, brings to mind Sara Mills’ consideration of the ways colonizers construct sublime experiences for themselves. According to Mills, the colonizer views a landscape as a vast space of economic potential, emptied of presence and history. This emptying out allows the colonizer to distance themselves from the material of the landscape—constructing it as “Other,” and then taking a position of power over that “Other,” which makes possible a sense of “transcendence.” Through this transcendence, the colonizer can understand themselves as an apolitical, ahistorical subject, from which all space and matter is filtered and transposed (Mills 131-6). In other words, the sublime hinges on the construction and situating of an “Other,” followed by the reduction of that other. This colonial construction of the sublime feels deeply related to dominant forms of nostalgia, as both are characterized by an emptying-out of history in order to experience identification, connection, and transcendence. As I will examine in my fourth chapter, sublime rhetorics animate the reproduction and circulation of rural nostalgia (Warner 2021). All told, this episode offers a fascinating example of the ways the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia seeps into rural spaces—in other words, how rural spaces and communities receive, and are variously impacted by, the deep stories told about them.

Later in the series, viewers are offered a glimpse at the ways rural communities engage the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia toward their own ends—in this case, tourism. After Moira is cast back into the media limelight with the release of *The Crows Have Eyes 2* movie, she is quoted in *People Magazine* saying the town is “the last place you’d ever want to end up” (“Rebound” 10:59-12:45). After the article is published, the family car is egged and there is a small protest outside of

town hall.²⁷ Mayor Roland Schitt remarks that her comments might sabotage the “big tourism campaign” he and the other town council members have been planning. For the trouble she has caused, Moira agrees to star in the town’s tourism commercial. Roland’s decision to enlist Moira’s celebrity for the Schitt’s Creek tourism campaign shows an example of the way communities of nostalgia employ nostalgic othering toward their own ends (and through their own means). As I examine in more depth in my fourth chapter, the roots of rural nostalgia, and the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering in particular, are tangled up with the rhetorical role of the tourist. In the Schitt’s Creek commercial, which viewers are treated to at the end of the episode, Moira takes viewers on “a little stroll through the slice of paradise I like to call the town where I currently am.” In deadpan, Moira explains, “The Café Tropical has certainly been described as ‘fine.’” Standing in front of the Rosebud Motel, which Moira introduces as “a humble little oasis,” she ends the ad by assuring potential tourists, “If heaven had a creek, it would be this one” (“Rebound” 19:43-21:15)

As my discussion of Moira’s character has begun to show, more so than any other characters, Moira’s relationship to Schitt’s Creek reveals the seemingly contradictory feelings many people feel toward small, rural towns—for Moira, it is *both* a slice of heaven *and* the last place you’d ever want to end up. What if, though, as Moira’s relationship to Schitt’s Creek suggests, these seemingly contradictory feelings are not as oppositional as they seem? What if we ventured to view them as porous, or even interdependent? This notion of a heaven that is also the last place you’d ever want to end up opens up alternative stories that challenge the rhetorical construction of the small town as *either* safe haven *or* trap. And as it follows, these alternative stories offer alternative pedagogies—new ways of understanding, reflecting on, and transforming our relationships to place

²⁷ In an attempt to appease the twelve protesters (who are holding up signs that say things like, “That wasn’t very nice!”), Moira insists that her quote was taken out of context, and that she never specified the town by name. She tells the protesters that she commended their generosity and beating heart, and even called the town a “slice of heaven.” She ends her plea by asking one of them to detail her car.

and community. In this way, re-visioning toward more porous, rather than dualistic and divisive, relationships to rural space is an essential step in recognizing and responding to our mutual dependence.

And as a final example of *Schitt's Creek* engaging examples of nostalgic othering and the formation of communities of nostalgia, it's critical to consider that what ultimately enables the Rose family to leave Schitt's Creek is the marketability of the (nostalgic) figure of the small town. Working together as The Rosebud Motel Group, Stevie Budd (who began the series as the motel's front desk attendant), Johnny Rose, and Roland Schitt secure venture capital for their proposal to buy small-town motels, dust them off, and market them as a "boutique experience." The Rosebud Motel Group refers to this as their "reinvigoration model," which will involve buying up thousands of the 250,000 motels for sale across North America.²⁸ Pitching to a table of fancy-suited investors in New York City, Johnny says, "Motels offer a window into the unique charm of small-town life. The Rosebud Motel Group plans to open that window and revitalize the classic roadside motel for a new generation." He remarks on the "simple pleasure" of his family's experience living at the Rosebud Motel in Schitt's Creek, and together, the team recites their tagline: "Where every stay feels like home." While the men around the table quickly dismiss their idea, talking down to them throughout the presentation, a group of junior partners starting their own firm recognize it as exactly the kind of project they want to invest in ("The Pitch" 13:20-20:05). The success of the Rosebud Motel Group, which finally (and somewhat ironically) provides the Roses with the resources to leave Schitt's Creek, comes from participating in and taking advantage of the nostalgic othering of the figures of the small town and the roadside motel—selling a romanticized version of their experience with

²⁸ I examine and analyze The Rosebud Motel Group in greater detail in the section focus on deep stories about leaving versus staying.

both.²⁹ This example in particular emphasizes the economic value of nostalgic(ally othered) representations of rural life, and further, how the value of these nostalgic representations often exceeds that of the perceived value of small towns and rural communities themselves (as Schitt's Creek is regularly depicted throughout the series as economically valueless). While it is possible, understandably desirable, and sometimes unavoidable for people living within small, rural communities to take (economic and social) advantage of their mainstream representation as nostalgic others, doing so will likely not disrupt the process of nostalgic othering and its harmful consequences in our economic, political, and social landscapes. While *Schitt's Creek*, as a text, does not offer this sort of evaluation of communities of nostalgia at work, the examples it offers make possible an opening and deepening of viewers' understandings of the implications of rural nostalgia for rural communities, and further, may prompt critical reflections on the ways we externalize—that is, reproduce—the deep stories about rurality that we've internalized.

Schitt's Creek as Nostalgic Other

Both sides of the small-town imaginary—the small town as saving grace, the small town as trap—are undergirded by the rhetorical practice of nostalgic othering that, for a range of all tangled up purposes, attempts to freeze the nostalgic other in a mythologized version of the past that can be manipulated toward particular ends. In this section, I analyze the ways in which *Schitt's Creek* affirms, challenges, and makes porous the dualistic framing of the small-town imaginary. As I consider across my dissertation, these moves toward a re-visioning of the small-town imaginary are critical, as

²⁹ This parallels Batteau's discussion of the symbolic process through which Appalachia has been constructed and circulated, which includes mythologizing, sacrificing, dramatizing, pilgrimaging, and commodifying (196).

they destabilize the broader rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and, as it follows, challenge its divisive claims.

Queering Mayberry

Schitt's Creek imagines what some audiences and critics refer to as a queer utopia or, in the words of Nicole A. Foss, a queer refuge.³⁰ Co-creator Daniel Levy has remarked that *Schitt's Creek* is intentionally presented as a place where queer people do not experience homophobia (Ivie).

However, the show does not ignore the reality of homophobia elsewhere, as both prominent queer characters, David and his boyfriend-then-husband Patrick, do experience anxieties and fears related to homophobia. For example, when Stevie invites David to a tailgate, he says he doesn't know what a tailgate is, but he is picturing a "klan party," and he is "not really in the mood to be the victim of a hate crime tonight" ("The Drip" 05:07-06:00). This remark references violence against queer people in rural areas, while also drawing a connection between rurality and white supremacist violence.³¹

Viewers also watch David struggle to adapt to his life in *Schitt's Creek*. At first, he believes he has a heart murmur from not being able to find kale ("Wine and Roses" 03:57-5:27). David's interpretation of his experience gestures toward the food insecurity and access issues that plague some rural areas, as well as his sense of disconnection from city life—where he not only had access to fancy health foods, but also art, fashion, and entertainment. Ted, a veterinarian and "the only

³⁰ In her master's thesis, *Exploring Queer Refuge in Poetry, Literature, and Pop Culture*, Foss defines queer refuge as "how queer people can find shelter from the world in texts" (1). As Foss explains, "When Dan and Eugene Levy portray a beautiful love story between a gay man [Patrick] and a pansexual man [David] that ends happily, they are engaging in a revolutionary queer politics. The town of *Schitt's Creek* seems to act as a refuge for the characters, just as the show acts as a refuge for us, and that makes it possible for a show that refuses to depict homophobia to speak to an audience that will doubtlessly encounter it" (Foss 57).

³¹ Later, when David actually shows up at the party, claiming that Alexis texted him that she needed help, he says his "mind went straight to *Deliverance*." With this reference, we witness direct evidence of the way the media influences our perceptions of rurality.

doctor in town,” tells David he is actually having a panic attack.³² To relax, David goes to partner yoga in a barn, where he describes his emotional struggles to his yoga partner Jocelyn Schitt. “It’s just all these feelings of displacement, you know?” he says, as they twist their way into position (“Wine and Roses” 13:55-20:20). David’s feelings of displacement are likely related to his queerness, which contributes to a sense of being both displaced and out-of-place in Schitt’s Creek (Foss 25). In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed writes about the liminal experience of appearing “out of place,” which contributes to what she refers to as a “migrant orientation,” or the “lived experience of facing at least two directions: toward a home that has been lost, and toward a place that is not yet home” (9-10). Alongside David’s embodied experience of being “out of place,” the economic precarity the Roses suddenly begin to experience in the first episodes of the series can also generate an affective state that combines feelings of “insecurity, anxiety, and...placeless-ness” (Patrick 298). Later in the series, we also follow along with Patrick as he reckons with coming out as queer to his (very accepting, albeit surprised) parents, who assumed David and Patrick were only business partners (“Meet the Parents” 09:50-13:03). In this way, the series engages with discourses of heteronormativity, the experience of coming to identify as queer later in life, and familial dynamics related to “coming out.”

Still, some critics have argued against the value of the queer utopia depicted on the show, especially as it is unreflective of many rural communities.³³ As Shepard argues in “The Unspoken Queer Horror of Schitt’s Creek,” the queer framework under which *Schitt’s Creek* operates “omits the realities of existing as a queer person in an environment that is either outright hostile to you or suffocates parts of you until you’re blue in the face.” Shepard goes on to say that he may, at least

³² Ted, a veterinarian, being “the only doctor in town” gestures toward realities related to limited access to medical care in rural areas.

³³ Relatedly, in *The Left Behind*, Wuthnow cites data that shows the support for the banning of gay marriage goes up as population decreases (129).

partly, be envious of Levy's idealism, and he would like to believe that more queer people can find something that resembles a home in small towns. "But," as Shepard states, "believing in that requires me to forget everything I've seen and experienced." Shepard's perspective aligns with many of those shared in texts such as *Storytelling in Queer Appalachia*. As contributors in this collection examine, many of the challenges of living queer in Appalachia, especially in rural Appalachia, emerge from the ways complex place-based histories come up against political, religious, economic, ecological, social, and cultural contexts. This complex coming up against results in psychological, physical, and material struggles and dangers for queer Appalachian people, whether they continue to make their lives in Appalachian spaces, are forcefully displaced, or choose to migrate.³⁴ With this text and others in mind, I wondered whether Schitt's Creek designation as a queer utopia speaks *with* or *over* these critical contributions to studies of queer rurality. And further, do representations of Schitt's Creek as a queer utopia reproduce or disrupt imaginations of the small town as nostalgic other?

In examining these questions, it's important to analyze *Schitt's Creek* through rhetorical lenses such as genre, audience, and purpose. In her thesis, Foss offers a useful scan of the history of representations of queerness and homophobia in television and film. Citing an article from *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, she considers the way twentieth-century morality codes created a "parallel dynamic of enforcement and punishment" in television and film (54). At first, there were no mentions or explicit representations of queerness. Later, as queerness became more accepted and was made visible in media, film and television showed patterns of either killing queer characters (i.e., the "bury your gays" trope), or representing queer characters as "miserable and morally compromised" (54). In "A Genealogy of Queerbaiting," Bridges argues that although

³⁴ Without reaching toward utopia, the essays included in this collection (edited by Glasby, Ryerson, and Gradin) often end on hopeful, queer, life-affirming notes that do not aim to erase difficult pasts, but instead show that by naming and reckoning with our pasts, we can create spaces in which to push for life-affirming futures.

representations of queerness in contemporary popular media are no longer taboo, the bury your gays trop is alive and well, and producers engage practices of queerbaiting and the canonization of queer stereotypes (Bridges). When we analyze *Schitt's Creek* in this context, it becomes clear that the series is part of a critical progression away from previous depictions of queer people in film and television. As mentioned, this is especially significant, and perhaps especially risky, in the context of a text that takes up the small-town imaginary and the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia more broadly, as it directly re-visions perceptions of relationships across rurality and queerness.

However, the queer utopia *Schitt's Creek* imagines is limited, especially when it comes to the representation of racial differences. Most of the people who live in *Schitt's Creek* appear white, which mirrors assumptions related to rurality and whiteness (Rowlands and Love 2021; Spearchief-Morris 2023). While some rural communities may be predominantly white, rural communities and regions are far more diverse than is often assumed.³⁵ Further, just because it is the case that many small, rural communities are home to a majority of white people, due to their history of racist policies and practices such as so-called sundown laws and redlining, the logic of the show does not limit it to a depiction of this reality, as *Schitt's Creek* imagines a queer utopia in the context of small, rural community (despite the fact that rural communities, like many other communities, are not typically experienced as queer utopias).

Before Patrick is introduced as a second queer character, David is the only explicitly queer character on the show, aside from one of Jocelyn's students who David briefly interacts with ("Little Sister" 11:40-13:11). Importantly, characters Ronnie and Ray, the only two prominent characters of color on the show, are also depicted in various ways as queer, though not explicitly. As explored by Tara McPherson in her analysis of the television show *Designing Women*, cultural texts have long

³⁵ See DW Rowlands and Hanna Love's "Mapping rural America's diversity and demographic change" (2021) for a useful investigation of the gaps between the assumptions and realities related to rural populations.

reinforced (and continue to reinforce) economies of racial visibility and invisibility (182-187). In the case of *Schitt's Creek*, the explicit presence of queerness in the small, rural setting is limited to white queerness. Because the show (and so, the town) critically imagines a queer utopia but does not address racialization, racism, or racial identity, I wondered if its writers and producers imagined themselves as creating a place where racism, or perhaps even race itself, does not exist—a sort of post-racial universe. Even if this were the case, though, it still raises important questions: Why is the better world *Schitt's Creek* imagines a mostly white world that is largely silent about racial and cultural differences?³⁶ Who or what is served by this decision, and how does it reproduce deep stories related to small, rural communities? In “Being Black in a Small Town,” Joy Spearchief-Morris writes, “The lone Black characters in shows like *Virgin River*, *Gilmore Girls*, and also *Schitt's Creek* reinforce the stereotype that Black people do not belong in small towns.”³⁷ This, in turn, reinforces the nostalgic narrative that “quaint” and “charming” small towns are white towns, and more broadly, that rural spaces are white spaces (Spearchief-Morris). As this makes clear, nostalgic narratives such as this one, are tangled up, at their roots, with settler colonial and white supremacist ideology.

As mentioned, there are two minor characters of color featured on *Schitt's Creek*. Ray, a member of the *Schitt's Creek* community played by Canadian actor Rizwan Manji, is presented as a loveable eccentric, and he seems to have many different jobs (photographer, real estate agent, travel agent, and Christmas tree salesman). Though we learn nearly nothing about his personal life, we do know that he is looking for a romantic or sexual connection (as Alexis comes across three of his

³⁶ As an (albeit limited) exception, there are several direct references to Johnny Roses' Jewish identity (see season two, episode five “Bob's Bagels”).

³⁷ As important challenges to this long-standing trend, Spearchief-Morris cites the work of journalists Omayra Issa and Ify Chiwetelu, who created the CBC multimedia project “Black on the Prairies,” which aims to represent the Black experience in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. As Spearchief-Morris writes, “To me, Issa and Chiwetelu's work is a step in the right direction, but it is still a work of non-fiction. Pop culture has yet to catch up.”

profiles on a “dating app for rural singles” called Bumpkin). Though Manji himself does not have an Indian accent, he decided to give one to his character. In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Manji addresses audiences’ concerns that his accent is offensive to himself and others. “It is a very slight Indian accent—somebody who was probably raised in Canada, but probably was born in India or Pakistan,” he said. “I don't regret that because I think it actually works for Ray. He wasn't like everybody else in that town. He was from somewhere else.” Still, some viewers and critics expressed that Manji's characterization of Ray “played into the expectations of white audiences and showrunners” (Andrew). Throughout the series, Ray and Moira have two exchanges that acknowledge Ray’s racial presentation in a way that simultaneously seems to acknowledge the characters’ (or at least Moira’s) struggle to understand racial difference. First, when Moira first meets Ray, at the cafe, she compliments his “complexion” (“The Drip” 04:00-05:06). Johnny is visibly embarrassed by Moira’s comment, but Ray smiles and thanks her. Secondly, later in the series, Moira asks Ray where his family immigrated from, and to her visible surprise, Ray says he is from Winnipeg (“Moira vs. Town Council” 03:50-05:00). In these ways, Ray’s character stands in for an examination and critical reflection on mythologies related to whiteness and rurality.

Ronnie, played by British-Canadian actress Karen Robinson, is a member of the Jazzagals, the Schitt’s Creek Women’s Business Association, town council, and owns a construction business. Though her character is minor enough that we do not learn many details about her personal life, Ronnie—from her wardrobe to her masculinized vocations—gestures toward various butch tropes. In an exchange between Ronnie and Johnny at a Women’s Business Association meeting in her home, Johnny shares that he and Moira, who attended the gathering as part of her campaign for town council, made an assumption about the “key demographic” that would be gathered together that evening. Before Johnny shares that he and Moira assumed the women would all be lesbians, Ronnie guesses they assumed that all of the women would be Black. When Moira and Johnny leave,

Ronnie sits down in her living room with the only woman remaining at the party and they shake their heads, laughing at the Roses (“Ronnie’s Party” 12:30-21:17). This is the closest audiences of *Schitt’s Creek* will get to a direct discussion about Ronnie’s identity as a queer Black woman. While Ronnie is certainly what we might think of as a Schitt’s Creek “insider,” Ray does not seem to have the same insider power and status. And though we do not explicitly learn Ray’s romantic and sexual identities, his character is positioned in eccentric, odd-ball, queered ways—as a differently racialized and accented outsider trying, largely through various entrepreneurial endeavors, to make his way *in* economically, politically, and socially.³⁸ In these ways, while *Schitt’s Creek* offers a re-vision to deep stories and realities related to queerness and rurality, it leaves intact—and even reproduces—dominant nostalgic narratives related to race and rurality.

Though limited, complicated, and imperfect, through the lens of reparative rhetorical analysis, I read *Schitt’s Creek*’s construction of a queer refuge as an attempt toward neostalgia, or a “critical longing for futures that could have been” (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 97). As Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus argue, neostalgia works to disrupt linear timelines and to build alternative futures. Though the construction of Schitt’s Creek as a queer utopia recirculates narratives related to the small town as a safe haven and saving grace, it rearticulates and extends these narratives to include queer-identifying people, disrupting persistent perceptions and experiences of small, rural communities as backwards and bigoted. In “Better Worlds: Queer Pedagogy and Utopia in Sex Education and Schitt’s Creek,” Tanya Horeck considers the way “the show’s queer political purchase lies in how their love is rooted in—and buoyed up by—a network of progressive and supportive interpersonal relationships” (Horeck). In this way, the series transcends a performative queerness to offer, instead, a critical reflection not on how queerness necessarily *is* experienced in the context of small rural

³⁸ Queerness in *Schitt’s Creek* often extends beyond sexual identity, aligning with hooks’ expansive definition of queerness, which I consider more thoroughly in my analysis of the character of Stevie Budd.

communities, but how it could be. In this way, rather than freezing Schitt's Creek in a rhetorical trap of nostalgic otherness, *Schitt's Creek* imagines the small, rural town as unfixed and emergent (Stewart 205). Schaab writes that the queer refuge depicted in Schitt's Creek makes "alternative forms of power, communication and collaboration appear possible and even natural," and through doing so, denaturalizes homophobia and heteronormativity to set "the stage for a queer future" that centers "interdependence and vulnerability" (154).³⁹ This is significant rhetorical labor, as it not only destabilizes the small town imaginary and troubles nostalgic othering, but it also offers the world a different story about things like love, community, and progress in a context characterized more often by things like hate and backwardness. In other words, *Schitt's Creek* takes up the nostalgic figure of the small town in ways that re-vision it toward what José Esteban Muñoz may have called "a critical investment in utopia" not only unfreezing its deep stories but writing toward alternative ones with—and this is the key—hope (*Cruising Utopia* 12).

Unbinding Belonging

It is also important to examine how belonging happens in Schitt's Creek, as deep stories related to belonging contribute to practices of belonging, and practices of belonging contribute to processes of individual and collective place-making. Further, in the context of the small town, practices and rhetorics of belonging are often routed through processes of nostalgic othering and communities of nostalgia. Examining the relationship between processes of belonging and place-making, William R. Schumann writes, "place-making is a process of selectively cultivating some narratives of belonging while erasing other meanings from public discourse" (9). Partly due to a disengagement from

³⁹ As evidence, in the *Warmest Regards, Best Wishes* documentary, the cast reads a letter from a large Facebook group for mothers of queer children. The letter is signed by 180 moms and thanks the show for its commitment to showing love and tolerance in a way that is entertaining but also positive and respectful. They write that they believe *Schitt's Creek* will be a catalyst for change.

regionalism, where paths toward belonging are entangled with regional rhetorics, belonging for the Roses primarily comes through deepening social and economic bindings to the Schitt's Creek community. Though they are only in the town for a small number of years—about four by the time Johnny, Moira, and Alexis leave—the Roses' roads toward belonging show that, in Schitt's Creek, belonging is not established through multi-generational heritage or ancestry. This challenges dominant narratives and experiences about how one comes to belong in a place or space, especially if that space is small, rural, close-knit, and relatively homogenous. In this case, Schitt's Creek shows that close-knit is not a closed knot. In conjunction with offering a re-vision of narratives about queerness in rural contexts, destabilizing deep stories about how belonging happens in the rural context is important rhetorical labor that models possibilities for political and social change.

Early in the series, however, viewers are presented with the knotted-up version of nostalgia, heritage, and rhetorics of belonging that we have likely learned to come to expect in communities of nostalgia (Boym xiv). When Johnny attempts to replace the “Welcome to Schitt's Creek” sign (to increase he and his family's chances of selling the town and then getting out of town), Mayor Roland becomes offended and tells him that the man on the sign is his great-grandfather, Horace Schitt, and that he was a “visionary” who “discovered” then developed the land that became Schitt's Creek seventy years ago.⁴⁰ Roland becomes emotional, saying, “He turned it into the little slice of heaven that it is” (“Don't Worry, It's His Sister” 16:22-17:46). The town council members are resistant to Johnny's request: the last thing Schitt's Creek needs is “some outsider coming in here and changing everything,” Ronnie says (“Don't Worry, It's His Sister” 08:55-10:00).⁴¹ Here, we see the ways

⁴⁰ The apparently infamous “Welcome to Schitt's Creek” sign is an important piece of visual rhetoric of the show, and its meanings are complex and evolving as the series progresses. The sign shows a woman bending over towards a body of water (presumably Schitt's Creek), reaching a basket toward the water as if to fill it up. A man holds her from behind, his arms wrapped around her waist as she bends over. Underneath the “Welcome to Schitt's Creek” text, there is an additional line of text that reads, “Where everyone fits in!” The man and woman painted on the sign are dressed in clothes that signify the early twentieth century. They have light skin and light hair, signifying European ancestry.

⁴¹ As bell hooks explores in *Belonging*, having a “sense of history” is deeply tied to identity construction (36).

feelings of nostalgia and threats of loss, often attributed to “others” and “outsiders,” become entwined (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 101).⁴²

Importantly for my analysis of nostalgic othering, Schitt’s Creek, according to Roland, was only founded seventy years ago, which places the founding of Schitt’s Creek right around 1945. Within communities of nostalgia (that is, within communities that have been nostalgically othered and have, as such, internalized nostalgic narratives about who they are why), there is often a circulation of deep stories that knit together the past with the present, and heritage with belonging. These stories may sound like: “Our family has lived here forever...” or “We go way back...” Though Roland uses settler colonial language and logics to describe his family’s arrival and rootedness in Schitt’s Creek—the language of “discovery”—the recency of Schitt’s Creek also destabilizes dominant narratives that freeze belonging to a sense of heritage, and then heritage to ownership. Narratives that engage what Jennifer Ladino calls “counter-nostalgia” imagine the “‘home’ as fractured, fragmented, complicated, and layered,” where the past is dynamic and official narratives can be exploited or inverted to challenge dominant histories (105). Even though the show itself does not assert any collective or individual memory of the land before it became Schitt’s Creek, the nostalgic view of a small town that has “been here forever” is (ever so slightly) destabilized. This destabilization is slight because, as cannot be ignored, the show does not see, or much less reckon, with histories of the land prior to the arrival of Schitt’s and the founding of Schitt’s Creek. This is significant, as Donehower, Hogg, and Schell discuss in *Reclaiming the Rural*, although rural spaces and “reclaimed” lands (such as the national park land I will discuss in chapter four) are often regarded as blank or nearly blank slates where little has happened and nearly no one has lived, these spaces and lands are layered with histories that, if understood, can lead to more complex ways of understanding

⁴² However, by the end of the episode, Roland has told Johnny that he will “fix” the sign. Apparently, this means that he will put up a smaller sign that reads, “Don’t worry, it’s his sister,” with an arrow pointing up to the larger (and unchanged) welcome sign. Any comedy generated here relies on tropes related to incest in rural communities.

where we are now—whether we are situated in rural, urban, or suburban spaces. In this way then, *Schitt's Creek* perpetuates the dehistoricized notion that rural space is blank until white settlers arrive and “discover” it. Further, the story Roland shares with Johnny is what Tuck and Yang refer to as a “settler move toward innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012), and it perpetuates deep stories that align with what Gloria Wekker conceives as “white innocence,” a seemingly paradoxical disavowal of violent histories and an embrace of narratives that center white “achievement,” an achievement which relies on the violent histories of racist and colonialist policies and practices (Wekker 2016). As I explore across my dissertation, this entanglement across settler moves toward innocence and narratives of blankness and discovery persist throughout the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

However, beyond this relatively brief scan of the history of Schitt's Creek, the series does not emphasize, or even mention, how long other characters or their families have lived in the town. While the show depicts an insider-versus-outsider dichotomy (as evidenced by Ronnie's response to Johnny's request to change the welcome sign), this dichotomy is not routed through the dominant narratives that correlate time spent in a place (including ancestral time) with belonging. The Roses' status as outsiders is far more complex than their recent in-migration. The Roses are outsiders because of their persistent desire to leave the town, and even more so because of the ways they perform and assert class differences, relying on a hierarchy between us (the family) and them (“the townies”).

However, through their growing social and economic participation in Schitt's Creek, the Roses make porous the boundaries between insider and outsider, which, in turn, destabilizes divides between belonging and unbelonging.⁴³ In reality (by which I mean outside of media representations

⁴³ As Wuthnow examines in *The Left Behind*, to be a respected member of a community, it's not just about taking care of self and family but pitching in to help the whole community address problems and work together toward solutions (80-85). This speaks to Wuthnow's notion of a “moral community,” which is less about morality itself (or an ideal view of community as moral) and more about how people develop loyalties to one another through their interactions (42). These

of reality), belonging anywhere often takes longer than a handful of years, but this may be especially true in small towns and rural communities, where belonging often happens across generations (Wuthnow 31-41). The implications of this long path toward belonging is, as it follows, a long stay in the territory of the outsider, or at least, the not-quite-insider. (This is, as I discuss above, often portrayed through the character of Ray.) Feeling and experiencing life as an outsider in a small town is not only socially isolating, but it also has political and economic repercussions that often result in displacement before one is accepted as an insider. Even if one stays, experiences of unbelonging result in disengagement and disconnection, especially if one is made an outsider due to their political and social identities and realities (such as being queer, disabled, an immigrant, and/or a person of color in a white space). Through a reparative lens, *Schitt's Creek* disrupts deep stories (and their attendant realities) about the way belonging happens in one small, rural community, especially as paths toward belonging are open to each of the Roses, despite the different social locations they occupy based on their identities, experiences, and interests. As Schaab writes about the Rose's path to belonging, "Recognising Schitt's Creek as home, the Roses gradually shift from apathetic outsiders to insiders mindful of their responsibilities to the community," focusing more on "interdependent personal and communal needs" rather than "their own needs, or desire to flee" (Schaab 157). While I agree with this reading in many ways, it is important to note that, aside from David in the final season of the series, the Roses do not—at least not consciously—recognize Schitt's Creek as home. They also do not rid themselves of their desire to flee. In fact, this desire, and the actions they take toward it, bubble up every season, sometimes in nearly every episode. My point is that the Roses come to belong in Schitt's despite these desires, and despite the imperfect ways they engage with and contribute to the community—despite the way that Schitt's Creek does

loyalties are developed through relationships, which can be built on obligations, common understandings, and affinities. No community ever, Wuthnow asserts, lives up to its ideal.

not fully feel like home, and despite that the Schitt's Creek community likely understands this. In this way, and with my previous discussion of Schitt's Creek as a "queer refuge" in mind, the show re-visioning what it means to belong, and who belonging is made available to, in the context of the small, rural community.

To better elucidate this point, I take up the case of Moira Rose to examine the ways her contribution to the Schitt's Creek community, through her participation on the town council and in the Jazzagals a cappella group, re-visioning paths toward belonging and reworks the figure of the small town as a saving grace. My analysis of Moira's path toward belonging, contributions to the community, and ever-shifting relationship to the people of Schitt's Creek is informed by a range of scholarship across rural feminist rhetorics (Greer 2015; Hogg 2006; Locklear 2011; Massey 2007; Sohn 2006). And though my analysis in this section focuses primarily on Moira, the series, and its depiction of rural women more broadly—through the characters of women like Stevie, Jocelyn, and Ronnie—reckons and re-visioning representations of rural womanhood, as the women living in the small, rural (and fictional) town of Schitt's Creek come together across different identities, social locations, and embodied experiences in ways that offer pedagogical models for the forging of restorative cross-cultural communities. This rhetorical labor challenges the nostalgic othering of rural women, which attempts to deny women living in rural spaces the agency and opportunity to contribute to progressive movements. And further, prevents the possibility of learning from the ways in which rural women have long contributed to the building and sustaining of restorative community and progressive action. In these ways, the nostalgic othering of rural women—through the rhetorical construction of rural womanhood—occludes an awareness of what Donehower, Hogg, and Schell pinpoint as mutual identification, or the ways rural, urban, and suburban land, spaces, and people are deeply interdependent and connected to one another (8-9). This lack of

awareness, or even rejection, of mutual identification contributes to harmful social and political divides.

When Moira arrives in Schitt's Creek with her family (and her extensive wig collection), audiences understand that her career (mostly as a soap opera actress) was stalled out, and that the Rose family's wealth was largely generated by Rose Video. Moira's character, then, embodies a sense of loss, and perhaps even shame and failure and desperation, at least as it relates to her career. It's also clear that Moira, like each member of the Rose family, has lost much if not all of her social circle with their loss of wealth and assets. Moira dresses in almost costume-like couture fashion; wears chic, statement-making wigs; and speaks in an accent that has been analyzed as a "mid-Atlantic hybrid" of British, Canadian, and Old Hollywood (Foss 61-2). In some ways, she seems to always be "in character," and throughout the series, expresses her admiration for characters like Jocelyn, Stevie, and her daughter Alexis for knowing who they are.

In the second season, Moira notices a small group of women having a wonderful time together at the cafe. Moira asks waitress and community member Twyla what has brought the group of women together and learns about the Jazzagals. The Jazzagals were founded by Jocelyn, and as Twyla notes, they have even traveled to New York City to perform in a festival called "Little Towns, Big Voices." As a "songstress" herself, Moira approaches Jocelyn to say she would like to join the group ("Jazzagals" 03:53-05:40).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Moira assumes Jocelyn will waive the audition requirement for her. When she doesn't, Moira is a bit taken aback and reluctantly shows up the audition underprepared—because she has made assumptions about the skill and talent of the group (based on her internalized deep stories about the kinds of people who live, or get stuck in, Schitt's Creek). However, when Moira arrives at the town hall where the Jazzagals rehearse, she is surprised by the vocal skill of a black woman named Lena, who is practicing her solo under the direction of Jocelyn. When it's time for her audition, what Moira delivers is strange and underwhelming, and she must "scat" when she forgets the lyrics of her chosen audition song. Here, we're also reminded of the superior ways in which she tries to position herself—attempts that, in their failure, disrupt her (and perhaps ours) assumptions about small town people.

The Jazzagals are an intergenerational group of women, and with the addition of Moira, they include a range of social classes and races. Like many of the “extra” and minor characters who populate Schitt’s Creek, the women who make up the Jazzagals are purposely cast to align with the perception of what women in small towns and rural areas look like—they are dressed in plain, modest, and often out-of-date or frumpy clothes, hair, and makeup. While the group is diverse in terms of body size and shape, as well as racially (though a majority of the women are white), their characters still speak to and reinforce deep stories about women in rural spaces as unstylish and off-trend, or with a lack of concern about their appearances.⁴⁵ In this way, the casting and costume design of the Jazzagals serves as an example of the way the text reaffirms some deep stories about rural people while re-visioning others.

As Moira’s participation in the Jazzagals continues throughout the series, Johnny stops by at an afternoon rehearsal and ends up singing baritone with Ronnie (“The Jazzaguy” 05-09-07:07). Per usual, many of the Jazzagals go to the cafe after rehearsal, and this time with Johnny tagging along, they seem to have a real hoot together. In fact, as Moira and Johnny walk home together after the outing, Johnny remarks, “We never did this at Rose Video, I don’t know why” (“The Jazzaguy” 16:08-18:09). And although Johnny does not know why, the rhetorical impact generated by this moment is made possible by an audience that does understand why—that the Roses are coming to feel what it is like to not only be part of a community (that is, in fact, not a business that they are the owners of), but to be part of the strengthening and even (re)composing of that community. For what seems to be the first time in their adult lives, Johnny and Moira Rose are building an authentic community grounded in reciprocal joy, companionship, and compassion. And this is, it seems, saving the Roses (and especially Moira)—socially, spiritually, emotionally and, as it later turns out,

⁴⁵ There is also a distinct sense of churchiness to the group, despite the stark absence of religion and faith-based community in Schitt’s Creek (which evades correlations between rural people and religion, especially extreme religion).

economically. By “saving” here, I mean to suggest that their budding relationship to and belonging in the Schitt’s Creek community affirms the nostalgic narrative that small towns are saving graces and safe havens, but with an important and critically reflective re-vision on how, who, and on what timeline such belonging is imagined to occur.

Soon after Johnny’s afternoon with the Jazzagals, Moira explains to him that she doesn’t want him to continue invading her time with “the gals,” as she fondly calls the group. Here, Moira admits what we already know: the transition to Schitt’s Creek has not been easy, and the Jazzagals’ rehearsals bring her joy, serving as a “tiny oasis in the echoing chamber of [her] social life” (“The Jazzaguy” 17:15-18:09). As a member of the Jazzagals, Moira is able to, once more, embrace and embody herself as more than the wife of a once-successful businessman, but as a performer and rhetor, and even more importantly, though she has not yet admitted it to herself, as a member of the Schitt’s Creek community, and this community of women in particular. In this way, Moira’s community participations and contributions aligns with the work of rural studies scholars such as Charlotte Hogg, Erica Abrams Locklear, and Katherine Kelleher Sohn, who have examined the importance of community amongst women in rural spaces, especially community built around literacy and rhetorical practices, due to the particular histories of gender politics in these spaces.

When the Roses are dispersing from Schitt’s Creek in the final season—Moira has landed a role in a reboot of the soap opera she once starred in—she must say goodbye to the Jazzagals. It is, to Moira’s surprise (but not to the audiences’ surprise), an emotional goodbye. Sarcastic and tough-loving Ronnie even cries, making explicit the existence of their unlikely but authentic and caring friendship. As Moira tells the gathered-around gals, “In your care, I have learned to see and hear the beauty in the bucolic” (“Start Spreading the News” 12:50-14:40). They all embrace, many of them crying those happy-and-sad-at-the-same-time tears. With a particular focus on intergenerational friendships amongst women, as well as friendships that form across different cultural, racial, and

class identities, Moira's participation in the Jazzagals shows the importance of social connection through community participation. As Schaab argues, "The cross-class community building and power-sharing featured in Schitt's Creek offers viewers a narrative questioning the status quo by queering the prevailing, divisive social class system and imagining alternative, yet plausible, economic and social futures" (150). Once more, Moira's character and storyline upends the binary of nostalgic othering, as she experiences and perceives the town as simultaneously saving grace and trap, and through her experience, audiences learn a lesson with transformative potential: you can long to leave a place, as Moira consistently does, while also forming generative, transformative relationships to that place and the people who live there. As noted, Moira's participation in and belonging to the group overshadows the fact that the group members knew she would not stay, and in fact, often overtly expressed her desire to leave. Though Moira remains along the insider-outsider spectrum throughout her time in Schitt's Creek, this does not prevent her from practicing and experiencing transformational, reciprocal forms of belonging. In these ways, Moira—and the Jazzagals as a whole—disrupt many of the deep stories that travel inside the rhetorical construction of rural womanhood—stories about conservatism, exclusion, sameness, backwardness, and entrapment—and in doing so, illuminate more porous and progressive possibilities for the forging of transformative and restorative relationalities.

Moira's eventual position on town council enables her to continue reconstructing her sense of self and identity, strengthening her sense of empowerment and belonging in the Schitt's Creek community as she finds her voice and takes up various community projects. In season two, Moira campaigns for town council against Jocelyn, ultimately winning the seat when Jocelyn drops out of the race. As part of her position on the town council, Moira and Roland travel together to a municipalities conference, hosted by the Regional Association of Municipalities, in a town called Thornbridge. At the conference, Moira wins Schitt's Creek a "big funding boost" by, as she says,

“channeling someone who cares” (“The Affair” 08:26-09:14). Here, audiences are primed to call Moira’s bluff: we know it is easy for Moira to channel someone who cares because she *is* that someone who cares. At the hotel bar after her big win, Moira very much enjoys how much everyone is celebrating and applauding her. She finds herself, her voice, and in some surprising ways, her people—in the place she’d least expect. Though Moira remains along the insider-outsider spectrum throughout her time in Schitt’s Creek, this does not prevent her from practicing and experiencing transformational, reciprocal forms of belonging—and from contributing to the restoration and continuation of communities bounded by connection and forged across difference. All told, Moira’s character and storyline serves as a pedagogical model for how we may destabilize processes of nostalgic othering and re-vision the nostalgic narratives that construct the small, rural town as more closed-knot than close-knit.

Portraying alternative paths toward belonging and being in community is one of the show’s most vital offerings to and beyond popular culture. Through the theory of nostalgic othering and my methodological lens of reparative rhetorical analysis, I read practices and processes of belonging in Schitt’s Creek as a detangling of belonging from heritage, troubling deep stories about the ways belonging happens in small, rural places, and who that belonging is and is not available to. And yet, it is hard not to consider this a soft disruption, as the Roses’ path to belonging is often entangled with property ownership (i.e., owning the town), and attempts to gain power, access, and mobility. This is to say, the challenges *Schitt’s Creek* offers to the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia do not work toward a detangling of the ways representations of the rural are entwined with the stories and logics that fuel structures such as settler colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism.

Throughout the series, we also see the Rose family come closer together—saved, as I’ve described it, by their time in Schitt’s Creek. As Chisholm writes, “This communal involvement encourages a transformative development of the protagonists, both in their relationships to the

community of the titular Schitt's Creek, and to one another" (224). In early episodes, we begin to understand just how disconnected the Roses were from each other, as Johnny and Moira express to their adult children they would like to get reacquainted. And as the family's time in Schitt's Creek goes on, we see Moira and Alexis' relationship go from awkward and distant to a close mother-daughter relationship bound with respect, admiration, and honesty, as they also become business partners, with Alexis successfully handling Moira's publicity. Reading the knitting together of the Roses' relationships to one another in the context of their placement in the small, rural town of Schitt's Creek, their growing closeness and interdependency reinforces deep stories related to rural cultures and the "simple" and "slow" ways of life that result in tight-knit families and communities. These deep stories, and the way they are embodied by the Roses, at least partially implies that their new lives have forced them too—as they are "stuck together" in a much smaller living environment with much less to do. And yet, because of the deeply felt, and much earned (through careful character development) pathos of the show, it is unlikely that audiences would read the Roses' relational transformations with one another as fully dependent on their situatedness in Schitt's Creek. In this way, their respect, care, and interdependency on one another is pedagogical for communities beyond the rural, and beyond nuclear, heteronormative family structures.

As I gesture toward above, *Schitt's Creek* shows the making of porous relationships across family and community. Jackson articulates this beautifully for *The Guardian*, arguing, "As the Roses learn to accept, and form relationships with one another, they simultaneously do so with the rest of the town," and in this way, their engagement with the Schitt's Creek community works to teach the Roses what really is, as they "find themselves guided into the first healthy relationships they've ever had" (Jackson). As the series goes on, we begin to see characters like Stevie Budd, as well as Roland and Jocelyn Schitt, form kinship bonds with the Roses, as they become friends and business partners with the formation of the Rosebud Motel Group. Though in "Without a Paddle," Stephanie Patrick

argues that the Rose family continues to distance themselves from their neighbors through their physical isolation as the only long-term guests at the motel (305), this is not true. The Roses, contrary to Patrick's analysis, regularly open their space to friends for visits and even community gatherings. They are also most often outside of their home, especially as the seasons go on and they become more economically and socially involved in the community. In fact, Chisholm explains the Roses' frequent engagement with their community in "An Evolution of a Combo," where she examines the way *Schitt's Creek* hybridizes and shifts forward the primary (i.e., home) and secondary (i.e., public) stages on which the North American sitcom has played out. The primary stage—imagine sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*—is centered around the family and the home. The secondary stage—imagine *The Office* and *How I Met Your Mother*—is centered on a group of friends or colleagues and their lives in work or recreational spaces. In *Schitt's Creek*, though, as Chisholm points out, "Family and friendship are combined, as are the home and the workplace" (216). Through this narrative structure, the Roses show that there is a possibility for both a nuclear, heteronormative family structure and an embedded, reciprocal, and joyful relationship with a broader community.

While the (in)famous *Schitt's Creek* welcome sign assures visitors, passers-through, and community members that *Schitt's Creek* is a place, "Where everyone fits in," the series itself offers audiences opportunities to critically reflect on the ways insider-versus-outsider boundary lines are maintained, and on the other hand, blurred—even, or perhaps especially, in the critically-utopian community of *Schitt's Creek*. The presence of insider-versus-outsider practices, policies, and rhetorics in rural communities are well-researched and deeply storied. For example, in their study of the small town of Ellis, Iowa, Carr and Kefalas note that there is a tolerance for newness, but that that is different than being welcoming or embracing, which they theorize will likely become a problem as immigration and the arrival of different people will promote regeneration and stave off

extinction (14). Carr and Kefalas comment on how people who live in small towns in the Midwest often find comfort in “being surrounded by people who understand the rules of local life instinctively because they are the direct descendants of the people who created these standards” (16). They go on to comment on how people living in small towns, especially those that are shrinking, also anticipate a sense of loss as new and different people (especially immigrants) move in. Here, we may think about so-called “reactionary nostalgia” and the social, political, and economic insider-versus-outsider practices that arise out of this particular anticipation of loss (Carr and Kefalas 17). Relatedly, while I have not come across any rural studies scholar or study that claims harmful insider-versus-outsider rhetorics and practices do not exist in rural communities, Wuthnow does draw up a useful counterpoint that suggests, in small towns and rural communities, people are often more likely to have to interact with people who are different from them because there are simply less opportunities for isolation (36). Anyone living or from a small, rural area has likely experienced this truth, and it certainly speaks to the many interactions across differences that happen in Schitt’s Creek, as everyone in town seems to congregate across the same few social establishments and organizations, and as the Roses continuously mark themselves (and are marked) as outsiders in Schitt’s Creek because of their class performance and the way this performance influences their appearance choices, primarily in their designer clothing and in the case of Moira and Alexis, in the way they wear their hair, makeup, jewelry, shoes and other accessories.⁴⁶

An early storyline featuring Moira and Jocelyn takes up this terrain, ultimately offering a reflection on deep stories related to difference and homogeneity of rural communities, and the ways

⁴⁶ This is because, as Daniel Levy explains, wardrobe is the most important element of storytelling outside of writing. “We as people say so much about who we are and what we believe in and what we want and what we think of ourselves in what we wear,” he explains, and he also says that he wanted people interested in fashion to recognize designers and pieces, and because of this, he and his team kept pushing budget boundaries (*Best Wishes, Warmest Regards*). Interestingly, this seems to reveal Levy’s imagined target audience: people not only interested in fashion, but knowledgeable about high fashion. For those of us who live in or are from small towns and rural places, we likely know there are very few people around with extensive knowledge of (or access to) couture (myself very much included).

stories of sameness contribute to rhetorics of (un)belonging. In her typical kindness and compassion, Jocelyn invites an emotionally flailing Moira to go with her to a hair salon in Elmdale, the nearest town to Schitt's Creek. After their appointments at the salon, Moira walks into the cafe with her wig done in Jocelyn's signature hair style—big, blonde, and curled up and out from her face. Johnny laughs at Moira's new style and says she looks like, "I wanna say...Tanya Harding." Moira is enraged, "Until I get in the shower, I'm stuck looking like every other person in this god forsaken prison" ("Turkey Shoot" 15:30-17:35).⁴⁷ Sensing Moira's reaction to her new hair, Jocelyn stops by the motel to apologize. "I know you hate your hair Moira, almost as much as you hate this town," she begins. "But you could be here for a long time, and people here are just trying to help you, and you may need them one day, and I would hate for that day to catch you by surprise." Moira replies that she doesn't hate the town, "It's just not mine. And *this* is not my hair." She says it *is* Jocelyn's though, and that she envies Jocelyn for knowing who she is. The exchange rings sincere, and it's not the only time Moira expresses similar admiration for the people of Schitt's Creek. Still, the scene ends with Moira telling Jocelyn that if she ever finds her shopping at Elmdale's "Blouse Barn" (where the women of Schitt's Creek go to shop) to shoot her in the temple ("Turkey Shoot" 18:40-20:11).

In this same episode, David dons camouflage and attends an annual "turkey shoot" with Roland, Stevie, and Ronnie. Meanwhile, Alexis goes on a first date to a buffet in Elmdale with the town veterinarian Ted. Through these storylines, this episode humorizes the Roses' attempt to adapt to the small town—to, in a sense, become insiders even as they maintain their outsider status, as both Moira and David "try on" the working- and middle-class styles and activities of Schitt's Creek dwellers. Their shifting appearances show that there is possibility for transformation and belonging

⁴⁷ In Schaab's analysis, "Rather than expressing gratitude, Moira worries she looks too much like the women of Schitt's Creek, whom she likens to inmates or people without freedom or options—people she resists finding common ground with" (153).

in the small town, though that transformation and belonging is, at first, routed through practices of becoming like (or at least appearing like) everyone else. The longer the Roses stay in Schitt's Creek, the more audiences understand that they are becoming more authentic, empowered versions of themselves while also becoming more embedded in the community that is (albeit slowly) embracing them for who they are, and in so doing, living up to the rhetoric of their welcome sign. In this way, by revising narratives related to who small towns offer a safe haven to, the series once more critically reflects on, then offers a re-vision for the small-town-as-safe-haven versus small-town-as-trap story so prominently entangled in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. In the following section, I connect nostalgic othering—the rhetorical process undergirding the construction of the small town as frozen in time and, as it follows, as either a romantic but backward safe haven or an antiquated, rundown dead-end—to deep stories that rhetorically construct a binary between leaving versus staying in the context of small, rural towns.

Deep Stories About Leaving Versus Staying

To review, the broad narrative arc of *Schitt's Creek* is that the Roses end up in the small, rural town of Schitt's Creek because it is their last remaining asset, and once there, they spend the remainder of the series trying, in various ways, to get out. In examining the ways the nostalgic othering of the small town is tangled up in narratives of those who leave *versus* those who stay, this section aims to illuminate connections across the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and the choices people do and do not (get to) make across the staying-to-leaving spectrum.

In *Hollowing Out the Middle*, Carr and Kefalas investigate the phenomenon known as the “brain drain,” where disproportionate rates of young people leave their rural hometowns for educational, professional, and social opportunities. Most notably, they identify the “filtering system”

that pushes, prods, and cultivates “high achieving” young people to leave the rural places where they are from, seeking opportunities (i.e., upward mobility) elsewhere (9). As noted in my opening section, this filtering system is present across rural and urban contexts and is especially present in spaces where “getting out” is presented as the surest route to normative measures of success. As part of my exploration of the deep stories that construct a binary between leaving *versus* staying, it’s interesting to consider another of Carr and Kefalas’ findings from *Hollowing Out the Middle*: “despite popular thinking about ‘the problem with young people today’ who are bored with life” in rural areas, the majority of young people involved in their study struggled with their decision to leave. As they write,

Leaving small town life requires a plan and a willingness to cut oneself off from a world that is familiar and predictable. There are some young people who can’t wait to break free, but far more choose the ties and the obligations of home, where things just seem to get harder. They fear the outside world will expect them to change too much of who and what they are” (4).

On both sides, then, there is fear and uncertainty. In other words, while leaving rural areas may open more opportunities, especially in terms of education and social and economic mobility, rural out-migration is also emotionally and socially costly. While Carr and Kefalas engage ethnographic methods to study the combination of policies, systems, and messages that contribute to the brain drain, using the tools of rhetorical analysis, it’s possible to submerge underneath these structures to illuminate the deep stories that undergird the broader rhetorical ecosystem under which the policies, systems, and messages operate.

When Moira arrives in Schitt's Creek she begins to threaten suicide, insinuating that this would be her only means of escape. She asks Stevie for a bathtub and a long extension cord; she refers to the town as a "coffin" ("Our Cup Runneth Over").⁴⁸ Paralleling his mother's sentiments, when the Roses first arrive at the motel David asks front desk attendant (and his soon-to-be-friend) Stevie for a towel so that he might wash the town off of his body. "Do you think I want to be here?" he asks Stevie. "Do you think *I* want to be here?" she replies ("Our Cup Runneth Over" 17:55-18:30). This exchange not only marks the beginning of their friendship, but it also introduces one of the central tensions of their relationship, and of the show itself: the tension between leaving and staying, getting stuck and getting out.⁴⁹

It is clear from the Roses' very first moments in Schitt's Creek that they do not want to be there and would do just about anything to escape—the only thing standing in their way is that they are all out of money and it seems that their wealthy friends have hung them out to dry. At the end of the first season, Johnny finally believes he has found a buyer for the town. The family becomes hysterically excited and begins packing for departure (to St. Barts for Alexis and New York City for David). David tells Stevie that she is going to come to New York with him and he's going to save her from this "dumpy town" ("Town for Sale" 5:30-7:00) David's draw toward New York City, and his assumption that Stevie will be drawn there too, aligns with Herring's analysis of the lure of "New York City," especially for queer people. Not being in New York, Herring explains, can be seen as a form of social death, as it promises "possibility, pleasure, plenitude, and escape," and as it has been

⁴⁸ Though Moira's references to suicide as an escape from the town, and to the town itself as a kind of death, are made in the service of comedy and character development, for some viewers, they may gesture toward a reality in rural areas related to real-life rates of suicide—a reality we are brought up closer to, though still comedically, through Bob's brother Carl's suicide, which everyone aside from Moira and Johnny seem to believe was a "freak accident" involving a ceiling fan (see "Carl's Funeral").

⁴⁹ Stevie often expresses her sense of feeling stuck and dissatisfied with her life in Schitt's Creek, but she also does not seem to have any sort of plan to leave, and it is unclear whether she has the resources to do so. Stevie, in this way, would most closely align with Carr and Kefalas' conception of "stayers," or the young people who remain in their hometowns while their more mobile peers leave for more populous environments.

normalized as the epicenter of queer culture, the place one must end up (1-3). Similarly, for queer people, leaving the country for the city is often understood and positioned as a necessary rite of passage—for reasons of both safety and lifestyle (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 27-45). Unfortunately for David and the rest of the family, though, the deal falls through and the Roses are left to face the fact that Schitt's Creek had been on the market for twenty years before Johnny bought it for David as a joke. When Moira finds this out, she remarks that they will be there for twenty years, "tucked in a crater, lost to all" ("The Drip" 20:16-20:40).

In exploring themes of rural isolation, *Schitt's Creek* enables the audience to connect narratives and experiences of rural isolation to discourses of staying-versus-leaving. When Alexis gets a cold, for example, Moira says she knew this day would come, "cut off from all medical services." ("Bob's Bagels" 00:30-1:30). This, of course, speaks truth to very real issues related to access to medical care in rural areas (Pruitt 27-28). The show also portrays the struggle for both young and older residents to make sexual and romantic connections in town, from characters like Alexis, Stevie, and David who are in their late twenties and early thirties to characters like Bob who is an older man, perhaps in his sixties. Throughout the series, characters often visit the Wobbly Elm, a dark and dusty dive bar on the "edge of town," in an attempt to meet a sexual or romantic partner. In one episode, when David and Stevie venture to the Wobbly Elm, it is nearly empty with only a few middle-aged people seated together and alone, listening to the classic country music playing from the speakers. Disappointed, David tells Stevie that his closest online match is seventy-nine miles away ("The Candidate" 18:40-20:30). As exemplified by this scene, David and Stevie often gesture toward a kind of longing that will likely feel familiar to many people, and perhaps to queer

people living in relatively small, rural communities in particular. David and Stevie embody the notion that life is happening somewhere else for someone else, but not here, and not for them.⁵⁰

In addition to connecting themes of rural isolation to leaving versus staying, the series also references the factor of education often present in the decisions young people make (or do not get to make) regarding leaving or staying in the small, rural hometowns. During the first season, for example, David is planning a “Game’s Night” at the motel and asks for Stevie’s help in finding a sixth person so that teams will be even. Sitting outside the cafe, David tells Stevie, “Obviously they need to be funny, and smart, and have a wide range of knowledge and a well-rounded sense of humor.” In reply, Stevie tells David, “All those types of people move away from here.” David thinks Stevie is joking and tells her she is funny. But she’s not joking. Rather, she’s speaking directly to Carr and Kefalas’ findings regarding the way so-called “achievers” are “air-lifted out” to fulfill their potential somewhere else (25-26). Because David is insistent that they invite a sixth person, Stevie suggests someone named Eric because “he graduated high school” (“The Cabin” 8:52-10:07). Here, and throughout the show, there are references to characters’ educational deficits. Later at the game night, which becomes more of a party thanks to Alexis, David gets frustrated and overwhelmed. “You’re not the only one dying in this town. It is boring and I am just trying to make the best of it,” he says to Alexis. When Stevie comforts him, she says that she doesn’t like most of those people either. Again, Stevie and David bond over their sense of shared queerness in position to the town and the people who live there (“The Cabin” 18:30-19:50). While Stevie identifies as straight, her position in Schitt’s Creek aligns with bell hooks’ consideration of queerness: “queer not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self

⁵⁰ Similarly, when Alexis downloads an “online social hub for rural singles” called “Bumpkin,” she complains that there are only ten guys on the app, and that three of them are Ray.

that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live” (hooks 2014).

In fact, in examining deep stories related to staying and leaving, mobility and immobility, Stevie Budd emerges, in the very first episodes, as a fascinating case study. The audience does not know a significant amount of Stevie’s backstory. We find out, when Moira makes an assumption that Stevie did not go to college, that she did go to college, but it’s unclear if she left Schitt’s Creek in order to do so, or if perhaps she commuted to nearby Elmdale College. We also know that when her aunt Maureen died, she left the motel to Stevie, making her the owner. “You are not your aunt,” David tells her, as they spread her ashes alone in a parking lot, but Stevie is not convinced and begins to consider selling the motel just to ensure she is not even more tied to Schitt’s Creek than she already is (“New Car” 13:59-15:07). We also find out, through her Aunt Maureen’s death, that Stevie does not have much family around (she explains to the funeral director that many of them have died or are in jail). There are also various references throughout the series to Stevie’s relatively low maintenance appearance (especially in comparison to the Roses’) as she typically wears light-wash bootcut jeans, unbuttoned plaid shirts over white t-shirts, Converse Chuck Taylors, her hair pulled back, and little makeup. Eventually, when Johnny becomes her business partner at the motel, and he tries to make the motel more successful, she begins to worry that she will soon be left behind with even more responsibility. She knows that one day the Roses will once more, and perhaps soon, have the mobility and accessibility to leave, and that in doing so, she will be left behind with the motel. Despite Moira’s urgency to leave, Johnny reassures her, “No one is leaving you behind.” In a gesture toward this, Johnny even decides to rename the motel from the Schitt’s Creek Motel to the Rosebud Motel, combining their two last names (“Open Mic” 20:15-21:18).

After a potential romantic partnership crashes and burns, Moira—who is directing a community production of *Cabaret*—visits Stevie at her apartment and gives her a copy of the script.⁵¹ Moira tells Stevie she sees potential in her, and that playing the lead role of Sally Bowles is what pulled her out of her “Podunk routine” years ago, once more alluding to the rural past she left behind in order to pursue her dream life (“The Hospies” 18:55-21:21). This role becomes a key plot point for Stevie’s character—leading to a series of transformations and realizations about her life in Schitt’s Creek. On opening night, Moira visits Stevie backstage to tell her how proud she is of her. Referencing David’s recent engagement to Patrick, Stevie says she is very happy but wishes she was not watching it happen from “behind the desk” of the motel, as she feels like everyone is growing up all around her, preparing to leave her behind. Moira shares that before being cast in *The Crows Have Eyes 2*, she too thought there was “no escape” from the “hopelessly dark existence” of life in Schitt’s Creek. She then tells Stevie to *use* the feelings she is having, adding, “I never thought I’d say this about anybody in this town, but you, you’re very, very cool. And whether you set sail or stay put, that’s never going to change” (“Life is a Cabaret” 14:05-16:22). This is the first and only time that Moira suggests that “staying put” is a possibility, much less a viable option. Stevie’s performance gets a standing ovation, and she seems to surprise everyone, including herself (“Life is a Cabaret” 16:22-18:30). This exchange between Moira and Stevie certainly feels “earned,” narratively speaking, but it is also the most intimate exchange they have throughout the series and brings together Moira’s conflicted but porous views about life in Schitt’s Creek and the possibilities that life might hold.

⁵¹ When Stevie wants to pursue a relationship with a travel blogger, he admits that he thought it was something casual that “happened when it happened,” since she is “chained” to the motel, and he travels for work. When Moira stops by Stevie’s studio apartment to give her condolences, Stevie tells her, “Turns out somebody who has been working the front desk of a motel her whole life isn’t exactly a turn on” (“The Hospies” 19:12-21:14).

After *Cabaret*, Stevie does much reckoning with whether she belongs in Schitt's Creek, and whether she wants to continue her business partnership with Johnny. Though, by the time Johnny proposes to buy Stevie out of the Rosebud Motel business, Stevie has decided she wants back in ("The Premier" 13:40-16:08). Soon, she comes to Johnny and Roland, who recently bought into the business, with an idea to buy at least thirty more motels in order to pay for the renovation of a second, recently acquired motel ("Sunrise, Sunset" 17:46-19:41). This is the idea that ultimately launches the Rosebud Motel Group, which of course (and somewhat ironically for Stevie), leads to Johnny, Moira, and Alexis' exit from Schitt's Creek. Meanwhile, Roland and Jocelyn will stay in Schitt's Creek to oversee the Rosebud Motel, and Stevie will travel around to oversee new motel openings and operations across North America, ultimately keeping herself rooted to Schitt's Creek. Stevie tells David she realized she did not need to live in a big city—she only needed to know that she could ("Start Spreading the News" 03:33-04:30). Stevie's realization here articulates a vital insight about the binary construction of leaving *versus* staying. If we have internalized the small, rural place as frozen in time (i.e., nostalgically othered), then we must either leave in order to become part of the present, undergoing a process of transformation, or stay back inside its past, embracing a state of stasis. In this way, the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering is directly connected to the binary construction of leaving *versus* staying. When Stevie's experience exposes this deep story as mythology, she is able to reframe her relationship to leaving and staying, feeling porosity and possibility where she once felt entrapped (Farrar 2011).⁵² In this way, Stevie's character and storyline

⁵² Here and throughout this section, I draw from Walter Benjamin's notion of "porosity," which Margaret E. Farrar describes in her study of the politics of place memory as "a sense of place that understands how history and memory seep into landscapes, allowing the past to coexist alongside the present" (731). Porosity allows us to attune to the ways the nostalgic othering of the figure of the small town impacts our experience and perception of small-town cultures and communities, as well as the cultures and communities themselves. In this way, porosity prohibits temporal freezing, as we take up habits of mind that allow us to read the past and present together.

offers important alternatives to the leaving-versus-staying binary experienced by many people living in small, rural communities.

David's character development also calls for close examination through the lens of deep stories related to leaving versus staying. When The Rosebud Motel Group is in the process of securing their investment capital, David assumes his soon-to-be-husband Patrick will want to move to New York City as soon as they have the resources to do so. To his surprise, Patrick is resistant toward the idea and says that he does not know if he wants to uproot their entire lives ("The Pitch" 11:10-12:40). Here, and elsewhere in the show, viewers are offered openings through which to see how the Roses have internalized the construction of the small town as a nostalgic other, and as such, assume that everyone, like them, is trying to escape their lives in Schitt's Creek—that they would get out if they had the chance. Eventually, Stevie tells David that Patrick had been planning to put an offer on a house in Schitt's Creek that David has said that he likes. David and Stevie drive over to the charming cottage with a fenced-in front yard and sit together on the hood of her car, gazing at it, both tearful. Stevie asks David, "What is it about New York City?" David says he has big dreams—following the script of the deep story that says dreams are chased and achieved in cities, at least any dreams worth chasing. As examined above, David's relationship to New York City aligns with Herring's discussion of queer urbanisms and the figure of New York City as a queer mecca (1-29). Stevie, picking up on this story, asks David why he can't have those dreams here, especially since his friends in New York City don't seem to be good people (as they are skipping his wedding for a music fest). Stevie asks, "Why do you want to go back to a place that has done nothing but hurt your feelings?" David replies, "Because I want those people to know that I'm not a joke. And that I've won." Stevie counters him, says he has won, and admits she doesn't want him to leave her. They tearfully embrace ("The Pitch" 17:27-20:00). This is a key moment because David draws a direct connection between staying in a small, rural community and "losing"—through the logic of this

internalized narrative, “winning” equals leaving for a larger, more populous place. When we understand the figure of the small town as a nostalgically othered space, we can connect David’s logic to the sense that, even as a safe haven, the small town is still a trap—a place where one may be safe and secure, but is ultimately frozen in the past along with the town, unable to transform and grow, and perhaps most importantly for David, closed off from both normative and queer markers of success.

However, his conversation with Stevie must have poked holes in this mythology, as David surprises Patrick by putting an offer on the home himself.⁵³ Buying the house in Schitt’s Creek, as opposed to going through with his original plan of renting a two-bedroom apartment with Alexis in Brooklyn, also represents narratives related to settling down and putting down “roots.” It represents a kind of investment in the place and community, a commitment (at least temporarily) that they are going to stay and live there and continue contributing to the social and economic wellbeing of the town. At the same time, the purchasing of the off-market house also raises questions and tensions around the politics of home, land, and property ownership in rural places—questions and tensions the show itself does not attempt to answer, or even to explicitly explore. Again, in these ways, the series does not offer any sort of pedagogical reflection, much less a re-vision, of the ways nostalgia for the small town, and the rural more broadly, is entangled with the logics and practices of settler colonial occupation. As I find across my dissertation, the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia often acts as a shield to the development of critical literacies about the ways our collective imaginaries of rural spaces, cultures, and communities are tangled up with the history and presence

⁵³ The fact that David was able to put an offer on the home is interesting enough—we know that he may have some savings from his Blouse Barn earnings, and that The Rose Apothecary (the business he shares with Patrick) may be somewhat profitable, and we do not know how much the house costs, or how much of a down payment he placed on the house, but this does seem to speak to the affordability of smaller towns and more rural areas. It’s also interesting to note that the home was not on the market, but that the people who lived there were apparently open to selling after talking to Patrick first, and then David. This gestures toward the ways people living in rural communities are at risk of being “pushed out” by those with more money, resources, and power.

of settler colonial violence across the United States and elsewhere. Importantly, in my following chapter, I analyze the Indigenous television series *Reservation Dogs*, which offers pedagogical models for the development of this critical literacy (Shor 1999).

When David tells his family, over celebratory pizza, that he and Patrick are going to stay in Schitt's Creek, he notes, "I just don't think I'm finished with this place." He tells them what they already know: his business is here, his soon-to-be husband is here ("Start Spreading the News" 20:00-23:04). While David's phrasing of not being *finished* with Schitt's Creek likely rings as "normal" to most audiences, in the context of my study, it raises questions about what it means, anyway, to be "finished with a place." What is the rhetorical and material relationship constructed between person and place through this particular turn of phrase? It strikes me as mirroring hierarchical relationships between humans and nature—a setting apart and above, a framing of a place and community as "for our use," or through a more reparative lens, as something to "invest" in. As I examine more deeply in my fourth chapter, both of these readings of David's reasons for staying in Schitt's Creek leave, intact and unbothered, settler colonial logics onto relationship across people and place, as they rhetorically construct the community and place of Schitt's Creek as something that exists for the fulfillment of his wants and needs, and suggest that once those wants and needs are fulfilled, he may leave, as he see himself as "finished" with it. As chapter two will closely examine, this human-centered framing of land and community exists in stark contrast to Indigenous relationships to land and community (Watts 2013; Tallbear 2011; Tuck and McKenzie 2015; Jackson and DeLaune 2018). More specifically, this notion of a place being ours for the using until we are finished undergirds deep imperial and settler colonial stories about our relationships to space and place, perhaps especially rural space and place (that is, space and place that is seen as empty, blank, and without history). All this being said, I don't read David as relating to Schitt's Creek in this way—like many viewers, I'm sure, the final episodes of the series seem to tell us that David and Patrick will stay in

Schitt's Creek for a very long time, if not their entire lives. And that they will continue to transform and grow there, all while contributing to the transformation and growth of Schitt's Creek—that, in a sense, there will be no being “finishing” with the small town David was once hellbent on escaping. My point, instead, is that even when we are working toward a re-visionary relationship to land and community, if we are working out from deep (settler) stories, we're likely to hear those stories slipping through the cracks. Rather than a reason to abandon this process of learning and unlearning, I posit that if we are able to attune ourselves to such cracks and such slipping, we will be well positioned to reflect on, reckon with, and ultimately offer re-visions for the rhetorical and narrative processes through which our world is shaped.

Lastly, when David reveals to Patrick that his offer was accepted by the previous homeowners he tells him, not that he decided he no longer wanted to go to New York City, but that he doesn't want to be anywhere Patrick doesn't want to be (“Start Spreading the News” 23:06-24:19). Here, audiences witness the entanglement between family and partnership, place and community. As many of us know intimately, we are bound to place by more than economic ties and historical connections, but by those we love—our partners, community, family.⁵⁴ This is an essential element of understanding why people leave or stay or return to places, perhaps especially rural places, and it's one that the show highlights through David's decision to stay.⁵⁵ It's important not to ignore this dimension of leaving and staying, mobility and immobility, and the way our most significant relationships often determine where and when we go (or if we stay).⁵⁶

⁵⁴ As Jan Willem Duyvendak writes in the preface to *The Politics of Home*, “Home for me is not a place: home is my man” (xi).

⁵⁵ And it should also be noted domestic partnerships, as well as biological and chosen family structures, are not only an important element of why people stay in small towns and rural places, but it is also an important element of why people arrive or return to these spaces and places. In *The Left Behind*, Wuthnow writes about the difficulties partners face when arriving to their partners' small, rural hometowns—and he writes that this impacts women disproportionately, as it is more likely for wives to move back to their husband's small, rural hometown, and then, as it follows, to struggle to feel like a fully accepted and welcome part of the community (76).

⁵⁶ Through Alexis and her relationship to Ted, we witness a different end point to the complications of leaving versus staying in the context of “chasing dreams.” Ted and Alexis break up when Ted chooses to pursue his research career in

A conversation with Neema Avashia, author of *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place*, crystallized my understanding of the consequences of the leaving-versus-staying binary so common to the experience of living in small towns and rural regions, and especially for those who are queered, in various ways, by the norms established and upheld in them. In the question-and-answer portion of her keynote address at the *Reimagining Rural* conference, she explained that this framing of leaving and staying as a binary pushes people (especially young people) to leave because it correlates, as David and Stevie often did, leaving with success and staying with failure.⁵⁷ Contrary to this deep story, “Staying is also a kind of success,” and “committing to roots and community is not a failure” (Avashia). But even when we understand this, it remains true that many people who grow up in small towns and rural places experience the pain and danger of, in the words of Avashia, “lov[ing] a place that does not love [them] back.” While Schitt’s Creek is constructed as a queer refuge, many places, including small towns and rural regions, are often not. “We need people to stay and fight,” she said, but for people who experience threats to their safety and well-being—as many queer people, people of color, and/or disabled people continue to experience in rural places—there are also ways to leave and fight. “You can leave and fight or stay and fight,” she said, a statement that rang as familiar. It’s a question my queer Latinx friend raising a queer child considers each day. Do they continue to stay and fight for a more equitable Wyoming, as

the Galápagos and Alexis chooses to stay in Schitt’s Creek with her family, where she is building her publicity business. Shortly after their breakup, a succulent that Ted bought for Alexis dies. Speaking to David at his bachelor party at the Wobbly Elm, Alexis wonders if it is a sign that the plant “couldn’t grow into its potential in such a small space,” drawing an obvious metaphor between herself and the plant (“The Bachelor Party”). As an early-career publicist fresh off her Associate Degree from Elmdale College, Alexis must not only contend with deep stories about potentiality and dream-chasing in the context of rurality—she must also deal with the hard reality that she likely *does* have less opportunity for career growth in Schitt’s Creek than she would in a larger city, like New York City, where she moves at the end of the series. Somewhat ironically, it is also likely that if she would not have started her publicity business in Schitt’s Creek, she may have never gained the confidence and security to venture beyond the small town in the first place. In this way, Schitt’s Creek is once more a safe haven and saving grace—a place where Alexis could become a large fish in a small pond, and then leave to find a larger pond to swim in (Wuthnow 60).

⁵⁷ As discussed earlier in the chapter, similar correlations are made for people who grow up in marginalized urban neighborhoods.

they have done for years, or do they get out before the present Wyoming threatens their lives? The very notion of leaving and fighting troubles the binary constructed between leaving and staying, as does Avashia's important reminder: "Leaving does not have to be final." To unravel the premises of deep stories that teach so many of us that we must either leave forever or stay "behind" forever, Avashia argued that we must show young people that there are many different ways to leave, many different ways to stay, and many decisions and relations in between. And as Avashia's answer to my question implied, we must re-vision the deep stories we tell about each of these relationships, dethawing the small, rural place from its rhetorical role of nostalgic other so that we may understand and re-vision its many complexities, histories, presences, and possibilities.

In *Belonging*, bell hooks writes about the connections between land and community that create "a culture of belonging." hooks' narration of her own decision to leave, then return to, her Kentucky home speaks to Avashia's reflections, and to the experiences of many *Schitt's Creek* characters. Even from vast geographic and cultural differences, as hooks worked her way through undergraduate and graduate degrees, she maintained her deep sense of rootedness and connections to the place and culture she had left—she did this by maintaining connections to her family and community, and by keeping in touch with her agricultural roots through caring for plants in her New York City apartment. *Belonging*, then, is evidence of the ways identities are constructed not only through our relationships to our families and communities, our histories and memories, and to the places in which we live and work, but also through our connective and reconnective practices. Most importantly perhaps, hooks' writes that leaving Kentucky—to pursue her education, career, life—was an essential part of her process of coming to know and feel Kentucky as the home where she belongs (14). In this way, leaving showed hooks that she could (and should) return to her Appalachian roots, even as that return was made complicated by her identity as a Black woman. And further, if she had stayed faithful to the leaving-versus-staying binary and the deep stories that

undergird it—a story that would have tried to convince her that to return would be a failure—she likely never would have ventured back to the place where she felt most connected to herself, her family, and the land surrounding. Though their experiences and identities are quite different, Stevie’s realization that she does not need to leave Schitt’s Creek, that she only needed to know that she could, shares resonances with hooks’ experience, and shows viewers that the wall between leaving and staying can be, in fact, an open door. These alternative narratives are important for the survival and wellbeing of small, rural communities. Further, they are critical for the bridging, or at least the making more porous, of divides across the urban, suburban, and rural—as we must not only recognize our mutual interdependence on one another, but we must also see one another as whole and holistic, as dynamic and ever-shifting, as full of potential rather than stuck in time and out of place. Though imperfect, through the reparative lens I’ve attempted to see through across this chapter, *Schitt’s Creek* offers a critical and pedagogical model toward this important rhetorical labor with, as I argue here and throughout my dissertation, material consequences.

Dethawing the Small-Town Imaginary

Patrick argues that, although the show sometimes presents “small-town values, community, and downsizing” as “desirable lifestyle choices,” these positive representations of rural and small-town life are in tension with the Roses’ near-constant desire to leave the town (305). However, as my analysis shows, Patrick’s read glosses over the Roses’ deepening sense of belonging and participation in the Schitt’s Creek community, and most importantly, how the Roses’ development of mutually beneficial relationships with their community is not oppositional to their desire to leave Schitt’s Creek. Though we cannot deny that the Roses’ desire to leave Schitt’s Creek is the primary narrative drive of the series—with the first episode of the show marking the Roses’ arrival and the final episode marking their departure. But, with the tools of reparative rhetorical analysis and its guidance

to look out for models for resistance, I connect their longing to leave *with* (not against) their developing relationships to their community. And further, through reparative rhetorical analysis, I've illuminated the rhetorical and narrative tactics through which the series models the destabilization and re-visioning of the deep stories that construct the figure of the small, rural town as a nostalgic other, frozen in the past and in the dualistic framing as either trap or safe haven. As I've found, the Roses' relationship with their community in *Schitt's Creek* proves that desires to leave (and even ongoing attempts to leave) a place and community may bring up complexities and tensions, but ultimately, these tensions and complexities do not have to lead to practices of disengagement. Rather, these tensions and complexities can be generative, and in *Schitt's Creek*, they illuminate the many different felt experiences of living in a small, rural community, and the ways these experiences are not oppositional, but can be felt simultaneously. Disentangling the deep stories that rhetorically reduce the small town to either trap or safe haven requires a resistance to temporal freezing—to seeing the small town as a figure of the past—and a commitment to understanding the past, present, and even future of a place, and our potential role or contribution to creating and even re-visioning that future. As my chapter shows, rhetorical study offers the tools for doing this work, and as rhetoricians, we can and must offer accessible models for noticing the circulation and implications of deep stories in our social lives and cultural texts, as well as models for disrupting, destabilizing, and re-visioning the deep stories that continue to divide and endanger.

In *Schitt's Creek*, audiences witness characters who grow and transform, all within the setting of a rural community, and who participate in that community in ways that contribute to its growth and transformation. The small town is not frozen in an illusion of its past. Rather, it is a space of possibility and porosity, a space that cannot be captured by a story because it is not done being drafted, never done being re-visioned. This text, though imperfect, is ultimately a model of Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' conception of neostalgia, or “pride, longing, and hope that resists,

counters, and/or appropriates the dominant nostalgia to create new traditional identities” (93). We get one final glimpse of these alternative possibilities on Johnny and Moira’s final morning in Schitt’s Creek. After they have said their tearful goodbyes and shared assurances that they will be back to visit, Johnny asks the driver of their big, black SUV to stop for one final look at the town welcome sign, a sign that now features his family instead of Roland’s ancestors, with Moira holding Johnny’s waist as he bends toward the creek, and with Alexis and David waving in the background (“Happy Ending” 23:03-24:04). Though the text of the sign has not changed—welcoming folks to Schitt’s Creek, a place “where everyone fits in”—the power of its visual rhetoric has opened up and deepened. Change is not only possible in the context of the small, rural community, it happens.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMOR, HAUNTING, AND COUNTER-NOSTALGIA: RHETORICAL TACTICS OF RESISTANCE AND REFUSAL IN *RESERVATION DOGS*

Like *Schitt's Creek*, the most prominent narrative arc of *Reservation Dogs* (2021–), created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, is that of a group of people attempting to leave their rural community. In the case of *Reservation Dogs*, this group of people is made up of four Indigenous teenagers (Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack), close friends who live on the Muscogee Reservation in Oklahoma, outside the small (fictional) town of Okern (population 8,246). In the very first episode of the series, audiences learn Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack are planning and preparing (i.e., trying to raise enough funds) to leave the reservation for Los Angeles, California. Their dream to make it to California is largely motivated by the loss of their friend and cousin, Daniel, who fostered his own California dreams. However, as the series progresses across its first two seasons (which are the focus of this study), Bear, Willie Jack, Cheese, and Elora navigate complex terrain across place and community, kinship and belonging, story and memory, grief and joy, and the past and present.

Willie Jack's alarm goes off at 4:30 a.m. Standing in her kitchen, she speaks to a portrait of her cousin, Daniel, who died by suicide just one year ago. Daniel's eyes move, in interest, as Willie Jack tells him she is finally going to kill Chunk, an elusive deer Daniel named on a previous hunt. Willie Jack is determined to get him, she says, before she takes off for California with close friends Bear, Cheese, and Elora ("Hunting" 01:50-03:00).

"Don't we own this land?" Willie Jack asks her dad, Leon, later that morning as he pulls his truck off the road alongside a barbed-wire fence. "No, we're Indian," Leon says, "We don't own land." He explains to his daughter that her great-grandfather sold this land to Texas ranchers, and that Texas ranchers "don't give shit back." Here, Leon speaks to what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have identified as "a profoundly settling, anthropocentric, colonial view of the world" that

manifests in the belief that “land can be owned by people, and that occupation is a right” (24). The series’ multiple references to Texas ranchers in the context of stolen land, occupied land, and land ownership speaks directly to the terrain explored across chapters three and four as well.

Leon and Willie Jack begin discussing her plans to move to California. When Leon asks his daughter why California is better than here, Willie Jack, who is sixteen years old, begins to list rappers from California: Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre. Leon insists the reservation, and the rural space that surrounds it, are fun too, and that there is a lot to do here—like “eat catfish and walk around,” he says. Willie Jack pushes back, saying she cannot be what she wants to be here—like, perhaps, an MMA fighter, or a chef, or a dog rescuer, but not a rescuer of reservation dogs. She reminds her dad that he is the one who always said she can be anything she wants. Then, in a poignant moment, she asks him why he never left. There’s nothing out there for him, Leon says, because his family and friends are here. “Tend to my own garden. Let other people tend to theirs,” Leon explains. He tells Willie Jack that he has often seen people leave and come right back, because this is where their people are. “This is their home,” Leon says. Besides, he tells her, Los Angeles “doesn’t have trees like this.” They both look around at the lush forest that surrounds them. “This is what’s going to bring you back,” Leon tells his daughter (“Hunting” 08:20-12:36).

Leon’s explanation to Willie Jack emphasizes familiarity, supporting Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie’s analysis in “Decolonizing Perspectives on Place.” As they write, “in Indigenous worldviews, relationships to land are . . . familiar, and if sacred, sacred because they are familiar” (51). Tuck and McKenzie consider Western culture’s romanticization of Indigenous relationships to land as “a misunderstanding of the nexus of Indigenous identity and land” (51). As Rachel C. Jackson and Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune write in reference to Tuck and McKenzie, “Land, story, and identity intertwine in Indigenous epistemologies, so that a particular location presents layered narratives and storied connections that comprise the present landscape” (46). In alignment and

extension of Tuck and McKenzie's analysis, Kim Tallbear describes Indigenous peoples' identities as often grounded in their relationships with particular places, and as such, "Indigenous notions of peoplehood" emerge "in relation with particular lands and waters and their nonhuman actors," which differs "from the concept of a genetic population, defined as moving upon or through landscapes" ("Genomic Articulations" 514-515). In this scene, Leon's reasons for staying emplaced on the reservation attend not only to his relationship to the land and its nonhuman agents, but also to his relationships with his friends and family. That is, Leon's identity is grounded in both place and the people who live (and have lived) there across time. In this way, *Reservation Dogs* offers an expansive understanding of place—one that always includes both the space itself, the beings which populate it, and the stories that travel within and through it.

But Willie Jack wonders aloud in response to her dad's explanation, maybe if Daniel had left the reservation, he would still be alive. Willie Jack and Leon talk about how much they miss Daniel, and how they often feel that he is still around. As they discuss the loss of Daniel, a tall figure with red eyes stares at them through the trees in the distance. Leon apologizes to his daughter for the ways his grief has impacted her, especially as he has struggled with a flare of obsessive-compulsive disorder since Daniel's death. As Willie Jack and Leon mourn Daniel's death together, we—the audience of *Reservation Dogs*—travel through time to a similar scene in the woods, except in this scene Daniel is still alive, and he is complaining to Willie Jack and Leon about the lack of deer in the area. Interestingly, because it is not clear whether this entwining of the past with the present comes from the perspective of Willie Jack or the perspective of Leon, it feels as if it has been produced by their shared experience of memory and mourning. In the present once more, Willie Jack and Leon find the ranchers' trail camera and take it down. Soon after, two older white men walk by in the distance; they talk loudly about cancel culture, taxes, and "the gays." These are, presumably, the Texas ranchers who own the land, and luckily, Willie Jack and Leon remain out of their sight

(“Hunting” 14:30-17:24). Leon tells Willie Jack that he saw the large, red-eyed figure known as the Tall Man in this same spot last year when he was spreading corn for the deer. “Maybe it was Daniel’s spirit trying to say goodbye,” Willie Jack reasons. Their conversation winds back to Willie Jack’s plans for California. Her dad assures her, “Nobody says you’ve got to go to California for all that stuff,” but, “If you need to leave, I’m here for you” (“Hunting” 18:47-20:20).

Leon wishes aloud that he could have done more to help Daniel—to help him in the way he needed help. Then, it is a year ago. In this way, grief, mourning, and longing are introduced as experiences which challenge linear (i.e., Euro-Western) conceptions of time and, relatedly, the very premise of progress narratives. Leon is loading his truck with corn to take out to the woods to feed the deer; Daniel is walking by on his way back from a honky-tonk bar with Elora. Daniel asks Leon if he needs help; Leon says he doesn’t. Then, Leon offers Daniel a coat, says he is “running around like a savage” and is bound to “catch death or a cold.” Daniel uses the Muscogee term for maternal uncle, Pauvw, as he tells Leon that he will see him later (“Hunting” 20:30-22:37).

At the end of Leon and Willie Jack’s hunt, Willie Jack kills the deer known as Chunk, and Tall Man’s bright eyes shine from the trees. On their way home, they stop by the cemetery to visit with Daniel. “Everyone wants to leave for California. But it’s really hard leaving everyone here. I don’t know how you did it,” Willie Jack says, crouching near Daniel’s grave. She says she forgives him as a Creek hymn begins in the background. As the frame widens and the episode closes, we see a group of elders singing together (“Hunting” 23:07-26:00).

While *Reservation Dogs* is certainly not the first television series or film, or popular culture text more broadly, to represent Indigenous characters and their stories, it is the first to do so with a cast and crew that is almost exclusively Indigenous. In other words, after decades of popular culture texts made *about* Indigenous peoples, but not *by* or *for* Indigenous peoples, *Reservation Dogs* is the first mainstream (as an FX on Hulu production) television series about a community of Indigenous

people and their cultures, created and produced by Indigenous creators (Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi) and producers. *Reservation Dogs* is also the first series filmed entirely in the state of Oklahoma, which has the second largest Native American population in the country (Spurrell). As is clear, *Reservation Dogs* represents a significant and recognizable turn from the still-dominant Hollywood decision to cast non-Indigenous people to play Indigenous characters, and/or to depict Indigenous characters as nostalgic others.⁵⁸ Importantly, *Reservation Dogs* disrupts this long pattern of settler-dominated (i.e., rhetorically imperialistic) Indigenous representation across digital, print, and live media. For these reasons—as my dissertation aims to understand how mainstream digital texts engage rhetorical tactics to respond to deeply-entrenched (and nostalgic) narratives about cultures and communities perceived as “rural,” and to uncover what we (as scholars, teachers, and community members) might learn from these texts as we, too, must learn to work with and against rural nostalgia and its implications—*Reservation Dogs* emerged as culturally significant, and even urgent, artifact to study.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ King traces Indigenous representation in the entertainment industry back to Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show*, which included Native American performers playing to the settler colonial gaze’s nostalgic construction of “Indianness” (89). At the same time, King notes the way entertainment has functioned as a tactic of survival for Indigenous communities (89). Importantly, as José Esteban Muñoz considers in *Disidentifications*, performance and “liveness” are still often positioned in dominant culture as a substitute for historical and political representation, and of course, not all performances or representations are liberatory (188-9).

⁵⁹ For more context, I approached my study of *Reservation Dogs* similar to the way I approached my study of *Schitt’s Creek*. In both cases, I had watched each available episode of the series once, if not more than once, for the same reasons I consume other television shows, movies, and literature—interest, entertainment, connection, and the pleasurable sensation of emotional and intellectual stimulation. In the case of *Reservation Dogs*, I felt immediately drawn to the characters and their stories, interested in the ways I related to them, and perhaps even more interested in the ways I did not and could not. Then, as I considered the kinds of questions I was interested in taking up in my dissertation—questions about the way rurality is imagined and represented, and how those representations fuel and are fueled by nostalgic rhetorics, and what the implications of those rhetorics are—I felt drawn back to *Reservation Dogs* in the same way that I felt drawn back to *Schitt’s Creek*. In both cases, I was not sure how these texts would challenge, complicate, extend, or speak back to my questions. And I was not sure, not yet, of the value of studying these cultural artifacts. However, I understood, as the very first of its kind—a mainstream television series about an Indigenous community, made by a collective of Indigenous storytellers—*Reservation Dogs* is culturally significant for the rhetorical and narrative tactics it models as it circulates across audiences and contexts. In this way, the series felt like rich and important material for rhetorical study.

For audiences of *Reservation Dogs*, Willie Jack's hunting trip with her father weaves together many of the interrelated strands, or stories, of the series. From grieving Daniel's death; to tensions between characters' decisions to stay or leave the reservation; to the material realities of settler colonialism⁶⁰ and its impositions on Indigenous⁶¹ land and sovereignty; to relationships to space, place, and community; and to the experience of the past inside the present. In continuing to think through the relationship across rhetoric and the notion of deep stories, this chapter leans toward Thomas King's articulation of narrative in *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. King compares Christian to Indigenous storytelling practices by examining the way the Bible constructs a "hierarchical relationship between God, man, animals, and plants," while Native storytelling practices work toward co-operation and balance (23-24). While the Bible, and Genesis in particular, crafts a narrative that emphasizes competition, scarcity, and war (i.e., good versus evil), Native stories are less concerned with winning and more concerned with achieving balance (King 24). King asks, rhetorically, whether we can truly blame the kinds of stories that circulate—especially our deepest stories, such as creation and origin stories—for our social, political, and economic problems. Though King cheekily elides answering such questions directly, his readers are primed to understand that we not only can but should investigate the relationships, structures, and worlds constructed by our dominant cultural narratives. This is because, as Kimberly G. Wieser usefully examines in *Back to the Blanket: Recovered Rhetorics and Literacies in American Indian Studies*, storytelling, as a rhetorical practice, "highlights communal meaning-making systems" (12). Further, storytelling, according to

⁶⁰ By settler colonialism I mean to signify the various policies, practices, structures, narratives, and logics that support and sustain ongoing settler colonial occupation. As Tuck and Yang describe in "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," the settler colonial state requires the "total appropriation of Indigenous life and land" (5). In settler colonialism, land is the primary value because settlers use Indigenous land both as their home and their source of capital. The settler colonial relationship to land is one of exploitation—the purpose of land is profit (Watts 26).

⁶¹ The term "Indigenous" is used throughout this chapter to describe and honor the peoples who were present, and continue to be present, on the North American continent before imperialism and colonization. As Kim Tallbear explains, the term "Indigenous" also emphasizes the relationality of "original peoples from around the world, united not by racial similarity but by colonial historical similarities and a common cause against settler and other forms of colonialism" ("Genomic Articulations" 511).

Jo-Ann Archibald in *Indigenous Storywork*, is a form of pedagogy. And as has been extensively explored in many contexts, stories have connective power, and more particularly in the context of many Indigenous narrative practices, “Stories unite people in relationships with the land and with each other” (Jackson and DeLaune 38).

Importantly, Leon and Willie Jack’s hunting trip also features a range of rhetorical tactics deployed throughout the series. Such tactics include humor (as well as joy), haunting (i.e., a rejection of “vanishing Indian” mythology and a critical engagement with the history and presence of settler colonial practices and logics), and counter-nostalgia (i.e., a strategic reappropriation of nostalgia). Together, these rhetorical tactics challenge, critique, and ultimately refuse the nostalgic narratives that have long circulated about Indigenous peoples and cultures. As I will examine throughout this chapter, these nostalgic narratives serve the production and circulation of a mythological national imaginary, and when left to their own (rhetorical) devices, contribute to the harmful social, political, and economic divides interrogated across this study.

Philip J. Deloria’s *Playing Indian* remains an essential text for mapping the ways Indigenous peoples have been rhetorically constructed throughout the history (and presence) of colonization. Deloria connects the rhetorical construction of “Indianness” or the “Indian Other” to the project of constructing and sustaining the United States as a nation, finding that, at the very roots of the making of the United States, or at the very beginning of the colonization process, Indigenous peoples, cultures, and lands have been rhetorically imagined and constructed in ways that serve the (ever shifting) requirements of settler colonial occupation. Put another way, “From the colonial period to the present, the Indian has skulked in and out of the most important stories various Americans have told about themselves” (Deloria 5).⁶²

⁶² As Deloria’s text implicitly argues, constructing a nation demands the construction of a national identity, and identity construction is an inherently rhetorical process that involves both distancing from and connecting to other identities—or more likely, other imagined identities.

Like the figures of rural nostalgia examined across my dissertation, Indigenous peoples have been rhetorically imagined and constructed as nostalgic others who are intimately connected with related constructions of rurality, nature, and wilderness.⁶³ The process of nostalgic othering directly contributes to structures of amnesia and delusion, not only about Indigenous peoplehood, but about the history and presence of settler colonial violence.⁶⁴ Aligning with Tuck and Ree's framing of the inventive settler, nostalgic othering shields the vast distance between real Indigenous peoples and their material realities and the "mental images, stereotypes, and imaginings based only loosely on those material people Americans have called Indians" (Deloria 20). And as argued in chapter one, nostalgic othering—a powerful and flexible rhetorical and narrative process—fuels and is fueled by dialectical framings. As Deloria explains in *Playing Indian*, when we pull up the roots of white American culture, we find that a "dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion," influenced by settler longings for both "savage freedom" and "civilized order," fuels the rhetorical construction of Indianness, or what Deloria refers to as the "Indian Other" (Deloria 3-4).⁶⁵

To map this rhetorical process, it is important to consider cultural narratives related to Indigenous relationships to place, space, and land. In the words of Tuck and Yang, in settler colonialism, Indigenous relationships to land are "made pre-modern and backward. Made savage" (5). To understand this process more deeply, it's also useful to consider Vanessa Watts' articulation

⁶³ In this chapter, then, I return to Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' concept of *nostalgic othering*. As Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus explain, "Nostalgic others differ from other 'others' of scholarly discourse (e.g., Said's *Orientalism*) in that their alterity is not primarily based in race or ethnicity. Rather . . . the nostalgic other is distinguished from the rhetor by time" (95). In other words, nostalgic othering is a powerful rhetorical device that allows a person or collective to freeze their perception of a person, community, or place in a past that they have (likely) learned or imagined from external sources. From this position as frozen, the nostalgic other can then be taken up and flexed to serve the present and, as it follows, impact the future (95). Nostalgic othering, as Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus argue, robs (or attempts to rob) communities of agency.

⁶⁴ Tuck and Ree explain the triad of settler colonial relations as "a) the Indigenous inhabitant, present only because of her erasure; b) the chattel slave, whose body is property and murderable; and c) the inventive settler, whose memory becomes history, and whose ideology becomes reason" (642).

⁶⁵ For example, distancing themselves from Great Britain, many English settlers longed for the "savage freedom" they imagined in Indigenous communities. Then, as it became more and more critical for settlers to see themselves in opposition to Indigenous communities (i.e., as they came to rely on Indigenous land for property and profit), settlers longed for the "civilized order" that was representative of more "developed" European societies (Deloria 3).

of the Indigenous conception of Place-Thought, which is “based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these Thoughts” (21). While Place-Thought, which Watts’ draws from Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies creation narratives, is not meant to represent a universal model for Indigenous thought, it critically maps the differences between “Indigenous and Euro-Western process” (23). While the colonial, or Euro-Western frame, locates thought from abstraction, the Haudenosaunee or Anishnaabe framework locates thought (and thus, agency) in the land, or said more specifically, in Sky Woman. In this way, Place-Thought represents thinking through and with what is framed, in Euro-Western thought, as nature. While, through Euro-Western logics, thinking is understood to happen in a way entirely separate from, and largely in opposition to, nature. Further, Watts argues that a settler colonial relationship to land rejects the concept of Place-Thought, and as such, rejects the epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationship to land that is felt, thought, and theorized by Indigenous people. The rhetorical framing of Indigenous peoples and their relationships to land as pre-modern, backward, and savage is critical for the settler colonial imperative to strip land of its agency, recasting it as a resource to exploit for property and profit.⁶⁶ It is critical, in other words, for the rhetorical and narrative construction of a collective invitation to “remember to forget” the violence of settler colonialism (Stuckey 230).

This rhetorical framing has also played a critical role in naturalizing “vanishing Indian” mythology, which Wolfe refers to as a “logic of elimination” (387), or as Tuck and Yang articulate, the settler colonial demand that “Indigenous peoples must be erased, must be made into ghosts” (6).

⁶⁶ The dehumanizing framing of the “Indian Other” as “savage” was particularly important for settlers to retain a stronghold on our/their constructed identity as rooted, entitled, and native to the land that became the colonies and then the nation. For example, as settler occupation expanded, and the presence of Indigenous peoples became more disruptive to this expansion, figures such as Columbus were used to replace the “noble Indian” as a crucial figure of American identity (Deloria 37-48). This rhetorical refiguring, Calderon argues, lies at “the heart of settler colonialism,” which relies on “legitimizing settler territorial acquisitions through physical and ideological dispossession of Indigenous inhabitants and cooptation of nativeness by settlers” (314).

Similarly, in *Days of Obligation*, Richard Rodriguez writes, “America is an idea to which natives are inimical. The Indian represented permanence and continuity to Americans who were determined to call this country new. Indians must be ghosts” (4). In other words, because Indigenous people were constructed as pre-modern, they were viewed by settlers as “incapable of developing, indeed even surviving, in the face of the modern industrial state” (Tallbear, “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary” 181). Through this lens, Indigenous genocide, removal, and relocation was (and is) largely understood as not only natural, but inevitable.⁶⁷ As Indigenous people were imagined more and more as “predead Indians who once dead would become history” (Deloria 58), the rhetorical construction of Indianness came to represent a peaceful, pastoral, nostalgic archetype (Deloria 63-4). In this way, in the words of Deloria, archaic and nostalgic images of Indianness undergirded the “full-blown ideology of the vanishing Indian, which proclaimed it foreordained that less advanced societies should disappear in the presence of those more advanced” (64).

Related to “vanishing Indian” mythology, Renato Rosaldo usefully labels the disingenuous sense of sadness white Americans express for the “disappearance” of Indigenous people, culture, and language as “imperialist nostalgia” (68-87). Used across this dissertation, Rosaldo’s theorization of imperialist nostalgia aligns with Deloria’s assessment of “a characteristically American kind of domination” where power dynamics are “hidden, denied, qualified, or mourned” (Deloria 187).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Removal and relocation policies range from the General Allotment Act, which King argues was, “Driven by the government’s desire to control tribes, by the desire of settlers for cheap land, and by the popular notion that land set aside for Indians was the antithesis of North American values and fair play, the General Allotment Act sought to ‘re-imagine’ tribes and tribal land” (130). In Canada, there was the 1876 Indian Act in Canada, which decides who is an Indian and who is not—contributing to “disappearance” (King 132). Additional policies in the United States include the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (133), House Concurrent Resolution 108 in 1953, sought to terminate treaty obligations, dismantle reservations, and “liberate” Native people from poverty and exclusion by relocating them to urban centers for assimilation (136), Arts and Crafts Acts in both the US and Canada (139), the Homestead Act of 1862, which “legitimated Thomas Jefferson’s dream of a nation of self-sufficient, landowning individuals” (100), and methods used to determine status and non-status in the US (decided by blood quantum) and Canada (decided by marriage).

⁶⁸ For example, although Native American people faced various forms of genocide, the United States never formalized a policy of genocide. “It could not,” Deloria explains, as “doing so would have made visible an absolutely destructive power over Indians that Americans wanted desperately to deny” (186).

Nostalgic narratives have undoubtedly contributed to these rhetorical evasions of power, reproducing large distances between the reality of American nationhood and the mythology of American identity.

Especially in the wake of large-scale transformation (such as the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, World War II, and the Counterculture Movement), Deloria argues that settlers have “returned to the Indian,” repurposing the rhetorical construction of “Indianness” to serve particular circumstances (7).⁶⁹ This “returning to the Indian” aligns, more broadly, with studies that show relationships between cultural upticks in nostalgia and large-scale transformation or catastrophe. Moreover, settlers have long performed and propagated “Indianness” to sustain a delusion of rootedness and entitlement to the land and its resources.⁷⁰ Most useful for this study, Deloria identifies several cultural moments in which “Indianness” was appropriated (or “played,” to use Deloria’s terminology) in ways that fueled the construction of the “Indian” as a nostalgic other significant to the production and circulation of the rural imaginary. Throughout the Romantic Period, for example, the figure of the “wild” and “instinctual” Native American was taken up to support American critiques of European society (Deloria 21; King 33).⁷¹ Through this framing, Indigenous people came to represent “a particularly pastoral vision of America’s historical landscape” (Deloria 50), and as such, Indigenous difference was defined primarily by temporal (i.e., nostalgic) difference, rather than racial or cultural difference (Deloria 58). This past-tense, pastoral

⁶⁹ For example, during the American Revolution, settlers used “Indianness” to construct a national identity—the figure of the “savage Indian” was used to draw boundaries around civilization, while the figure of the “noble Indian” was constructed as oppositional (and favorable) to the Englishman. Further, colonial propaganda connected the colonies to the figure of the “Indian Princess.” In this way, Indigenous female identity and sexuality was used to represent the fertility of the land, and to depict “the colonies as available and vulnerable to the desires of English men” (Deloria 29).

⁷⁰ For example, King identifies institutions such as the society of Red Men, who “were using the idea of the Indian to anchor their order to an American antiquity” (73). And as Deloria explains, “Lacking Athenian columns and crumbling amphitheaters... American tastemakers turned to visible signs of time and history in the landscape: Indians and nature joined as important artifacts of contemplation and commemoration” (50).

⁷¹ The Romantic Period trafficked in an “emphasis on feeling,” as well as a fascination with the natural, mystical, exotic, erotic, and a “preoccupation with the glorification of the past,” and the symbol of the “Indian other” united each of these interests (King 33).

construction of Indigenous peoples and cultures persists, contributing to reproduction of the “Indian other” as a nostalgic other—a rhetorical figure frozen in time, trapped in (rural) space.⁷²

Though it seems like quite the sleight of hand—to root one’s identity in a rhetorical construction of Indianness that does not exist, all while contributing to the occupation of Indigenous land and marginalization of Indigenous communities and cultures—doing so aligns with Tuck and Yang’s examination of the “settler moves to innocence,” which settlers employ to “relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege” (21). Settler nativism, where “settlers locate or invent a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had ‘Indian blood’” in a way that “deflects settler identity all while continuing to benefit from settler privilege and continuing to occupy stolen land” (Tuck and Yang 10), and settler adoption fantasies, which include “adoption of Indigenous practices and knowledge” as well as “narratives in the settler colonial imagination in which the Native (understanding that he is becoming extinct) hands over his land, his claim to the land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe-keeping (14),” align with Deloria’s theorization of “playing Indian,” and are attempts to sustain delusions of rootedness.

Ironically, questions, concerns, and interests in conceptions of authenticity are an essential element of the rhetorical construction of Indianness, and unsurprisingly, nostalgic conceptions of the “authentic Indian” are entangled in and through the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.⁷³ As a result, Indigenous peoples living in urban spaces are seen, through the settler colonial gaze, as less

⁷² In *Reclaiming Nostalgia*, Jennifer K. Ladino usefully traces the ways nostalgia, as a rhetorical force, has fueled the constructed, and sometimes contradictory, relationships across conceptions of Indianness and conceptions of nature, rurality, the wilderness, and the pastoral.

⁷³ For example, in *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King considers the photography of Edward Sheriff Curtis, who traveled the western part of the country, “looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct” (34). To ensure he would capture the sort of Indianness he imagined, Curtis traveled with boxes of “‘Indian’ paraphernalia—wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing—in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look” (King 34). Even as he fought for Native rights, publishing articles and books that protested the government’s treatment of Native American people, his photography catered to the settler colonial gaze and national fantasy of an authentic North American antiquity that white Americans feel entitled to claim (King 57).

authentic. Relatedly, white Americans living in urban areas who consider their own experience or lifestyle inauthentic in some way (often due to senses of disconnections and rootlessness that have resulted from increasing shifts toward technology and industry), locate authenticity in rural Indigenous communities.⁷⁴ But the essential problem with authenticity, as King notes, is that its value comes from its rarity (56). In other words, urban Indigenous peoples across the United States “become an asterisk group, invisibilized,” even as, according to the 2010 census, about two-thirds of Indigenous peoples across the United States live in urban areas (Tuck and Yang 23; Deloria 142).⁷⁵ Rhetorical entanglements across Indianness, rurality, and authenticity, then, strengthen ideologies of the “vanishing Indian,” especially as settler colonial clinging to constructions of the “authentic Indian” have contributed to harmful blood quantum policies (King 53; Tallbear, “Genomic Articulations” 510-525).⁷⁶ Tommy Orange powerfully complicates the association between Indigeneity and rurality in the prologue to his novel *There, There*, ultimately arguing that living in an urban environment, or being influenced by urban experiences and culture through the Internet, does not take away from an Indigenous person’s Indigenous identity (10). As Orange writes, “Getting us to cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption, erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign. But the city made us new, and we made

⁷⁴ As Deloria explains, “Because those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as inauthentic, they easily locate authenticity in the figure of an Other. This other can be coded in terms of time (nostalgia or archaism), place (the small town) or culture (Indianness)” (101)

⁷⁵ Deloria explains that after large numbers of Native people fought in the second world war, The Bureau of Indian Affairs was committed to an urban assimilation model, set forth through a termination policy aimed to “eliminate all tribal political and social structures in order to turn Indian *individuals* loose into American society” (142) The Indian Relocation Act, which was part of the Indian Termination Policy, moved Indigenous peoples away from reservations to urban areas. In response, Indigenous peoples fostered community, often hosting powwows that were open to non-Indigenous people (Deloria 142).

⁷⁶ Speaking to the entanglement of Indigenous authenticity with blood quantum, Kim Tallbear writes, “Indigeneity recast as genetic becomes a discourse of scarcity and death,” rather than a discourse of sovereignty and survival (“Genomic Articulations” 516). An emphasis on genetics erases the ways Indigenous identity is entwined with land, culture, politics, and relationships. In this way, reducing definitions of Indigeneity to genetics is itself a mode of erasure, one that serves settler futurity rather than Indigenous sovereignty (Tallbear 525). Tallbear writes Indigenous peoples themselves may privilege biological connection to ancestors, but interests and concerns in Indigenous blood are often taken into consideration alongside connections to land and culture (510).

it ours” (9). Further, Orange considers the way urban environments “belong to the earth” just as much as rural environments (11). Gasoline and freeways may not be traditional, he writes, but neither are reservations. Still, the very existence of “Urban Indians” disrupts and challenge nostalgic narratives about Indigenous authenticity, and Orange refuses these nostalgic narratives by asserting:

But what we are is what our ancestors did. How they survived. We are the memories we don't remember, which live in us, which we feel, which make us sing and dance and pray the way we do, feelings from memories that flare and bloom unexpectedly in our lives like blood through a blanket from a wound made by a bullet fired by a man shooting us in the back for our hair, for our heads, for a bounty, or just to get rid of us. (10)

As Tommy Orange's writing captures, even as Indigenous peoples have been rhetorically constructed as nostalgic others, and have been stripped, by settler colonial government forces, of their military and economic power, Indigenous communities have long harnessed their cultural power and influence toward political and social ends. For example, as Deloria explains, “When the Red Power activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s took over Alcatraz, marched on Washington and trashed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and sniped at the besieging army at Wounded Knee,” they were fighting for “social and political power through a complicated play of white guilt, nostalgia, and the desire to be Indian and thereby aboriginally true to the spirit of the land” (Deloria 179). And as Kim Tallbear assures, despite centuries of “vanishing Indian” policy and ideology, Indigenous communities are not “relics of an ancient or dying past, now absorbable into Western bodies, institutions, and definitions,” and are not vanishing, but are “vibrant and growing in number and power” (“Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary” 187). Further, while the rhetorical construction of Indianness relies on and reproduces the (material and ideological) erasure of Indigenous peoples and

cultures, scholars such as Deloria, Malea Powell, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Scott Richard Lyons, and Ellen Cushman consider the ways Native people have deployed rhetorical means to reappropriate narratives and constructions of “Indianness” toward survival and resistance (or what Powell refers to as “survivance”).⁷⁷ *Reservation Dogs*, as a cultural text, emerges from, and continues the work of, these social and political practices, joining and even extending the methods through which Indigenous peoples have long deployed rhetorical sovereignty toward survivance.⁷⁸ Lyons’ defines rhetorical sovereignty as “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires...to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449-50).⁷⁹ As the first mainstream television series created, written, produced, and performed by Native people, *Reservation Dogs* offers a pedagogical model for contemporary practices of rhetorical sovereignty, and perhaps just as urgently, generates precedence for the presence of mainstream Indigenous popular cultural texts.

⁷⁷ In the twentieth century, for example, intellectuals Arthur C. Parker and Charles Eastman “mimed white-created Indian Others back at white Americans in order to subtly alter perceptions of Indian people,” and during the hobbyist movement, many Indigenous people found it valuable to imitate their own elders and their traditions in ways that strengthened connections and community (Deloria 147).

⁷⁸ Powell develops the notion of survivance through an analysis of the rhetorical and literacy practices of Native American intellectuals Sarah Winnemucca and Charles Eastman. Through her analysis, Powell finds that both Winnemucca and Eastman deployed settler tools to tactfully dismantle settler ideologies. In short, the writings of Winnemucca and Eastman resist stereotypes of “Indianness,” while reappropriating colonial discourses and conventions to circulate Indigenous knowledges as a tactic for survival and resistance (i.e., “survivance”). In this way, rhetorical practices of survivance directly respond to colonization and demonstrate what Lyons’ refers to as rhetorical sovereignty.

⁷⁹ Sharon Venne explains the broader concept of sovereignty as “woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility. This is a cyclical view of sovereignty, incorporating it into our traditional philosophy and view of our responsibilities. There it differs greatly from the concept of western sovereignty which is based upon absolute power. For us absolute power is in the Creator and the natural order of all living things; not only in human beings...Our sovereignty is related to our connections to the earth and is inherent. The idea of a nation did not simply apply to human beings. We call the buffalo or, the wolves, the fish, the trees, and all are nations. Each is sovereign, an equal part of the creation, interdependent, interwoven, and all related” (23).

Situating *Reservation Dogs*: Narrative Context

As I will explore in this section, *Reservation Dogs* engages narrative elements and storytelling methods in ways that practice rhetorical sovereignty through their resistance and even refusal of nostalgic constructions of the “Indian Other.”

Space and place (i.e., setting) emerge as significant narrative elements of the series. Here, I turn to Malea Powell’s definition of space: “By ‘space,’” Powell says, “I mean a place that has been practiced into being through acts of storied making, where the past is brought into conscious conversation with the present and where—through those practices of making—a future can be imagined” (388). As my analysis will show, *Reservation Dogs* emphasizes the relationality Powell describes across past and present (or past–present), and through doing so, illuminates the ways the past–present constructs the spaces we inhabit and move through. Importantly, *Reservation Dogs*’ narrative commitment to past–present relationality functions as a rhetorical tactic for resisting and even refusing nostalgic othering.

The spaces where *Reservation Dogs*’ narrative unfolds were chosen with care and clear intentionality to “identify and accurately represent spaces and experiences that have, for too long, been left off the silver screen” (Spurrell). *Reservation Dogs*’ production designer Brandon Tonner-Connelly explains that he and Sterlin Harjo (series co-creator), worked to create a setting that would feel grounded, real, and specific (Spurrell). With this in mind, Tonner-Connelly visited the small town of Okmulgee (population 11,000 and about one hour outside of Tulsa), where most of the show was filmed.⁸⁰ As Tonner-Connelly explains, in some ways the town is similar to a lot of other small towns across the Great Plains and Midwest, but in other ways, “it has a very distinct culture, because it also has a large Indigenous community, and the tribal authority administers the land

⁸⁰ Tonner-Connelly says his goal was to get to know “the visual landscape” of the space, observing its “hand painted signs...murals that were part of the revitalization effort of the town by local artists...the way people decorated their front porches...the place that had the best barbecue or even the best cheeseburgers, where people hang out” (Spurrell).

there” (Spurrell). Tonner-Connolly notes that Okmulgee is actually quite similar to the town where Sterlin Harjo grew up, which was about two hours away from Tulsa. Because main characters Elora, Bear, Cheese, and Willie Jack dream of California—albeit an abstract, mythological California—Tonner-Connolly explains that they wanted the space to feel warm and comforting, with an emphasis on the strength of the community (Spurrell). In this way, the visual rhetoric of the series begins to communicate that their dream of escape is complicated and cannot be achieved without destabilization and loss.

The neighborhoods audiences see on screen are part of a tribal housing development, which offers subsidized home ownership for community members. In any given three or four block radius, each of the houses has the same layout. “So anyone who has lived in one of those homes can easily identify them as such,” Tonner-Connolly explains, noting that this “seemed like a meaningful detail to people who were in the know and felt the authenticity of the locations” (Spurrell). In other words, the narrative spaces offer points of identification and connection, as well as learning opportunities for people who are not familiar with reservations, tribal housing developments, or Indigenous communities more broadly. Further, the rurality of the characters’ surroundings is also an important element of the setting, and comparisons to more urban spaces punctuate the narrative.⁸¹

As the first mainstream television series made by and for Indigenous communities, some audiences have expected the impossible (or nearly impossible): for the story to represent the lives and cultures of all Indigenous peoples living in the United States. But *Reservation Dogs* is specific. Rather than being interpreted as the only contemporary Native American experience, or as

⁸¹ Many of these comparisons manifest in the character of Jackie, at first an enemy, and then a friend, of Elora, Cheese, Willie Jack, and Bear. Jackie, who has recently moved to the reservation from an unidentified city and complains to their friends that there “isn’t shit to do” on the reservation (“Saturday” 08:50-09:11). Later in the series, Jackie draws comparisons between the city and the country as they road trip to California with Elora, describing to Elora the way that people leave other people alone in the city, a feature Jackie explains as a positive but that Elora, clearly, is more apprehensive about (“Saturday” 26:46-28:10).

representative of all contemporary Native American experiences, the specificity of the series asks audiences to consider the ways it, in fact, does not and could not represent the heterogeneity of Indigenous stories, lives, and cultures. For instance, Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack live on a reservation that is embedded in a rural area, and their rural context (at least partially) drives their longing to move to Los Angeles. However, as previously discussed, many Native people living in the United States live in urban and suburban environments, and further, not all reservations are situated in rural areas. In order to maintain the specificity and intimacy of the story the creators and writers intended to tell, they imagined a small audience (“Reservation Thots” 42:00-42:30). They also allowed the story to be driven by its characters and their identities, experiences, and relationships (“Reservation Thots” 44:00-44:15). And though the first two seasons of *Reservation Dogs* maintain their focus on Cheese, Elora, Bear, and Willie Jack as they navigate the loss of their friend and cousin Daniel, as well as their complex longings to leave, with each episode, audiences understand more and more the ways the characters’ lives are not only woven with one another, but also with their community, as well as with the cultures, histories, and spaces in which they have been raised. In this way, *Reservation Dogs* remains specific while simultaneously portraying deep-rooted relationalities that extend and connect across time and place.

In terms of genre, *Reservation Dogs* embraces hybridity. As a viewer, I experience the show as both comedy and drama. And as each episode is around thirty minutes, the series strikes a balance between the length of sitcoms and the lengthier, often more dramatic genre audiences are becoming more and more familiar with in the age of digital streaming platforms. *Reservation Dogs*’ genre hybridity—or its refusal to align squarely within comedy or drama, sitcom or longform—aligns with Muñoz’s consideration of hybridity and the remixing of dominant forms as an essential for queer and postcolonial subjects (*Disidentifications* 83-90). Further, as Thieme and Makmillan note, hybrid genres are often “enacted in situations where Indigenous and colonial systems of activity interact”

(476). In this way, genre hybridity, as a rhetorical tactic, can be both political and pedagogical—contributing to the re-vision of deep stories while also offering models for how re-vision can be taken up in, across, and between genres.⁸²

In addition to genre hybridity, *Reservation Dogs* also embraces cultural hybridity, clearly showing that living on a reservation does not necessarily isolate Indigenous communities from other cultures, and that texts grounded in reservation life do not need to exclude other cultures. For example, the title *Reservation Dogs* comes from the title of the Quentin Tarantino movie, *Reservoir Dogs*. Similarly, the show weaves music by Native artists with classic country and western, classic rock (as Tom Petty’s “Free Fallin’” comes to play an integral role in the narrative), and hip hop. And the main characters blend Native languages with mainstream Internet slang, social critique, and popular culture discourse. The many transcultural rhetorics of the series align with Pratt’s conception of “contact zones.” According to Pratt, contact zones “emphasize how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other,” attending to the “relations among colonizers and colonized...in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (7). While most of *Reservation Dogs*’ characters are Indigenous people living on the reservation, the narrative often brings these characters into contact with white people, as well as other people of color, and with structures of settler colonialism, gentrification, and capitalism.⁸³

Narratively, *Reservation Dogs* resists easy classifications—such as the triumph narrative or trauma porn—which have previously and continue to characterize many mainstream stories about marginalized communities. When we consider the production and circulation of mainstream digital

⁸² Beyoncé’s recent album, *COWBOY CARTER*, comes to mind as a critical example of the rhetorical, political, and pedagogical labor of working across, and bringing together, multiple genres.

⁸³ For example, the abandoned building where Elora, Bear, Cheese, Willie Jack, and Daniel constructed their “hideout” gets torn down by Texas ranchers who purchase the land to build a mega-church (“The Curse” 07:11-08:03).

texts, we are automatically thrust into considering the realm of the capitalist marketplace, where some narratives have more market value than others, and where the most marketable narratives are easily identified by examining what kinds of stories are most frequently being bought and sold, produced and circulated. However, as Muñoz describes, art can serve a politically pedagogical role, providing audiences with models of resistance (*Disidentifications* xi). Though not always, and perhaps not often, mainstream popular cultural texts can and do offer opportunities for counterpublic interventions, even as mainstream media is “usually hostile to counterpublic politics” (151). This hostility, and the struggle it generates, is made evident in the art and media we consume and have access to, as the state, the market, and the artist all have different goals (Muñoz 199; Ngugi 11).⁸⁴ And yet, the artist, the state, and the market “have the audience as their common target” as “they aim to make worlds” (Muñoz 199). For those seeking and making narratives (and worlds) outside of those deemed most marketable, it can feel like a miracle (and in fact, in many ways it is) when a cultural text, like *Reservation Dogs*, cuts through the clutter of dominant narratives, representations, and characters—challenging, rather than affirming, the deep (and often nostalgic) stories held most dear. In her introduction to James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*, Louise Erdrich explores the impact of this cutting through.⁸⁵ “Welch had done something nobody else had—written about Indians without once getting pious, uplifting, or making you feel sorry for ‘The Plight,’” Erdrich writes (xiii). At every turn, Welch’s characters disrupt dualist, nostalgic constructions of “Indianness,” as they are neither noble nor savage. Tommy Pico, a poet and staff writer for *Reservation Dogs*, has similarly reflected on the lack of pressure he felt to create virtuous characters for the series. The task, rather, was to create “real” characters—characters who are complicated and imperfect, always shifting and growing and

⁸⁴ Relatedly, Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes, “The struggle between the arts and the state can be seen in performance in general and in the battle over the performance space in particular” (“Enactment of Power” 11).

⁸⁵ Erdrich writes that the text was a “touchstone” for her when she was beginning to write, living far from the Great Plains, where she is from, as part Turtle Mountain Chippewa.

never static nor frozen in a representation or archetype or period of time; characters who are trying their best to love one another but do so imperfectly (“Reservation Thots” 45:15-45:30).

Relatedly, in “R Words: Refusing Research,” Tuck and Yang (2014) examine the predominance and preoccupation with stories that center damage, or what they call pain narratives, and how these narratives operate on settler logics of time, space, distance, and order. Pain, as bell hooks has similarly examined, is often a requirement of stories of colonized and marginalized figures: “I am invited to speak, but only when I speak my pain,” she writes (241). As Tuck and Yang explain further, pain narratives and their logics “require time to be organized as linear and rigid, in which the pained body (or community or people) is set back or delayed on some kind of path of humanization,” and in response, “must catch up (but never can) to the settler/unpained/abled body (or community or people or society or philosophy or knowledge system)” (231). In this way, pain narratives support rhetorical processes of nostalgic othering. Ultimately, Tuck and Yang argue that pain narratives must be refused, and that desire-based research is the antidote. Desire, however, is not a decontextualized turn toward the positive. Rather, desire “is a recognition of suffering, the costs of settler colonialism and capitalism, and how we still thrive in the face of loss anyway; the parts of us that won’t be destroyed” (647-8). Further, “Desire is a refusal to trade in damage; desire is an antidote, a medicine to damage narratives,” and importantly, “Desire, in its making and remaking, bounds into the past as it stretches into the future” (Tuck and Ree 647-8). Narratives of desire honor complexities, and honor change as both a possibility and constant, disrupting the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering. In *Reservation Dogs*, desire emerges through both humor and haunting, which I situate below as key rhetorical tactics.

Situating Reservation Dogs: Key Rhetorical Tactics

Popular culture texts, such as television series and films, have long served as vehicles through which white Americans have attempted to settle our individual and collective identities through the imagination, rhetorical construction, and representation of Indigenous identities.⁸⁶ As discussed above, I chose to study *Reservation Dogs* to investigate and illuminate the ways the text deploys a series of rhetorical tactics—namely humor, haunting, and counter-nostalgia—to resist, refuse, and speak back to the ways Indigenous peoples and cultures have been rhetorically constructed to serve deep stories about nature and nation—these stories, as I explore across my dissertation, are all tangled up with the roots of rural nostalgia.

The main characters of the show—Bear (played by D’Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), Willie Jack (played by Paulina Alexis), Elora (played by K. Devery Jacobs), and Cheese (played by Lane Factor)—are played by actors who were, like their characters, raised on reservations in the United States and Canada. In an interview for *Good Morning America*, Alexis, Factor, and Woon-A-Tai discuss how similar they are to their characters. Alexis’ family and friends, for example, tell her that it does not even seem like she is acting. In the same interview, Woon-A-Tai discusses how the production of the show is grounded in Indigenous cultural practices. For example, before the start of each season, everyone involved in the making of the show comes together to have a ceremony to bless the set and one another, and they do the same for difficult or challenging scenes. Then, after shooting these more difficult scenes, they come together once more to smudge the energy that was generated during the scene (“Rising Stars”).

⁸⁶ Echoing Deloria in a poem entitled “How to Write The Great American Indian Novel,” Sherman Alexie concludes, “In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written, / all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts.” Similarly, as Thomas King explains, “Somewhere along the way, we ceased being people and somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for White North America” (68).

In considering *Reservation Dogs*' creation and production, as a text created and produced by people telling a story close to their own experience—especially as many of the series' creators, writers, actors, and crew were raised on reservations or in Indigenous communities that they left to pursue their creative ambitions—I have started to understand the series as an autoethnographic text expressed in multivocal autobiographical voices.⁸⁷ In *Under Imperial Eyes*, Pratt explains autoethnographic expression as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways which engage with the colonizer’s own terms” (6-7). In this way, autoethnographic texts are constructed “in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (Pratt 7). In other words, autoethnographic texts, like *Reservation Dogs*, reappropriate colonial (mis)representations while also resisting, refusing, and/or re-visioning those representations. This, identified by Muñoz as a queer practice, is “an effort to reclaim the past and put it in direct relationship with the present,” a rhetorical and narrative tactic employed throughout the series, which is made possible by nonlinear, relational storytelling and the persistent emergence of what I analyze as “haunting.” As scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith have argued, settler colonial projects rely on shields, screens, amnesia, and delusion to naturalize processes of assimilation, occupation, and systemic violence (36). As an autoethnographic text, *Reservation Dogs* directly responds to these settler colonial practices and, in doing so, provides a pedagogical model for autoethnographic expression. Further, it serves as an especially useful artifact for rhetoric scholars

⁸⁷ Reflecting on the series' collaborative writing process, staff writer Tommy Pico reflects on the way he, and many of the writers in the room with him, had “complicated relationships to the place they came from.” Because of this, Pico considers how healing their writing process often felt. In this way, *Reservation Dogs* was created and written by people who, like Cheese and Willie Jack and Elora and Bear, had to navigate difficult decisions about whether they would stay or leave the reservation, and whether they would return if and when they did leave. Having left the Viejas Indian Reservation (home to the Kumeyaay Nation) at eighteen years-old, Pico explains that, throughout the writing process, he identified most with Elora and her drive to get out to a more urban area as soon as she could. Pico reflects on the similar ways he, like Elora, felt that the reservation, as well as its surroundings, was “eating people,” and that his grief at losing so many loved ones (or, as he says, “so many Daniels”) just kept accumulating (“Reservation Thots” 31:00-32:00).

interested in questions at the intersections of rhetorical sovereignty and autoethnography or autobiography, as the text models particular tactics ripe for analysis.

In considering the exigence of *Reservation Dogs*, it is useful to consider Alison Ravenscroft's analysis of the reception and circulation of Indigenous media in the Australian context. Ravenscroft notes, "It is through the arts that most encounters between Indigenous and settler Australians take place" (353). This is likely the case in the context of the United States as well, and because of this, Indigenous art—especially in the form of a mainstream digital text—has a significant amount of rhetorical power and potential influence. Not to undo centuries of misrepresentation and rhetorical imperialism, but to resist, refuse, and speak back to these harmful rhetorical and narrative practices through an employment of rhetorical sovereignty.⁸⁸

Though *Reservation Dogs* feels primarily (and rightfully) by and for Indigenous peoples, it also seems likely that, understanding their audience would likely extend beyond Indigenous communities, the series' creators, writers, producers, and actors may have considered questions that align with those Margaret Kovach asks in *Indigenous Methodologies* (12-18). Questions such as: What responsibility do Indigenous researchers and artists have in terms of sharing their knowledges with non-Indigenous people? What research and narrative methodologies may help Indigenous researchers and artists navigate this responsibility in ways that maintain the safety and sacredness of Indigenous ways of knowing? How can Indigenous researchers and storytellers account for "colonial residue" (Kovach 18) while also centering Indigenous sovereignty and futurity? By responsibility, Kovach means responsibility to Indigenous communities, Indigenous cultures, and Indigenous Knowledges, especially when Indigenous Knowledges are recognized in colonial spaces, such as the academy or mainstream popular culture. As I will examine in my analysis, the key rhetorical tactics

⁸⁸ The opposite of rhetorical sovereignty is what Lyons refers to as "rhetorical imperialism," or "the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate" (452).

deployed in *Reservation Dogs*—humor, haunting, and counter-nostalgia—offer a useful model for responsibly, ethically, and effectively engaging both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences in a way that resists and refuses the nostalgic othering of Indigenous peoples and the deep stories, tangled up with the roots of rural nostalgia, that fuel the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering.

And though it is unlikely the series' creators and writers imagined an exclusively Indigenous audience, it is also unlikely that they anticipated the kind of broad exposure, notoriety, and success that the series has so far received. The series, along with its creators, writers, and cast, have been nominated for, and won, many awards from institutions such as the Critics' Choice Awards, The Independent Spirit Awards, the Golden Globes, the Peabody Awards, the Television Critics Association Awards, and the Writers Guild of America. Staff writer Tommy Pico has shared that many of the series' writers, like himself, "thought it would be something small that has an impact in Indian Country and that's it" ("Reservation Thots" 27:45–28:00). As Pico reasons, there is very little Native American representation, especially representation of reservation life, in popular culture. "There has never been and there isn't any," he says, making it implicitly clear that he means Native representation by Native creators, writers, and actors ("Reservation Thots" 28:00-28:15). This gap in representation came with a certain pressure, Pico explains, as he reflects on the way each writer in the room understood that they were writing for young Indigenous people who have not grown up with any mainstream texts that represent themselves or their lives. "We do have culture, but it's not popular culture," Pico explains. "Nothing that talks about Reservation Life from the point of view of Rez people, written by Rez people" ("Reservation Thots" 28:15-29:00). Considering all of this, Pico shares how much it meant to see, all over Instagram, young Indigenous people dressed up as *Reservation Dogs* characters for Halloween ("Reservation Thots" 30:13-30:30). That is when he more fully realized the positive impact the show could have on Indigenous communities. "I bet, there's going to be kids who won't kill themselves, and I can't think of a better impression to have left on

the world that I came from,” Pico says (“Reservation Thots” 30:45-31:00). Pico also shares that writing the series with his colleagues seemed to generate both individual and collective healing, as he explains that each writer in the room, like him, “had Daniels,” i.e., they experienced the loss of friends and/or family members to suicide and other tragedies (“Reservation Thots” 31:00-32:00).

Throughout *Reservation Dogs*, counter-nostalgia emerges as a key rhetorical tactic through which rhetorical sovereignty is practiced. Rather than linear narratives that align with notions of time as unrepeatable, counter-nostalgic narratives, according to Ladino’s theorization of the term, are “often attracted to seasonal or cyclical conceptions of time” (16). Aligning with Tuck and Yang’s framing of desire narratives that disrupt pain narratives and their reliance on settler conceptions of progress, counter-nostalgic rejections of linearity are a rejection of progress narratives (which always undergird rhetorics of nostalgia). Different from anti-nostalgic texts, which take up nostalgia itself as an object of critique, in counter-nostalgic texts, “nostalgia is the vehicle through which critique happens” (Ladino 15). We can think of counter-nostalgia as a “tactical reappropriation” of nostalgia that is critically reflective in the face of dominant and decontextualized historiography (Ladino 15-16).⁸⁹ As a counter-nostalgic text, *Reservation Dogs* tactically reappropriates nostalgic narratives about Indigenous communities and cultures. Through doing so, the text ultimately resists and even refuses processes of the nostalgic othering which attempt to freeze Indigeneity in a mythological American past—a past where, as the narrative goes, Native American people vanished by way of naturalized processes of modernity, progress, and the taming of wilderness. In this way, *Reservation Dogs*, as a counter-nostalgic text, aligns with and serves as a pedagogical model for engaging rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons) toward survivance (Powell) and, more broadly, toward the destabilization of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

⁸⁹ In this way, counter-nostalgic texts align with Boym’s theorization of reflective nostalgia (2001).

Alongside counter-nostalgia, *Reservation Dogs* also deploys haunting as a rhetorical tactic that works to resist and even refuse the nostalgic narratives that fester at the roots of our national imaginary. To understand haunting as a rhetorical tactic, it is helpful to consider the ways Eve Tuck and C. Ree theorize haunting in the context of colonization in “A Glossary of Haunting.” As Tuck and Ree explain, haunting “is the relentless remembering and reminding” that “settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation” (642) are generated and fueled by mythological narratives shored up by nostalgia. The United States is haunted by slavery, genocide, and structural violence, but according to Tuck and Ree, the purpose of haunting is not for reconciliation, or even for shifts in perception (642). Rather, haunting aims to confront and unveil the horror of settler colonialism, and the power of haunting lies “precisely in its refusal to stop” (Tuck and Ree 642). As examined earlier, the rhetorical maneuverings of nostalgia and nostalgic othering work to veil the logics and implications of settler colonialism—haunting refuses and lifts this veil, representing the insistence of the past on, in, and through the present. And, as it follows, the promise that the past does not relent to the future. Haunting unveils the mythology at the roots of settler history—the “histories written wrong and meant to be forgotten” (Orange 10)—pushing back against rhetorical processes aiming for amnesia. Alongside and often in combination with deployments of haunting and counter-nostalgia, though, *Reservation Dogs* uses humor to effectively engage multiple audiences.

Though I will analyze the rhetorical workings of each of these tactics in sections below, an early scene in the series usefully shows how humor, haunting, and counter-nostalgia combine to put practices of “settler moves to innocence” (Tuck and Yang) on sharp, yet humorous, display. As the episode opens, a classic country song plays on the radio as an older white man and woman drive down an empty road through Okern. The man and woman drive by road signs marked with graffiti that says, “LANDBACK” and “Landback, Fuckerz” in the main characters’ signature graffiti style.

In their slight but obvious “country” accents, the man asks what the graffiti means and the woman says she reckons, “Indians did it.” The man says he doesn’t understand. “They want the whole damn thing back?” he asks, then says though that would not be possible, he can see giving “some of it back.” The woman, looking out at the road from the passenger seat, replies with deflection, distancing herself from settler colonial violence. “The whites did kill an awful lot of them and took the land. So America ought to be ashamed of itself,” she says. The man, growing flustered, tells her that they already get casinos and one thousand dollars a month “just for being Indian.” When the woman pushed back—“Whatever they get, they deserve,” she says—the man grows defensive and says he doesn’t want to have a “political discussion.” In response to the man—and here is the distinct example of settler nativism, which Tuck and Yang classify as a settler move to innocence—the woman says she is, in fact, part Indian. The man does not buy into her move toward innocence—he says sure, and he is part millionaire (“Uncle Brownie” 0:05-01:30). Even he understands that the woman’s claim to Indigeneity is rooted in nostalgic narratives and romanticized representations of Indigenous history. Audiences will likely pick up on the humorous tone of the scene here, as we can sense that both the man and woman, in different ways, are haunted by the calls for “LANDBACK,” and in response to this experience of haunting, become parodies of conservative ideology and settler colonial culture more broadly.⁹⁰ As parodies, these characters, never seen again in the series, serve as critiques of settler culture and the nostalgic narratives that fuel it. This critique, aired out with a generous dose of levity, works differently for different audiences. In short, it is likely affirmative for Indigenous audiences and more provocative for settler audiences, who may see ourselves/themselves in the white man and woman as they react to their

⁹⁰ Soon after, on the same road the man and woman were driving on, Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack come across a dead deer, hit by a vehicle and left in the middle of the road. Bear (in an irreverent tone) says, “I bet some old white folks did this.” They load the deer into the trunk of Elora’s grandmother’s car to make backstrap. In addition to exemplifying settler moves to innocence, this scene also speaks to settler practices of waste and disrespect for beings beyond themselves and those most like them.

experience of haunting with complex moves to innocence. In this way, combining rhetorical tactics of humor, haunting, and counter-nostalgia that are channeled through desire rather than pain narratives (Tuck and Yang 2014), the text works to expose how nostalgic narratives about Native people are tangled up with settler colonial logics and national imaginaries, and further, how these entanglements move across our collective imaginations to our everyday conversations to material and political realities.

Reflections on Positionality and Methodological Shifts

This chapter required shifts in the research methods, methodology, and analytical process I employed in my first chapter. Relatedly, it required an even more careful reflection on my positionality in relation to the text (*Reservation Dogs*) and its content and context. While I was born and raised in small towns reminiscent, at least in some ways, to the town of Schitt's Creek, I am a white settler scholar educated inside the logics of settler colonialism—logics that, as discussed, circulate mythological narratives about Native American people and their history.

In “A Principled Uncertainty: Writing Studies Methods in Contexts of Indigeneity,” non-Indigenous scholars Katja Thieme and Shurli Makmillan reflect on the ways, “Methods need to be flexible resources mobilized in the interest of advancing ethical knowledge” (486). For Thieme and Makmillan, and for myself, “It has taken a few unexpected turns in the research process, an ongoing reflection on Indigenous ways of knowing, and the incontrovertible fact of our presence on unceded Indigenous territory to drive this point home” (486). My first methodological shift happened early in my analytical process. As relationality emerged as an important theme and element of the series’ narrative structure, I realized I needed to disrupt the coding process I established for my first chapter. Rather than separating each episode into scenes, and then categorizing each scene with a

single code (such as “community”), I needed to examine and analyze the interrelated stories that weave together throughout the series, and to welcome the application of multiple, overlapping, and porous analytical categories or codes.⁹¹

In “Decolonizing Community Writing with Community Listening,” Rachel C. Jackson and Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune speak to my initial desire to (literally) divide and “conquer” the data I gathered from my observation of *Reservation Dogs* in the same way that I was able to with *Schitt’s Creek*, a decidedly non-Indigenous text. As they write, “Western academic discourse privileges heuristics, taxonomies, categories, genres, and terminologies intended to impose rational order on otherwise organic ideas and spontaneous meanings” (Jackson and DeLaune 39). While these methods offer clarity, or a false sense of clarity, as they “conquer” data and “settle” meanings, they also subordinate a text and its meanings to rhetorical imperialism, rather than analyzing Indigenous material on Indigenous terms (Jackson and DeLaune 39-40).⁹² Attempting to loosen from settler colonial logics by focusing instead on listening “urges us to attend to the potential meanings and possible actions the story opens,” such as “the relationships between the past and the present situation, between peoples and places, between ‘then and now’ and ‘us and them’” (Jackson and DeLaune 39). And further, to “understand why the story is being told, as it is being told” (Jackson and DeLaune 39). In other words, listening, in this way, becomes a rhetorical practice.

Extending Krista Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, Jackson and DeLaune propose “transrhetorical listening,” as “a literate act that engages listeners as collaborators in meaning making

⁹¹ With my observational data gathered from *Schitt’s Creek*, I could easily separate an episode into its particular scenes. From there, with an open coding approach, I could easily code each scene. However, when it came to *Reservation Dogs*, I found the coding process much more difficult—each scene, and even each piece of dialogue or frame, could be coded in multiple and overlapping ways. It quickly felt misguided to attempt to code, or categorize, each scene or even parts of scenes with a single descriptive code. In attempting to separate parts of each episode into analytical categories, I was masking their broader, relational meanings.

⁹² The urge to settle meaning is, in other words, like “laying a map on the storied landscape that erases those who live there” (Jackson and DeLaune 39).

across multiple sites,” as listeners “work together with storytellers to construct and sustain cultural knowledge by building storied connections across difference” (42).⁹³ Grounded in Jackson and DeLaune’s analysis of Kiowa storytelling practices, transrhetorical listening disrupts the Western rhetor/audience, or speaker/listener, binary as it calls “listeners into collective identity and a shared responsibility for cultural knowledge” (42). To attempt to engage in transrhetorical listening, I hold myself responsible and accountable for the ways I engage with the cultural knowledge shared in *Reservation Dogs* and shared by the Indigenous scholars I bring together on these pages, as I remain aware of and in tension with the cultural differences across listener and storyteller (or, in this case, myself and the text). Practically speaking, this requires an attempt to release the urge to “settle” meaning, and instead, to attend to potential meanings and possibilities for relationality in ways that illuminate why the stories of these characters and their lives are being told, how they may impact listeners, and in turn, how listeners may impact or contribute to the continued tellings of these stories.

My attempt at transrhetorical listening as an analytical method draws inspiration from additional arguments and methods for disrupting the ways settler colonial logics press on academic research practices. In taking up Indigenous Materialisms, Ravenscroft considers how an attempt to travel toward “other ideas of materiality and materialisms” might be more useful than arrival “at this point in colonialism’s history” (358). To do so, Ravenscroft suggests a movement from the language of holding, grasping, and apprehending “toward something more liminal, provisional, tentative, experimental” (358). Further, she calls scholars embedded in Western habits of mind (as I am) to “attend” to Indigenous materialisms by first noticing the “anxiety caused by uncertainty and doubt” in the face of others’ materiality, as well as the pleasure of curiosity, as we “remember to remember

⁹³ Rhetorical listening, as defined and theorized by Ratcliffe, is a cross-cultural method of communication that emphasizes recognizing our “always evolving standpoints” to listen in ways that allow us to see, name, and struggle against structural inequalities (18).

that affects and bodies are not universal” (358). I find Eve Tuck’s explanation of her method of “close description,” which she draws from education scholar Patricia Carini, particularly useful in actualizing the kinds of attending Ravenscroft (as well as Jackson and DeLaune) call for. Tuck describes close description as “an approach of staying with something on its own terms, attending to its animating logics, conditions of meanings, and staying in the domain of description rather than leaping all too quickly into categorization” (“I Do Not Want To Haunt You But I Will: Indigenous Feminist Theorizing on Reluctant Theories of Change”).⁹⁴ Tuck also notes that close description allows her to illuminate possible pedagogical implications, as I have also set out to do. In this way, close description, like transhistorical listening, is about opening or continuing a conversation, rather than providing a prescriptive, final conclusion or answer.⁹⁵

While certainly in conversation with Sedgwick’s methods for reparative reading and weak theorizing, which I draw from in the previous chapter and across my dissertation, the methodological insight I have gathered to work from in this chapter is grounded in Indigenous Knowledges, and because it is grounded in Indigenous Knowledges, it requires a more critical, ethical, and responsible engagement with my positionality in relation to *Reservation Dogs*. In thinking through responsible, ethical ways to navigate my positionality as a white settler scholar in relation to *Reservation Dogs* and the Indigenous Knowledges I draw from across this study, I learn from Cathy Park Hong’s writing about “speaking nearby,” which she draws from filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha (Park Hong 102). As Minh-ha states in an *Artforum* interview, “When you speak nearby, rather than

⁹⁴ Importantly, in their resistance of “settling,” these combined methods of analysis resist Descartes’ dualist formulation, “I think, therefore I am,” which becomes, in the logic of settler colonialism, “I conquer, therefore I am,” then, “I know, therefore I conquer, therefore I am,” then, “I know her, therefore I am me” (“R Words: Refusing Research” Tuck and Yang 224). As “the right to conquer is intimately connected to the right to know,” and as the conqueror derives their sense of self from the relationship between conquering and knowing “the Other.”

⁹⁵ While in relationship to Sedgwick’s methods for reparative reading and weak theorizing, which I draw from in the previous chapter, the methodological insight I have gathered to work from in this chapter is not only grounded in Indigenous Knowledge, but because it is grounded in Indigenous Knowledge, it requires a more critical, ethical, and responsible engagement with my positionality in relation to *Reservation Dogs*.

speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film” (Park Hong 103).⁹⁶ Echoing Jackson and DeLaune’s transrhetorical listening as well as Ravenscroft’s call to release the language of holding and grasping, Minh-ha goes on to explain that speaking nearby asks us to “leave the space of representation open” as our distance requires the deliberate suspension of closed meanings (Park Hong 103). According to Minh-ha, this allows those who may be closer in proximity to a given subject or subject matter “to come in and fill that space as they wish” (Park Hong 103). I find this methodological attempt toward opening especially important when one is attempting to illuminate, situate, and make space for the re-vision of deeply embedded narratives, such as settler narratives, and the destabilization of a powerful rhetorical ecosystem, such as the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

I have also learned from fellow white settler scholar Jennifer Clary-Lemon’s articulation in “Gifts, Ancestors, and Relations,” borrowed from Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, “to think about how we might embrace a decolonizing ethic by claiming different ancestors.” By claiming different ancestors, Clary-Lemon writes, “Rather than think about citation lists as simple ethical practices of having read widely and diversely, I also wish to frame citation practices as drawing from particular intellectual ancestors, past and present.”⁹⁷ As I have attempted to do throughout this chapter, Clary-Lemon encourages scholars to gather and learn from different ancestors, even as we might get it wrong, even as our relationality to these ancestors might be a difficult one that brings up difficult questions and realizations—not only about the implications of

⁹⁶ Minh-ha’s “speaking nearby” resembles posthumanist geographer Juanita Sundberg’s call for white settler scholars to practice what Gayatri C. Spivak has called “homework,” that is “examining how [one’s own epistemological and ontological assumptions] have been naturalized in and through geopolitical and institutional power relations/practices” (64).

⁹⁷ Here, I think of guidance offered by Himika Bhattacharya, a scholar of transnational feminisms, in a research-focused course I was taking with her at Syracuse in 2020. When a white scholar asked if she was “allowed” to draw from Patricia Hill Collins’ theorization of Black Feminist Thought in her own work: “You are not ‘allowed.’ You must!”

settler colonialism, but about my own role in those implications as a settler scholar. In the following sections, I begin my analysis—that is, I begin putting these methodological frames to use.

Humor and Counter-Nostalgia Combine as Rhetorics of Resistance

Throughout *Reservation Dogs*, counter-nostalgia is used to tactically reappropriate the nostalgic construction of the “Indian Other.” Through this reappropriation, counter-nostalgia works *with* nostalgic narratives in an attempt to expose, challenge, re-vision, and ultimately refuse their reproduction. As this analysis will work to show, counter-nostalgia—especially when aired out with humor—appeals to multiple audiences, though in different ways and for different reasons. And as such, offers a powerful pedagogical model for scholars and instructors interested in the breaking down and re-composing of deep stories about (and beyond) nostalgic representations of the rural.

Before considering the rhetorical effectiveness of *Reservation Dogs*’ use of counter-nostalgia, it’s also important to consider the limitation, and even risks, of working with counter-nostalgia in the context of Indigenous representations and narratives. As Deloria writes, reappropriating the rhetorical construction of Indianness back at settler audiences in order to challenge this construction and the logics which undergird it carries unpredictable implications, as “ideas signified by Indianness [are] so deeply ingrained in the American cultural psyche and so ideologically powerful” that they can be “almost impervious to assault” (125-6). While using counter-nostalgia to challenge conceptions of Indianness may poke holes in deep stories and stereotypes, it also may “reaffirm them for a stubborn white audience, making Indianness an even more powerful construct” (Deloria 126). Ultimately, Deloria decides such rhetorical tactics are a “conflicted form of empowerment” (144). Along with Deloria’s analysis, Muñoz’s theorization of disidentification, as a social and political strategy that works on and against cultural logics from *within* those logics, offers a useful

lens through which to understand the potential limitations and possibilities of counter-nostalgia. Disidentification, like counter-nostalgia, does not attempt to break free from the “inescapable sphere” of dominant ideology (Muñoz 11). Rather, “Disidentification for the minority subject is a mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy” (Muñoz 39). As discussed above, Indianness, as a symbolic object, has certainly been invested with powerful energy. And although I analyze *Reservation Dogs*’ deployment of counter-nostalgia primarily as a practice of disidentification, it is not completely untenable to read the text’s reappropriation of symbolic Indianness as a tactic of counteridentification. Counteridentification, according to Muñoz, often reinstates dominant discourse while attempting to denounce it. The risks of attempting to recycle and re-form constructions of Indigeneity are clear, but as I will argue, *Reservation Dogs*’ tactical use of counter-nostalgia more often destabilizes, rather than reinstates, the dominant construction and representation of the “Indian Other,” revealing it as “constructed and contradictory” (Muñoz 115). In this way, the text aligns with the ways disidentification redeploys the past in order to critique the present (Muñoz 33). Through a counter-nostalgia that has a bend toward disidentification, which I read, in this context, as rhetorical practices of survivance, *Reservation Dogs* encourages audiences to reexamine settler stories of Indigenous peoples, land, and knowledges.

The character of William Knifeman most clearly and directly demonstrates the text’s counter-nostalgic tactics. William Knifeman emerges, often on his horse, in main character Bear’s life during difficult moments. William Knifeman’s first visits with Bear after he and his friends have been shot with paintball guns by members of a “gang” called the NDN Mafia (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs 11:06-13:50). During this first visit, William is self-deprecating as he explains to Bear that he is an “unknown warrior” who died during the Battle of Little Bighorn. Through periodic and comically half-hearted war chants, he tells Bear that he saw Custer on top of a hill, but just as he was going to begin participating in the fight with his fellow warriors, his horse fell into a gopher hole, rolled over,

and squashed him dead. Now, he says, he travels the spirit world to find and guide lost souls, like Bear. “The spirit world,” William muses, “is always cold. My nipples are always hard, and I’m always hungry.” Bear seems unimpressed and even confused by this strange and sardonic figure, dressed in traditional buckskin pants, with feathers in his long hair and beaded, metal, and leather jewelry on his bare chest and arms. As soft music begins to play, William tells Bear that he died for his people and their land; he asks Bear what he and his “thuggy-ass friends” are doing for their people. “What will you fight and die for?” William asks Bear, feigning seriousness as he raises his weapon toward an alarmed Bear. “I’m just fuckin’ with ya,” William says, lowering his weapon with a grin before growing serious again. “But for real,” he tells Bear, “listen to what I said.” William’s horse comically buckles under him as he begins to ride away” (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs 13:50-16:00).

In a later episode, William visits Bear’s bedroom window and wakes him up, greeting him as “godson, nephew, cousin,” and explains that Bear’s ancestors called on him to pay Bear a visit. William tells Bear that he has some colonizers in his bloodline—that his great-grandmother must have liked to “smash white guys.” Bear tells Spirit, as he often refers to him, that he is planning to leave for California with his friends later that day. William says he is proud of Bear for leaving this place better than it was. As audiences will likely recognize the seed of doubt William has just planted in Bear’s mind, William asks Bear if did everything he needed to do here (“Satvrday” 0:10-02:35).

Later in the episode, when Bear and many other members of the community are gathered in the church basement for safety from an approaching tornado, William emerges once more and explains that this time, he has been called there by the fear in Bear’s heart.

He tells Bear that he knows, deep down, what he needs to take care of. At this, William quips, “No answers. Just stoic wisdom,” directly referencing nostalgic constructions of the “Indian Other.” Per usual, Spirit punctuates his visit with an emphatic, “Aho!” (“Satvrday” 16:45-18:30). Though, throughout the series, William’s “traditional” chanting is often disrupted by coughing fits—

coughing fits which work to reveal the constructed conception of “authentic Indianness,” and which ultimately work toward a disidentification with this conception.

In addition to revealing the ways conceptions of “traditional” and “authentic” Indianness are constructed and complex, William Knifeman’s character bridges the past with the present (literally, as he travels back and forth from the spirit world to the material world), weaving humor and sarcasm with sincerity. As his character reaches toward a camp buffoonery, William Knifeman not only pokes fun at, but pokes holes in, the dominant, nostalgic ways in which Indigenous people, and spirit figures in particular, have been represented as mystical, magical, and pure (“Reservation Thots” 41:00-41:30). Perhaps what is most important about William Knifeman and the way he functions as a counter-nostalgic tactic throughout the series is his complexity. William is more than a buffoon, more than an “unknown warrior”—he offers relevant guidance to Bear as he struggles with the absence of his father, the loss of his friend Daniel, feelings of disconnection from his friend Elora, and a sense of confusion in the face of questions regarding whether he should stay or leave the reservation. Though William has been dead for well over a century, and while his guidance is often informed by the past—for example, he advises Bear that being a warrior means being in touch with your feminine side, as Crazy Horse was (“The Curse” 4:40-6:20)—his character is by no means frozen in the past. Rather, William moves between the past and present as he communicates with Bear in ways that show his connection to contemporary life and call to mind nonlinear conceptions of time that challenge the linear progress narratives on which the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia relies. In these ways, William’s character—especially his combination of sincerity and challenge to conceptions of authenticity—serve as a critique of nostalgic othering, and the vehicle for this critique is the humorous reappropriations of nostalgia acted out by his character. Ultimately, William Knifeman’s character reveals the nostalgic construction of the “Indian Other” for what it is—a myth, and a laughable one at that. As an Indigenous man who fails to “play Indian”—i.e., to

affirm the rhetorical construction of the “Indian Other”—settler audiences are likely encouraged to reckon with the mythology at the roots of our/their notions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and histories. And from this reckoning, to critically reflect on what additional, related deep stories may be more based in falsity than reality; and may be serving what communications scholar E Cram calls “memory cultures of violence” (xv).

Kenny Boy, the operator of a nearby salvage yard, also serves counter-nostalgic purposes, though in a different way than William Knifeman. Kenny Boy operates his office out of a school bus and employs a crew of white men often referred to by other characters as “the methheads.”⁹⁸ Kenny Boy wears beaded jewelry, his dark hair is grown out just past his ears, and his beard is scruffy. “Hoka hey,” Kenny Boy says in greeting to Bear, Cheese, Willie Jack, and Delora. “It’s Lakota,” he explains to them, but they matter-of-factly tell him they are not Lakota. While Kenny Boy uses various Native languages throughout the series, audiences are not quite sure whether he is a white man who “plays Indian” or a Native American man who is perceived as white.⁹⁹ Through the lens of Tuck and Yang’s “settler moves to innocence” and Deloria’s theorization of “playing Indian,” I read Kenny Boy as a white man who (fondly, but naively) appropriates Indigenous cultures.

Regardless of our perception of Kenny Boy’s identity, audiences become quickly accustomed to the ways he homogenizes Indigenous cultures, languages, and peoples. In a later episode, Kenny Boy greets Big, the reservation’s likable and dependable Lighthorseman, in Navajo. Big says, in a sarcastic tone, that he does not speak “Klingon,” referencing the language spoken by aliens in the Star Trek universe. When Kenny Boy earnestly explains to Big that he was speaking Navajo, Big

⁹⁸ When Bear, Willie Jack, Elora, and Cheese introduce themselves to Kenny Boy and his crew—after they arrive at the salvage yard in a delivery truck they stole, planning to sell it to Kenny Boy to raise funds for California—one of “the methheads” introduces himself to them by saying, unprompted, “I’m a Native American.” Cheese seems a bit confused, a bit annoyed, and yet unsurprised. “Cool,” he says reluctantly (“F*ckin’ Rez Dogs” 04:40-04:54).

⁹⁹ See the “Kenny Boy?” Reddit thread, where viewers of the series discuss Kenny Boy’s possible identities (“Kenny Boy?”).

continues to mess with him. “Oh shit, I thought you were clearing your throat in reverse,” he says. “Our people have always used humor to get through hard times,” Kenny Boy says as he shrugs Big off, then continues to speak in Navajo until Big tells him to stop. “Just like the priests at the boarding school,” Kenny Boy says, referencing Indian Boarding Schools and their often-violent assimilation tactics (“This is Where the Plot Thickens” 04:40-05:20). Though Kenny Boy’s primary function as a character is to (comically) represent the “playing Indian” archetype, as he identifies with Native American histories and uses Indigenous languages, audiences are also offered an attunement to the ways Indigenous languages, cultures, and histories have crossed social and cultural boundaries to become part of the broader American narrative, shifting the ways settlers understand themselves, their heritage, and their world (Deloria 33).

As noted above, when read as a white man, Kenny Boy’s identification with Indigenous culture aligns with what Tuck and Yang refer to as “settler moves toward innocence.” The desire to “play Indian,” Tuck and Yang argue, is closely related to the “settler desire to be made innocent, to find some mercy or relief in face of the relentlessness of settler guilt and haunting” (9). Similarly, I read Kenny Boy’s character as an echo of what Deloria characterizes as the “hobbyist movement” of the twentieth century. According to Deloria, one category of hobbyists, “people hobbyists” rather than “object hobbyists,” viewed “authentic Indian culture” as a learned behavior, meaning that anyone, even a person who is not Native, could “learn it, grasp hold of the authentic, and thus consolidate a unique personal identity” (141-3).¹⁰⁰ I also read Kenny Boy’s character as a parody of

¹⁰⁰ Hobbyists often gathered at powwows to interact with Native American people and culture, though they were often unaware or naive to the “racism, poverty, and coercive government policies aimed at destroying the very qualities [they] cherished” (Deloria 152). Hobbyists’ belief that white people could “become” Indigenous destabilized notions of whiteness, though blood quantum policies would soon step in to restabilize the maintenance of racial difference, and previously discussed assumptions based on lifestyle and location (i.e., that “real” and “authentic” Native American people lived on reservations in rural areas) helped to shore up identity lines (142-3). Further, as Native American people engaged in political struggle throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (i.e., The Red Power Movement), they actively shaped notions of Native identity, rejecting assimilation, developing cultural boundaries, and “flirting with ethnic separatism and developing their own figurings of racial essentialism” (Deloria 153). For example, some powwows no

the white hippie, representative of the counterculture movement of the mid-to-late twentieth century. As Deloria explains, hippies and communalists, often disconnected from actual Indigenous communities, flexed rhetorical constructions of Indianness to align with their conceptions of healthy community and social harmony (Deloria 158). Though hippies “played Indian” with a fondness and appreciation for their nostalgic interpretation of Indigenous cultures, King assures theirs’ was an example of “kind racism,” that is “a racism infused with a suffocating paternalism that can gently strangle the life out of a people” (145). More broadly, while followers of counterculture movements believed they were engaging in social and political struggle by working on themselves, “Racism, poverty, and poor health care, underfunded educational facilities, pollution and toxic dumping, domination by extractive industries,” and settler colonial policy continued to harm Indigenous communities (King 177-8). For example, the Supreme Court slashed through the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in the 1980s, which had implications for Indigenous freedoms against environmental law, tourism, and hydropower production, logging operations, and state regulation of controlled substances (King 171). In this way, there is a direct link between nostalgic narratives and the harmful policies that create and sustain inequitable material realities. As prominent and likable characters such as Big—as well as Cheese, Bear, Willie Jack, and Elora—use quick wit and sarcasm to deflate Kenny Boy’s attempts to “play Indian,” settler audiences are gently guided to see the pitfalls in his appropriative behaviors and romanticized conceptions of Indigenous peoples. This gentle guidance, as I’ve called it, is important rhetorical labor, as it opens possibilities for the collective destabilization of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia broadly, and the nostalgic othering of Indigenous peoples, land, and cultures more specifically.

longer allowed white hobbyists. In this way, as Deloria writes, “The troublesome question of access to an Indian authentic came eventually to rest squarely in the hands of Indian people” (153).

Over the course of the series, the development of their relationship offers audiences an understanding of the text's perspective on "playing Indian," and the appropriation and circulation of Indigenous cultures. This perspective, as shown through not only the character of Kenny Boy but also through a more minor character called "White Steve," seems to complicate, or even challenge, arguments made by scholars such as Tuck and Yang. White Steve is a member of the "NDN Mafia," which clashes with the "Reservation Dogs" (i.e., Bear, Cheese, Elora, and Willie Jack) throughout season one. In the church basement during a tornado warning, White Steve performs a rap for the community gathered there. "Call me White Steve like white bread," he begins, as his audience laughs and cheers. "White on the outside, inside Rez," he continues before referencing the largeness of his body, the discomfort of his tight pants, and how tall he feels "standing next to ya'll." He ends with a reference to Derek Jeter before everyone cheers loudly, embracing and accepting White Steve as a member of their community ("Saturday" 15:00-15:35). Through a reparative lens that attempts to understand how and what *Reservation Dogs*' perspective on the appropriation and circulation of Indigenous cultures does, it is valuable to consult Lewis Hyde's framing of the gift economy, as well as Hong's analysis of Hyde's work in *Minor Feelings*. Paraphrasing Hyde's argument, Hong writes, "We must make right this unequal distribution [of power] but we must do so without forgetting the immeasurable value of cultural exchange," and without succumbing to "internalized market logic where culture is hoarded as if it's a product that will depreciate in value if shared with others" (102). Further, "If we are restricted to our lanes, culture will die" (Hong 102). Though it's important to note Hong is not writing specifically about the appropriation and circulation of Indigenous cultures, *Reservation Dogs* seems to embrace at least a limited, context-dependent view of Hyde's (and Hong's) perspective. Though it can be difficult for a text to offer this perspective without slipping into "some facile version of multicultural oneness or the sterilizing language of virtue signaling" (Hong 109), *Reservation Dogs* resists the flattening of multicultural oneness while still showing respectful, mutually

reciprocal, and even joyful relationships between Native and non-Native people. Importantly, the text's Native characters have agency in their decisions to accept and embrace or challenge and reject (often through making fun of) the appropriation and circulation of their cultural knowledges, languages, and practices. In these ways, the text's handling of the appropriation and circulation of Indigenous cultures is more reparative than paranoid, as it offers a representation of cross-cultural exchange that is sometimes awkward and offensive, sometimes connective and rewarding, but never without the presence of dynamics across difference and power. As a result, I read this representation as part of *Reservation Dogs*' refusal of a nostalgic othering that freezes and isolates Indigenous communities and cultures in the past tense.

While it is possible to read Kenny Boy's character as closer to an anti-nostalgic rhetorical figure (where nostalgia is the object of critique, and as such, is rejected as a vehicle through which processes of critique, reflection, and resistance can happen), I read Kenny Boy's function throughout the text as primarily counter-nostalgic (where nostalgia is the vehicle through which critique, reflection, and resistance happens). Kenny Boy is a buffoon-like character, but importantly, his buffoonery is regarded with far less reverence than that of elder and spirit William Knifeman. In short, while both characters offer humor to the series, they do so through very different tonalities and registers, due to their different positionalities in reference to the characters and storylines, as well as to Indigenous histories and contemporary realities. At least partly due to his appropriation of Native cultures—an appropriation which is routed through nostalgic narratives—the characters (and audiences) are more inclined to laugh *at* Kenny Boy, rather than with him. This cues audiences to do the same, and it is inside the space of this shared laughter where *Reservation Dogs*' counter-nostalgic tactics do their rhetorical work. For fellow settler viewers, in rolling our eyes, shaking our heads, and laughing at Kenny Boy *with* Big, we are invited to become critically reflective regarding Kenny Boy's

inclinations toward nostalgic othering (and potentially, in regard to these same inclinations within ourselves). In this way, Kenny Boy's nostalgic, romanticized, and homogenized identification with Indigenous cultures and communities serves as a vehicle for Native characters, like Big and Cheese, to critique—often with humor—his (and others') practices of "playing Indian." Settler audiences may then learn from the Native characters' critiques, which, if relevant, may even invite them/us to critique their/our own ways of reproducing nostalgic narratives of Indigenous life and culture in our lives. In other words, Kenny Boy's character may be pedagogical, contributing to collective practices of re-vision and the development of a more critical literacy regarding Native appropriation and nostalgic othering. The pedagogical possibilities opened here hinge on the rhetorical work of humor—its invitation to meet one's discomfort with laughter, which softens inclinations toward defensiveness and close-mindedness. For Indigenous audiences, it is more likely that both Kenny Boy's and William Knifeman's characters foster a sense of identification, connection, and affirmation—not with the characters themselves, but with the narratives and representations they humorously hold up to the light, reckon with, and ultimately work to resist. Through a combination of humor and counter-nostalgia, the characters of William Knifeman and Kenny Boy work separately to destabilize the construction of the "Indian Other" and its role in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, and in doing so, offer pedagogical models for rhetorical tactics through which a more collective re-vision of deep, dominant, and nostalgic stories may occur.

The Role of Visual Rhetoric in Refusing Nostalgic Othering

As production designer Tonner-Connolly explains, *Reservation Dogs*' creators and producers aimed to create a visual environment that was layered with meaning and narrative about the characters' lives (Spurrell). To do so, Tonner-Connolly describes how he spent many days driving around the

Okmulgee area, knocking on doors and visiting with people in their homes. Inside, he would observe details such as the way the walls were painted, what Bible quotes they had displayed on their refrigerator, and the pop culture posters teenagers hung in their rooms. Most importantly, he says, there was an “amazing team of people from the community who were able to come onto the art department” to ensure the series looked and felt aligned with their lived experiences (Spurrell). The result is a powerful visual rhetoric that refuses two of the most dominant, nostalgic narratives that persist about Native life and culture.

First, the show refuses to equivocate rurality with antiquated emptiness. This is certainly different from the way rural space is depicted in *Schitt's Creek*, and in the broader rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia from which *Schitt's Creek* draws, and this difference can be seen in a comparison of the transitional shots used between scenes in each show. While *Schitt's Creek* shows the rural as a space of past without present (i.e., empty fields, dilapidated barns, rusted water towers), *Reservation Dogs* uses visual rhetoric to show the way the space holds narratives of both the past and present—how the present holds the past inside of itself, and where, because of this visual relationality across present and past, “a future can be imagined” (Powell 388).

As described in chapter one, the view of rural space as empty is a settler colonial view routed through progress narratives that both rely on and reproduce nostalgia, and as it follows, imagined divides that contribute to material divides. James Welch articulates this view in *Winter in the Blood*, communicated through the perspective of his protagonist and narrator, a young Native man of Blackfeet and Gros Ventre ancestry who is hitching a ride back from Havre, Montana to his ranch on the Rocky Boy Reservation. The unnamed protagonist observes the white family who offers him a ride, noting, “The man and his wife in the front seat spoke about the countryside as if it were dead, as if all life had become extinct. Occasionally she would point at something, a shack or busted-down corral beside an irrigation ditch, and he would nod and roar excitedly” (102). The man’s roar of

excitement is important here—the excitement of empty space generated by the settler’s longing and sense of entitlement to fill, use, or narrativize that space. Later, just as the protagonist is being dropped off near his home, the man asks if he can take his picture: “He pointed a small gadget at me; then he turned a couple of knobs on the camera, held it to his face and clicked” (Welch 104). This moment in the novel both pulls up and digs into the tangled-up roots of rural nostalgia, the construction of the “Indian Other” and the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering, along with the structures of settler colonialism, nationalism, whiteness, and racialization. Specifically, it emphasizes the perception and romanticization of rural space as both empty and ruined—part and parcel of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

Counter to visual representations of emptiness and extinction, *Reservation Dogs*’ transitional and opening shots are embodied with people, animals, and plants, offering audiences an opportunity to consider the expansiveness of the community, both beyond the human and beyond the dominant emptied-out, temporally frozen depictions of rurality, and “flyover states” such as Oklahoma in particular. Transitional shots between scenes peppered throughout *Reservation Dogs* show small one-story homes, decorated with Oklahoma and United States flags moving in the wind, parked cars and buildings, often run-down but marked with signs of presence, such as graffiti, fields of wildflowers, pastures with grazing cows, a well-used basketball court, a man lying next to a filled-up dumpster, a man and woman sitting on a front porch smoking, a long and rolling road cutting through trees, graffiti that says “The Village,” a reservation dog resting in the middle of a road, more dogs and cows, and several bird’s-eye views of the land, including views of a muddy brown river flowing strong and large green trees filled with leaves. Overhead views show the space’s vastness, as opposed to the mostly tight transitional shots peppered throughout *Schitt’s Creek*, which focus on the space’s smallness. Though *Reservation Dogs*, like *Schitt’s Creek*, shows the history of the surrounding spaces and the ways that history is made present, sometimes through ruin or dilapidation, *Reservation Dogs*

shows the many ways these spaces remain populated, and because of this population, they remain emergent—dynamic spaces where things do, are, and will happen (Stewart 1996). In this way, rural decay, or even ruin, is rhetorically repurposed and even resuscitated.

Secondly, the show's visual rhetoric emphasizes the presence of cross-cultural exchange and transcultural rhetorics in the lives of each character. In this way, *Reservation Dogs* refuses dominant narratives, entangled in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, about the cultural isolation of Indigenous peoples and cultures. A key example of transcultural visual rhetoric comes from the clothing that the characters wear, especially main characters Cheese, Elora, Willie Jack, and Bear (each between the ages of fifteen and seventeen). Like in *Schitt's Creek*, clothing in *Reservation Dogs* plays an important rhetorical role. In an early episode, Willie Jack wears a baseball-style hat that tells audiences, "You are on Native Land" ("NDN Clinic"), and in a later episode, a hat that says, "Urban Native Era" ("Offering"). Bear wears a long-sleeve shirt printed with Jean Michel Basquiat's popular and politically significant crown motif ("What About Your Dad"). Cheese wears a graphic t-shirt that illustrates Big Foot's presence in Oklahoma ("Satvrday"). And Willie Jack's t-shirts often show her love for country and western music, especially Willie Nelson. Cleo, of the local convenience store and restaurant called Rob and Cleo's, is a Black man who audiences see wearing an "Oklahoma Freedmen" shirt ("Run").¹⁰¹ And characters also wear shirts that say phrases like "Keeping Oklahoma Native" ("Wide Net"). Through clothing, the show draws connections across cultures, and communicates characters' interests and perspectives. More specifically, *Reservation Dogs*' costume design emphasizes the ways the main characters are socially and politically engaged. Through the communication of characters' interests and perspectives, audiences are invited to learn and understand the perspectives of the text's Indigenous creators, writers, producers, and actors—

¹⁰¹ There has been a range of discourse around Black and Black Native representation throughout the series, including critiques that the series erases or excludes Black Native experiences. It seems likely that the decision to dress Cleo in an Oklahoma Freedman shirt serves as an acknowledgement of and response to this criticism.

perspectives that may be, depending on a viewer's social location, new or different from their own. In this way, *Reservation Dogs*' visual rhetoric (along with many other elements of the show) open pedagogical possibilities for learning how to engage visual rhetorical tactics toward the resistance and refusal of processes of nostalgic othering and the re-vision of deep stories related to the construction of the "Indian Other."

Audiences also get several glimpses inside Bear's room, which is heavily decorated and like Bear's clothing style, combines contemporary and historical references, as well as combining Indigenous material with more "mainstream" popular culture material (such as posters for popular musicians). One poster in his room states, "I loved America before it was America," and a bumper sticker reads, "Indians discovered Columbus." It is also interesting to note, in both Willie Jack and Elora's homes, family portraits from previous generations mingle with portraits of family members still alive. In many of *Reservation Dogs*' interior spaces, the conversation between the past and present, and between history and story, is visualized. While the visual and spatial rhetorics of the show, often communicated through the characters' clothing and production's design choices, speak to Nestor Garcia Calcini's argument that, in late-Capitalism, all subject citizens form their identities through hybridity generated through participation in a range of symbolic systems (Muñoz 5), I also read the very intentional visual rhetoric of the show as a rebuttal to the ways Indigenous peoples and reservation cultures have been imagined and represented as nostalgic others—isolated and frozen in the past tense, apart from popular and contemporary culture. In other words, the way *Reservation Dogs* intentionally intermixes touchpoints of popular culture with Indigenous culture destabilizes the mythological separation between the two and calls to mind, once more, what Hyde calls the gift economy.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Hyde's notion of the gift economy attends to the unequal distribution of power involved in culture exchange (i.e., cultural appropriation), but does so "without forgetting the immeasurable value of cultural exchange" (Hong 102).

Another significant piece of visual rhetoric integrated into the show is an illustrated map of “Indian Country,” which is shared throughout Cheese, Bear, Elora, and Willie Jack’s eventual road trip from Oklahoma to California (“I Still Believe”).¹⁰³ The map trades the names of national and state boundaries with the names of the Indigenous peoples that have lived and continue to live in particular geographic areas. The map also contains references to the series’ actors, writers, and creators, as audiences can see illustrations of familiar faces on the map.¹⁰⁴ This critical cartography is both a rhetorical and pedagogical tool, disrupting nostalgic historiographies that erase or make light of the realities of settler colonialism. In other words, as Mishuana Goeman argues, Indigenous storied and embodied land disrupts settler maps (296).¹⁰⁵ Further, this visual rhetorical element gestures toward Indigenous concepts, such as Watts’ Place-Thought, which speak to enmeshments across land, place, identity, knowledge, and agency.

Similarly, in an early episode that largely takes place at the Okern Indian Health Clinic, where Bear’s mother Rita and many other community members are employed, audiences are shown a mural that stretches across the front of the large brick building. The painting shows a group of white male doctors and female nurses giving a group of traditionally dressed Native American people bottles of pills (“NDN Clinic” 03:12-03:15). This visual representation of history speaks to the series’

¹⁰³ Much of the second season, like the first, leads up to an eventual road trip to California. This time, it is Elora, Cheese, Willie Jack, and Bear who finally make it to “Cali” together, reconnected by a letter Daniel wrote to himself as a freshman in high school, expressing his dream of seeing Los Angeles and feeling the Pacific Ocean. The journey, and the characters’ final scene together at the ocean, is healing—it is not that the characters have found an end to their grief, but it is that their grief has changed, and they have changed along with it. And perhaps most importantly, in that change, they have come back together as friends and family, all with the help of Daniel. It is interesting to consider why they had to get to California to heal and come together in this way, and how that speaks to questions of leaving, staying, and returning. The text speaks to the potential power and importance of leaving our homeplaces without foreclosing possibilities for return. Leaving does not have to be permanent, we learn in this final episode of the season, but returning is also not guaranteed (as Bear’s final words of the season express his desire to stay in California, and audiences are unsure which of the characters will go back to the reservation and which will stay distanced from it).

¹⁰⁴ For example, those familiar with staff writer and poet Tommy Pico will recognize an illustration of his face near Kumeyaay land in what is now southern California.

¹⁰⁵ Relatedly, in *Lost Children Archive*, Valeria Luiselli states, “A map is a silhouette, a contour that groups disparate elements together, wherever they are. To map is to include as much as to exclude. To map is also a way to make visible what is unusually unseen” (Luiselli Box V: Loose Note).

frequent discourses around the differences between Indigenous medicine and white medicine. The mural also rhetorically depicts implications of settler colonialism, beyond the acquisition of land, directly showing the consequences of settler imposition on Indigenous lives, cultures, and knowledges. While some audiences will understand the visual message of the mural quickly, other audiences may become curious about what the scene represents, and this curiosity may invite them to ask questions (and seek answers to) what they may have not yet learned about the process of settler colonialism and its lasting impact on Native communities, especially in terms of health and well-being (i.e., what are often referred to as social determinants of health). In other words, for curious and critically reflective audiences, the visual rhetoric of this mural opens pedagogical possibilities for reckoning with “vanishing Indian” ideology and nostalgic constructions of “Indianness” more broadly.

In addition to *Reservation Dogs*' powerful visual rhetoric, music, literature, and language also perform similar transcultural rhetorical functions. From hip hop by Native artists, like Hi-Rez's “Dreams Worth Dying For,” which Bear listens to as he walks around the village; to rock and roll classics from Native band Redbone; to classic country and western (like Jacob Tovar's “Cleveland Summer Nights” and Sanford Clark's “The Big Lie”); to classic rock from musicians like Tom Petty; to traditional Indigenous hymns shared by elders and ancestors; each character listens to music as a path to identification and connection.¹⁰⁶ For audiences, the music integrated throughout the show emphasizes both the presence and value of Indigenous musical culture as well as the presence and value of cross-cultural exchange. In terms of literature, two key texts circulate throughout the community. The first is a book on String Theory that captures the interests of multiple characters,

¹⁰⁶ For example, when Cheese joins Big for a ride along, Big finds deep pleasure in introducing Cheese to Redbone's popular “Come and Get Your Love,” and the episode itself ends with footage from a Redbone performance (“Come and Get Your Love”). Big's sharing of Redbone with Cheese emphasizes the importance of intergenerational cultural exchange, and music as a point of cultural connection.

including Kenny Boy, and a fictionalized text called *Man Moon*, which guides men to “rediscover the sacred feminine” (“The Curse”). As these texts emerge with various characters in various scenes, audiences are offered an understanding of the dynamic ways knowledge circulates within, and is shared throughout, the community—rhetorically refusing the construction of Indigenous communities as nostalgic others.

Indigenous languages and language practices also circulate throughout the series—with “slang” terms such as “stoodis” to “skoden” often exchanged by main characters. As Jeanette Centeno writes for *PowWoms*, “As with most languages, slang terms are often unique to a specific generation, and in the case of Native slang, a specific reservation. The impact of slang words and phrases can tie a community together and form a part of its identity” (Centeno). Importantly, along with English, there are many different Native languages represented in the series, as the reservation is home to people belonging to a multiplicity of tribes and nations. In this way, the integration and circulation of Native languages on the show aligns with Ellen Cushman’s definition of translingualism, or meaning making processes that involve “translanguaging, translating, and dwelling in borders” (235). Through this lens, the translingual practices that course through *Reservation Dogs* serve important rhetorical functions not dissimilar to the shows’ visual and cultural rhetorics, “unveiling colonial matrices of power” and allowing space and strategies for dwelling “in the borders created by the imperial difference” in ways that just might “generate pluriversal understandings, values, and practices” for various audiences (Cushman 235-6). Dynamic, pluriversal understandings and representations of Indigenous cultures and communities cannot help but to resist and refuse the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering, and as it follows, the rhetorical construction of the “Indian Other” and its position in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

Relationality as a Narrative Tactic of Nostalgia Refusal

Rather than the construction of a linear (i.e., progress) narrative, the narrative structure of *Reservation Dogs* embraces a nonlinear relationship to time, characteristic of counter-nostalgic texts (Ladino 2012), as well as texts that work to challenge settler colonial epistemologies and their conception of the passing of time as a forward march toward progress (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). Inside *Reservation Dogs*' nonlinear narrative structure, captured in Leon and Willie Jack's hunting trip examined above, the past and present are not separate, but enmeshed and in a cyclical, reciprocal relationship. This representation of the relationship between past and present challenges the very root of nostalgia—an emotional and rhetorical structure which depends on the perception of distance from the past (Boym). For the characters of *Reservation Dogs*—who have experienced and continue to experience various forms of grief, loss, and dispossession—this perception of distance does not and cannot exist. Rather, characters live in and with the present and past, experiencing time as present–past, where the past represents both their personal pasts and their ancestral pasts. In other words, the narrative representation of the present–past directly refuses the ways nostalgic narratives of Indigenous lands, cultures, and communities construct a mythological version of the Indigenous past with no present.

First, however, it is important to note *Reservation Dogs*' primary setting is in the contemporary present. In this way, the text employs a rhetorical tactic common across contemporary Native literature and cultural productions. As King has observed, refusing the past as a setting refuses the dominant, nostalgic narratives that have accumulated into a deeply embedded mythology about Indigenous peoples and cultures (105). In King's words, “by the time Native writers began to write in earnest and in numbers, we discovered that the North American version of the past was too well populated, too well defended” (105). For example, by the mid-twentieth century, the “cowboy versus Indian” dichotomy was made stable—as a deep story that circulates across many genres—

through rhetorical imperialism. If a Native writer chose to place their story in the past, they would be met with the demand that their Native characters be noble, tragic, and on horseback (King 105-6). Native writers, in response, chose to challenge this nostalgic construction of “Indianness,” which insisted, in the words of King, “that our past was all we had” (106).¹⁰⁷ As a rhetorical tactic of nostalgia refusal, “Native Writers began to use the Native present as a way to resurrect a Native past and to imagine a Native future” (King 106). Though King’s observations are primarily drawn from Native literature, his analysis extends to similar histories and narratives across film and television. Through this lens, *Reservation Dogs* joins a long and dynamic lineage of Indigenous writers and creators who have tactically refused narratives of nostalgic othering by situating their stories in the present. However, by representing the present as enmeshed with the past, *Reservation Dogs* extends the work of this lineage by reclaiming and re-visioning histories that previous Indigenous writers and creators were, generally speaking, not yet able to—though their work laid the groundwork for these tactics of reclamation and re-vision. *Reservation Dogs*’ representation of the past and present as always relational, always enmeshed not only counters the mythology of dominant nostalgic narratives, but as I will discuss, it also offers opportunities for critical engagement with histories (and hauntings) of settler colonialism.

For an example of how *Reservation Dogs* narrativizes enmeshment across past and present, it is useful to turn to Willie Jack’s visit with her Aunt Hokti, Daniel’s mother, who is in jail.¹⁰⁸ Willie Jack tells Aunt Hokti about her and her friends’ struggle to stay connected after Daniel’s death—she

¹⁰⁷ This is, at its core, the rhetorical aim of nostalgic othering.

¹⁰⁸ This episode gestures toward the disproportionate number of Native women in prison (Wang 2021). As Willie Jack waits to visit Hokti, she talks to white man who says that the white people who built this (referring to this particular prison, and it seems, to the larger prison system) lost their way. “Being separated from family is a bitch,” he says, and that is why visiting family is important. Willie Jack is taken by the man and his wisdom, and she asks him who he is. “Just an old hippie dude who’s done a lot of acid,” he tells her. As she continues to wait, Willie Jack reads a *National Geographic* article about Crazy Horse. Even in these seemingly small exchanges and intra-actions, audiences are offered deep and complex explorations of settler and Indigenous relationships, as well as the ways Indigenous people have been represented in popular culture and media.

says it feels as if they are wandering around, suspended in darkness.¹⁰⁹ Though we learn that Hokti does not usually accept visitors, before Willie Jack's visit, Hokti communes with an ancestor. The spirit tells her, "Ignoring your responsibilities is ignoring your ancestors," then she asks Hokti why she stopped working with her medicine and encourages her to continue once more ("Offerings" 02:30-04:30). Audiences will recognize this exchange as a key exploration of the show: What are our responsibilities to one another? What are our responsibilities to those who came before us, and those who will come after us? These questions, in and of themselves, challenge the way in which nostalgia, as an emotional and rhetorical force, often divides the past, present, and future.

As Hokti listens to her niece's reflections, she begins to draw from her ancestor's guidance to practice her medicine. As her ancestor observes from a distance, Hokti guides Willie Jack to take long and slow breaths, to listen to her breathing, and as she does so, to remember stories about where their family comes from—generations of caretakers and medicine people, "who brought us together when we arrived from our homeland." A larger group of ancestors gather around Willie Jack, "men and women whose songs led us through the dark," Hokti explains. They begin to sing; Willie Jack begins to cry. "This is the power we carry—they're all around you, all the time," Hokti assures her ("Offerings" 08:10-22:30). This scene speaks to Jackson and DeLaune's articulation of the way cultural literacy is learned in Indigenous communities. Cultural literacy focuses "on sustaining cultural knowledges via tribal cultural literacy practices, despite historic suppressive forces, and revitalizing the Native stories and languages that house them" (Jackson and DeLaune 47). As we see in the exchange between Hokti and her ancestor, and between Hokti and Willie Jack, "Elders rely on other community members to listen to their stories, to place them on the storied landscape, to thread them together and connect them to their own family histories, to make meaning

¹⁰⁹ As Willie Jack continues to share her struggles with her aunt, Hokti remarks that when you come to ask for advice, you are supposed to bring a gift, like food or tobacco, echoing much of the guidance offered in Kovach's *Indigenous Methodologies*. Taking Hokti's suggestion, Willie Jack gets up to buy Hokti snacks from a nearby vending machine.

of them, to share them with others” (47). Further, Willie Jack’s visit with Hokti, and her later attempt to bring her friends back together using the medicine she learned during her visit with her aunt, gets to the heart of the story *Reservation Dogs* tells about this community of people mourning separately and together, all while continuing to reckon with the implications of settler colonialism, and the experience of the past inside the present. This method of movement through loss and mourning, the narrative suggests, is a practice of collective and individual survivance.

Interestingly, after visiting Hokti, Willie Jack makes wild onion omelets for Cheese, Bear, and Elora. She wants to bring them back together, but it proves to be an awkward dinner. She tells them that she went to see Hokti, and then attempts to perform the same healing ceremony that Hokti did for her, but it does not seem to work in quite the same way; the ancestors do not arrive, at least not visibly (“Offerings” 22:30-28:50). In this way and many others, *Reservation Dogs* refuses a reductive, romanticized perspective on the intergenerational exchange of Indigenous cultural practices and knowledges. It is not simple, easy work—especially in the context of settler colonialism—and representing the intergenerational exchange of cultural literacies and knowledges in this way aligns with Tuck and Yang’s conception of desire as “a recognition of suffering, the costs of settler colonialism and capitalism, and how we still thrive in the face of loss anyway; the parts of us that won’t be destroyed” (647-8). Like *Reservation Dogs*, narratives of desire honor change as possible and constant but also complex, ultimately disrupting the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering and its attempt to freeze people and places in an imagined, unchanging past.

Reservation Dogs’ close and careful engagement with the past, from a primary setting in the present, also aligns in generative ways with Eunjung Kim’s theorization of curative violence.¹¹⁰

According to Kim, for people experiencing illness or disability, the imperative “to be cured” folds

¹¹⁰ Kim’s *Curative Violence* examines Korean cultural productions, analyzing themes of “curative violence” as they emerge, and in doing so, making sense of the mutually constitutive works of disability, gender, and heteronormativity, and unveiling how, “The cure imperative simultaneously demands normatively gendered and sexual performances” (21).

time in ways that erase or veil the presence of illness or disability. Only the nondisabled, normative past and normative, cured future are made visible and meaningful.¹¹¹ In studying the rhetorical tactics employed by *Reservation Dogs*, I felt drawn back to Kim's project, and became interested in how the imperative for cure may guide our understanding of the rhetorical structure and function of nostalgia, especially imperialist nostalgia for figures and spaces of rurality. Like the cure imperative, nostalgia often attempts to fold and manipulate time in particular ways, constructing a clean, "cured" version of the past that erases the ways the past impacts present experiences and realities. In the context of settler colonialism, this cured version of the past—a past where Indigenous people were not violently removed and displaced from their homelands—veils the presence of settler colonial harm. *Reservation Dogs*' critical engagement with the history and presence of settler colonialism, then, works to unfold time—to show the ways the past presses into and on the present.

Kim's notion of curative violence speaks to the cultural imperative to "move on" in the face of loss, grief, and mourning—the imperative to fold time, creating the narrative of a past where the loss was not yet experienced and a future where a person or community is fully healed (or cured of) the experience of loss and the process of grieving. *Reservation Dogs*, though, is a text that is largely about the ways a community, and a group of four teenage friends in particular, grieve the loss of their friend Daniel, as well as additional losses (as Elora loses her grandmother and must continue to navigate the previous loss of her mother, for example, while Bear grieves the absence of his father from his life). As the characters' grieving processes move them back and forth across the past and present, audiences feel their resistance to the imperative to fold time into a clean, linear narrative about the progress they have made in their collective and individual grieving processes. This

¹¹¹ This, Kim reasons, is the state's attempts to make disability disappear, erasing the presence of disability, and obscuring the violence of the cure imperative. This violence manifests in two ways. First, as mentioned, the cure imperative denies the present and embodied experience of disability or illness, and second, mental, physical, and material violence experienced in the process of cure is justified in the name of cure (Kim 14).

unfolding of time, and making visible the nonlinear grieving process, is a rhetorical tactic that also resists the construction of nostalgic narratives, as the characters remain in close connection with their lived experiences and how their lived experiences are in relation to legacies and logics of settler colonialism.

Audiences understand the characters' loss and grief from the very first episode of the series, as we learn of Daniel's suicide and witness Bear, Elora, Cheese, and Willie Jack coming together, in black suits and ties, on the anniversary of Daniel's death. They use ceremonial practices to honor the loss of their friend and family member, and to honor their collective grief and mourning ("F*ckin' Rez Dogs" 25:00-28:00). As this episode and many others closely examine, loss, memories of loss, and processes of mourning are woven throughout the characters' everyday lives—impossible to fold away, or to "leave" in a "cured" version of the past. In the second season, audiences witness communal mourning through an exchange between Bear and Daniel's dad, Danny, when they find themselves working together at a construction site for a housing development, or what one of Bear's coworkers explains as "white people shit." We quickly understand that Bear is angry with Daniel's dad, and even though Bear tries to avoid him, Danny eventually saves him from falling off a roof, and later, helps him learn how to drive a nail. Eventually, after some midday guidance from William Knifeman, Bear apologizes to Danny for his anger, but Danny wonders, aloud to Bear, how he could have been a better father. He says he wishes Daniel would have gone to California like he wanted to. Here, we feel Danny's investment in Daniel's dream of "getting out" to pursue a better (or at least a different) life. Bear admits he wonders similarly how he could have been a better friend, but Danny explains that Bear does not need to take on any responsibility or blame— it's on the adults who didn't see what was happening, he says. As they connect in their grief and mourning, they notice a bright spot in the sky; they pause their work and conversation and watch the bright spot move across the sky together ("Roofing" 07:10-21:05).

As these strands of *Reservation Dogs* show, exploration of individual and collective grieving processes, read as a resistance to the cure imperative, connects to Muñoz’s writing about melancholia.¹¹² In *Disidentifications*, Muñoz connects melancholia to communal mourning, which is immensely complicated, as a community experiences both the loss itself and the experience of losing part of itself along with the loss (73). Muñoz suggests that melancholia, for queer people, people of color, and queer people of color, is “not a pathology but an integral part of everyday lives” (74). By this Muñoz means that melancholia “is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names—and in our names” (74). These practices of identity (re)construction and taking with, as evidenced throughout *Reservation Dogs*, are important parts of the resistance to the colonial imperative to cure oneself of loss—to “remember to forget,” as Stuckey articulates—and of the imperative to leave a loss in the past, rather than carrying it into the present and future, where it can continue to be remembered and reckoned with in experiences of the past–present. Melancholia, understood by Muñoz as the experience of communal mourning, resists nostalgia through its resistance of “moving on,” and in that “moving on,” reconstructing a version of the past that cures the experience of loss in the present. Rather, characters not only live with their losses, but they connect through their losses, (re)constructing their relationships with one another, with themselves, with those they have lost, and with the structures of harm and violence that have contributed to what (and who) they are left to mourn. In this way, *Reservation Dogs* presents the past–present as a method of both survival and resistance (i.e., survivance), and through doing so, offers a pedagogical model for deploying representations of the past–present as a narrative and rhetorical tactic for resisting and refusing nostalgia.

¹¹² Freud describes melancholia as mourning that does not know how to stop, characterized by “the subject’s inability to immediately work out the problems or contradictions that the object and its loss produce” (Muñoz 64-73).

Haunting as a Rhetorical Tactic of Survivance

In this section, I more specifically examine the ways *Reservation Dogs* employs haunting as a rhetorical tactic to resist the perpetuation of “histories written wrong and meant to be forgotten” (Orange 10), and in doing so, affirms Indigenous experiences and refuses to let settler audiences off the hook of settler colonial horror. In this way, the rhetorical tactic of haunting works to uncover and detangle the relationship between settler colonialism and nostalgic construction of Indigenous peoples.

I first noted the use of haunting as a rhetorical tactic in an early episode of the series, as audiences wake up with Rita, Bear’s mother, alone in a large bed in a large and bright room.¹¹³ The night before, she met a white man named David at a bar. In the dining room where Rita and David have breakfast, she notices a large taxidermy buck on the wall, and he says archery is his preferred method of hunting. The tone in which he tells Rita this reveals that he is attempting to communicate his embrace of (what he perceives as an) Indigenous hunting practices—except, as audiences may begin to pick up on, David’s view of Indigenous hunting practices, and Indigenous cultural practices more generally, is grounded in nostalgic othering. It’s not long before Rita notices the confederate flag tattooed on David’s forearm, poking out from his rolled-up sleeve. The illustration of the flag includes a feather wrapped around and through it. David says, in explanation of the flag, that he is a Lynyrd Skynyrd fan, and also that he “loves Indians,” in explanation of the feather. David continues, unprompted, as Rita grows increasingly wary, saying the land he owns is Indian land, but explaining multiple times that his grandfather “bought it honestly” from a Creek man who stayed on the property “in separate quarters,” but was invited to dinner on occasion. “My best friend is Lakota,” he continues, still unprompted, saying that he texts with him daily, and that he has always been most attracted to Native women. At this point in their largely one-sided conversation, Rita visits the past,

¹¹³ “Fuck yeah,” Rita whispers to herself, “he’s rich.” We know from earlier in the season that she has been hoping to find a “doctor dad” for Bear.

where she is seated in the same room with the same man, but now she is also joined by three traditionally dressed Native servants who offer her lemonade with “Indian herbs” in it. Rita, in the present once more, runs out of the house (“What About Your Dad” 12:10-16:30). The past, Rita’s experience suggests, remains enmeshed with the present.

The unprompted, over-explanation we witness from David speaks to the settler anxiety and “moves to innocence” Tuck and Yang outline in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” as David fetishizes Indigenous women at the same time that he does not bother to hide the white supremacist tattoo on his forearm. By placing settler moves to innocence right alongside settler practices of harm, *Reservation Dogs* rhetorically reveals their coexistence in ways that may leave Indigenous audiences feeling affirmed and calls settler audiences to reckon with their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and the ways in which they may align, even in subtle ways, with David’s character. This call to reckoning functions, rhetorically, as haunting; David serves as a relentless reminder of the ways settler colonial occupation and ideology is alive and well and has material implications in the lives of Indigenous communities, especially as David’s narrative regarding the land his family “bought honestly” is clearly dripping in mythology, nostalgia, and “vanishing Indian” ideology.

Elora and Jackie’s road trip to California, which takes place at the end of season one and beginning of season two, also deploys haunting as a rhetorical tactic that lifts the veil on the continual presence of settler colonial violence, especially in the lives of Indigenous women.¹¹⁴ Jackie and Elora’s first encounter with violence occurs early on in their trip, when Elora’s grandmother’s car (somewhat predictably) breaks down as they drive along a rural, two-lane road.¹¹⁵ They decide to

¹¹⁴ Though it’s also important to note Elva Guerra, who plays Jackie, identifies as two-spirit, and they have said that their character is a direct representation of themselves.

¹¹⁵ While the community gathers in the church basement to protect themselves from a possible tornado, Willie Jack stands up and begins to talk to everyone about how it is her mom and dad’s anniversary, how they are good parents, cousins, and friends to those who need them, but that she hasn’t seen them happy since Daniel left (“Saturday”). She announces that she is going to stick around because she is not going to have them forever, and she has so much more to

grab their bags, abandon the car, and hitchhike. Eventually a white man in a large sedan pulls over and says he is on his way to Amarillo to see a large, white cross; though skeptical, Jackie and Elora get in his car. Soon, without explanation, the man turns off the two-lane road onto an even more isolated road that cuts through a wooded area. Quickly understanding that they are in danger, Jackie and Elora repeatedly ask, then demand that the man pull over, but he refuses. When it is clear that the man means to harm them, Jackie kicks him, and Elora stabs him. The man finally pulls over, and Elora and Jackie jump out of the car, soon realizing they no longer have their bags or wallets—all they are left with, in terms of money, is a few dollars that Jackie finds in their pocket (“The Curse” 12:10-17:30). Unsure of what else to do, Jackie and Elora continue walking and soon come across an area with a few homes planted in the open land. Spotting a truck, Jackie explains that “bumpkins” always leave their keys in their vehicles. Jackie’s assumption about rural people proves accurate in this case, but just as they quietly make their way inside the vehicle, attempting to steal it to replace Elora’s grandmother’s car, two white men storm out of a nearby house with large guns. One man wears camouflage and the other wears a shirt celebrating the confederate flag. Elora and Jackie take off running while the men climb in the truck, which resembles a vintage military vehicle, and begin chasing them (“The Curse” 27:00-28:38).

The Band’s “Up On Cripple Creek” plays as an eagle flies overhead and Elora and Jackie run for their lives. As the men continue chasing Elora and Jackie, they shoot at and near them with their rifles. Eventually, Elora and Jackie find themselves in a hayfield and hide behind its bales. Jackie remarks that these “fucking rednecks” are going to kill them. The men continue to shout, calling Elora and Jackie “thieving fucking Indians.” Then, as they search for them in the hayfield, they tauntingly sing, “One little, two little, three little Indians,” then they add, “We don’t want to have to

learn from them while she is here. Taking Willie Jack’s cue, Cheese announces, “I’m not going to California either.” Soon, Bear decides the same, leaving Elora with Jackie as her only option for a road trip companion.

shoot you, but we will.” Eventually, the men seem to grow satisfied with knowing that they have terrified and likely traumatized Elora and Jackie, and they drive away, shouting about how they cannot go around stealing others’ property (“Run” 0:15-01:40).¹¹⁶ Both Jackie and Elora’s violent encounters with white men during their road trip prods at the tensions related to rural (“backwoods”) people and white supremacist ideologies and practices.¹¹⁷

While audiences would likely prefer to watch Jackie and Elora have a carefree, rewarding trip to California—the kind of trip young people in more privileged positions are likely to have—*Reservation Dogs* insists on continuing to deploy reminders and narrative examinations of the settler colonial horrors that linger in and endanger the lives of Indigenous peoples. In this way, the show asserts haunting as a rhetorical tactic that disrupts nostalgic narratives about the past—presence of settler colonialist ideology and practice.

In the last example of haunting as a rhetorical tactic, Big and Kenny Boy walk through the forest after Big accidentally takes a large dose of psychedelics being prepared at the salvage yard, and in solidarity, Kenny Boy swallows a similarly large dose and joins him on his trip (“This is Where the Plot Thickens” 07:00-09:00). Eventually, Big and Kenny Boy come across a large gathering of people wearing black hooded cloaks. The hooded people are worshipping a very large owl sculpture, and as with every appearance of owls on the show, this owl’s eyes are blurred in reference and respect to Indigenous cultural beliefs related to making eye contact with the owl, who is associated

¹¹⁶ The mens’ use of the words “stealing” and “property” are important here, as by this point in the series, the notion and practice of “stealing” emerges as a theme. It is also useful to note that Jackie and Elora ultimately steal a white woman named Anna’s truck after she offers them dinner and a place to stay in her large, plantation-style home. Through narrative explorations of stealing, *Reservation Dogs* (implicitly) raises questions, and gets into generative tension, with what stealing and property means in the context of settler colonialism. As I observe and analyze scenes like those from Elora and Jackie’s road trip, I wonder, through what alternative lenses might we read “stealing” as a decolonial practice? In what ways does the show ask us to challenge learned conceptions of “property”?

¹¹⁷ As a scholar interested and invested in representations of rural communities, though, I cannot help but have complicated feelings about the way the series narrates this encounter, especially as, through the lens of rhetorical analysis, some audiences (such as white people living in rural areas) may feel negatively, and perhaps unfairly, depicted in this scene, and because of these feelings, may turn away from the series’ deeper narratives, cutting themselves off from their pedagogical possibilities.

with death and the underworld in some tribes, and with shape-shifting and restless souls in others (“Native American Owl Mythology”). The hooded people wear large masks that resemble catfish heads as they chant, “Ours, ours,” and pump their fists while a man, who ends up being the governor of Oklahoma, speaks to them, saying, “We are here. Sons of grandsons. The old ones who settled this land. This land. Our birthright. Our land.” Big tells Kenny Boy that he knows what this is. “White people,” Kenny Boy remarks (gesturing toward his signature settler nativism), but Big corrects him, “It’s the Order of the Midstreamers.” A group, he explains, of oil executives and politicians—a secret society that believes they are the rightful heirs of all Indian territories, as well as all the minerals beneath the ground. Big shares that a few people went missing “back in the day,” and that their disappearances were connected to the group, but he says he thought the group had gone dormant. “It looks like some sort of initiation,” Big goes on, comically explaining that he learned about all of this “on the YouTube.” An absurd ritual begins. All the men take off their robes and kneel down naked in front of the owl. Another man brings out buckets of beheaded catfish, and another bucket, filled with what appears to be blood, is poured over their heads. When the men begin to masturbate with the fish carcasses, Big steps toward them and commands that they take their masks off as he pulls out and points his gun. Kenny Boy tells them they are on the Muscogee Reservation. The governor tells Big and Kenny Boy that they don’t know who and what they are dealing with. “Don’t you have any reverence for nature and its peoples?” Big asks them. Kenny Boy grows whimsical and adds additional commentary, “Water and land? The four-leggeds and the no-leggeds?” One of the robed men, this one wearing the collar of a priest, shares his nostalgic, colonial perspective, “Our God has given us this land to do with as we will, because the Native will not! He is too precious and too reverent,” he says. Then, more shockingly, “The earth is a whore, and it is our will to take her.” The priest’s statements capture the violent ideologies undergirding settler colonialism, and do so in a way that audiences (myself always included) likely cannot ignore, brush

aside, or easily forget. Soon, two armed men charge Kenny Boy and Big from behind, placing their rifles at their backs, then begin beating them with their weapons.¹¹⁸ The Midstreamers continue their chant as Kenny Boy and Big are tied against trees, blind folded and badly beaten. As they become conscious, Big begins to cry, explaining to Kenny Boy that he failed some friends of his, let two people die, and that he knew their whole families. Big then tells Kenny Boy that he owes him an apology for the way he has treated him, and that he knows he is a good man. Kenny Boy asks if he can refer to Big as “brother.” Big is generous: “Not in front of my friends,” he says. In this complex (both lighthearted and meaningful) moment I think of Tuck and Yang’s argument that, “Solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict” (3). Soon, Deer Lady—an Indigenous guardian and protector that appears throughout the series and especially in Big’s life—emerges and shoots the guards, saving Kenny Boy and Big.¹¹⁹ From here, Big and Kenny Boy arrest the Midstreamers; news cameras and reporters show up on the scene (“This is Where the Plot Thickens” 14:00-28:00).¹²⁰

The ways the show contends with the past and presence of settler colonial horror refuses nostalgic narratives of Indigenous peoples and cultures, rejects the ideology of the “vanishing Indian,” and in ways both implicit and explicit, shows the continued implications of settler colonialism on Indigenous lands, cultures, and lives. Haunting, as *Reservation Dogs* shows, is a tactic

¹¹⁸ While Big is being beaten unconscious, he visits a memory from his past—a memory he began to visit earlier when he was first tripping. There is a young couple on a motorcycle. He offers the woman, who we understand to be Elora’s mother Cookie, a ride home, but she insists the man driving her home is sober, and she lives right down the road. After he has walked away, he notices the man stumbling out of the gas station he had stopped at. As he gets on the motorcycle with Cookie and drives away, Big turns on his sirens and lights and takes off after them. Though the man eventually pulls over, he quickly drives off, saying that Big is not a “real cop” anyway. Big continues to chase after them. Then, Big (along with the audience) is taken to the scene of the eventual crash, with Cookie thrown off the bike and the bike burning up in flames. Big’s visitations with the past align with my previous analyses of mourning and the enmeshment of past with present as a refusal of dominant cultural imperatives for nostalgic distancing.

¹¹⁹ Deer Lady tells Big that Cookie was the one that told her he was in trouble. An important figure throughout Big’s life, Deer Lady tells Big to keep being good as she offers him a hug. See Summer Lewis’ explanation of Deer Lady (also known as Deer Woman) and her role on *Reservation Dogs*, published in WeRNative.org.

¹²⁰ One of Midstreamers tells Kenny Boy that he looks white, and Big agrees that he does, adding complexity and potentially even confusion to our understanding of Kenny Boy’s identity.

through which to challenge and refuse the inventive settler's memory, which has been solidified as history, and as such, fuels nostalgia and its various rhetorical maneuverings and material implications. Throughout *Reservation Dogs*, haunting as a rhetorical tactic disrupts nostalgic settler colonial memory with "relentless remembering and reminding" (Tuck and Ree) of settler colonial violences and their continued reverberations throughout Indigenous communities. As a rhetorical tactic, haunting is powerful and effective, as the experience of being haunted is not easily forgotten, veiled, explained away, or solved. In other words, haunting achieves its rhetorical prowess from its relentlessness, and from its resistance to reconciliation, which it refuses to offer (Tuck and Ree 642). As *Reservation Dogs* shows through the strands described and examined above, haunting is an important rhetorical tool, especially when waged against deep-rooted nostalgia and its attempts at shielding, distancing, and forgetting. Because haunting is a rhetorical tool through which nostalgic narratives and their material implications can be resisted and refused, haunting is both practice and proof of Indigenous survivance—a critical and pedagogical tool waged against the rhetorical imperialism under which Indigenous narratives have often been produced and circulated.

Modeling Rhetorical Sovereignty, Refusing Nostalgic Othering

As I began my observation of *Reservation Dogs* for this chapter, I thought my analysis would likely focus on the characters' longings to leave the rural reservation in which they were raised. Though I continue to think the series offers an important perspective on questions of in- and out-migration to and from rural areas (in this case, in the context of Indigenous teens living on reservations)—a perspective that has much to teach scholars, educators, and policymakers—the focus of my study in this chapter continued to be pulled toward the incredibly complex and generative ways *Reservation Dogs* challenges, and ultimately refuses, the nostalgic narratives that have long circulated about Indigenous peoples and cultures—narratives that serve the production and circulation of a national

imaginary that defends, justifies, and shields the horrors of settler colonial practices and logics. In other words, the nostalgic othering of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and land directly contributes to structures of amnesia and delusion, not only about Indigenous peoplehood, but about the history and presence of settler colonial violence. In this way, this chapter not only pulls up and examines the all-tangled-up roots of rural nostalgia and importantly, situates the “Indian Other” as a figure of rural nostalgia, contributing to movements across rural studies to extend and complicate the notion that rurality is always and only associated with white cultures and communities.

As this chapter examines, for many decades, Indigenous representation in mainstream film and television has been subject to rhetorical imperialism, but *Reservation Dogs* emerges out from (and continues the work of) Indigenous activists, storytellers, and cultural workers who have long deployed rhetorical sovereignty toward survival and resistance (or what Powell refers to as “survivance”). As I find throughout this chapter, the series disrupts settlers’ long-held gaze on “Indianness” and asserts rhetorical sovereignty for Native American representation in popular culture through its tactical resistance and refusal of nostalgic narratives and nostalgic othering. In this way, *Reservation Dogs* makes a significant cultural contribution—especially when we recall the stakes of the stories produced, circulated, and consumed.¹²¹ Stories move rhetorically through and contribute to the construction of our daily lives and social practices, political structures and policies, land and bodies. Stories make (and break) our worlds, unite and divide. And importantly, storytelling is pedagogy (Archibald). In the context of Indigenous storytelling, Watts explains that colonization is an attack not only on peoples and land, but on Indigenous Cosmologies (22). Colonization is an attack, then, on knowledges, and the ways knowledges are shared through stories, which is also to say, the way worlds are made (and unmade). This attack is what Lyons refers to as rhetorical

¹²¹ As Thomas King writes, “once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world . . . So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (10).

imperialism, and as this chapter has found, *Reservation Dogs* engages complex and multilayered rhetorical tactics to work, simultaneously, with and against rhetorical imperialism and the deep stories about Indigenous peoples and cultures it has circulated since the very beginning of the colonization process of the North American continent. From humor and joy, to counter-nostalgia and past–present relationality, to haunting and nostalgia-refusing visual rhetorics, this chapter illuminates the ways *Reservation Dogs* serves as a pedagogical model for survivance (Powell) and the reclamation and assertion of rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons).

As discussed in my introductory chapter, scholars both in and beyond rural studies and rural rhetoric, literacy, and composition studies have wrestled and reckoned with the way nostalgic narratives construct perceptions of rural life and culture, and with the implications of this deep-rooted entanglement between nostalgia and the rural imaginary. Current scholarship makes clear that nostalgia is a significant contributing factor to the stark social, political, and economic divides at work across rural, urban, and suburban spaces. However, we are short on paths through and forward—in other words, we are short on propositions for what to do about rural nostalgia and its complex, harmful implications. This chapter not only establishes the connection between the rhetorical construction of the “Indian Other” and rural nostalgia—situating the “Indian Other” as a figure of rural nostalgia—it also contributes to our understandings of how rhetorical uses of nostalgia itself can contribute to the resistance, refusal, and re-vision of nostalgia, especially in contexts (such as this one) in which a total rejection of nostalgia would likely not be effective or even possible.

Through my reparative analysis, I have identified the rhetorical tactics through which *Reservation Dogs* wrestles and reckons with nostalgic narratives and perceptions of “Indianness.” As I’ve found, these tactics are most aligned with what Ladino terms counter-nostalgia, which is closely

related to Muñoz's theorization of disidentification, as a social and political strategy that works on and against cultural logics from *within* those logics, as a "mode of *recycling* or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy" (Muñoz 39). Through this work, *Reservation Dogs*, and my analysis of it as both a popular culture and pedagogical text, complicates binary understandings of rural nostalgia (and nostalgia more broadly) as *either* good or bad, and importantly, contributes to our understanding of how it can be used—through particular rhetorical tactics that must navigate multiple audiences (such as Indigenous and settler audiences)—toward the resistance, refusal, and revision of deep stories. *Reservation Dogs* also models the complex process through which the deployment of one rhetorical tactic, such as humor or haunting, can affirm the lived experiences and narratives of one audience group (such as Indigenous peoples) while another audience group (such as settlers) is challenged in ways both gentle and sharp, explicit and implicit. In addition to analyzing the series' most significant rhetorical labor, I also situate *Reservation Dogs* as an autoethnographic text, and as it follows, a pedagogical model for autoethnographic expression, and a rich artifact for rhetorical scholars interested in the intersections of rhetorical sovereignty and autoethnographic writing and performance. Because of the cultural significance of *Reservation Dogs*, along with its complex and innovative deployment of rhetorical maneuvers, the text opens important terrain for rhetoric and composition studies scholars to investigate, deepening our understanding of contemporary practices of survivance, rhetorical sovereignty, and worldmaking (Muñoz, *Disidentifications* 200), as the series tactfully re-forms some of America's deepest, most damaging stories, and the nostalgia that fuels them.

CHAPTER THREE

**RE-VISIONING FRONTIER MYTHOLOGY: “OLD WEST” NOSTALGIA MEETS
*THE POWER OF THE DOG***

The Power of the Dog (2021), the film adaptation of Thomas Savage’s 1967 novel of the same name, tells the story of two brothers, Phil and George Burbank, who live on, own, and operate a cattle ranch in Montana in the early 1900s. When George marries Rose, a widow from the nearby town of Beech, Phil (single and nearing middle-age) becomes resentful and sets out to emotionally terrorize Rose. Though Phil attempts to use Rose’s teenage son Peter as a pawn toward these ends, his plans (and his power) unravel right out of his unsteady grasp.

Phil, who we may categorize as the film’s antagonist, is made vulnerable, and ultimately ruined, by his internalization of deep stories about the western region of the United States. More specifically, Phil’s character, and the film itself, examines assumptions across gender and sexual normativity in the context of the west in the early twentieth century. As a queer rancher who is, we might say, hellbent on concealing his sexuality, Phil holds fast to a rhetorical construction of masculinity that is routed through frontier mythology.¹²² As frontier mythology is the lens through which Phil defines what it means to be a “real man,” his conception of manhood is what I refer to as frontier masculinity—a conception Phil is not only in tension with but tormented by. To ensure no one, himself included, questions his status as a “real man,” Phil refuses to wear protective gloves as he castrates cattle, fixes fences, or completes any of the other physical and sometimes dangerous

¹²² As discussed in my introduction, though it can be difficult to define what a myth is, scholars have long wrestled with what myths are and how they function. Claude Levi-Strauss, for example, understood myth as a strategy for “reconciling the deeply held conceptual binaries that lie at the root of any culturally legible form of meaning” (Bishop 61). Through this lens, myths are deeply rhetorical, as they shift and shape our collective and individual identities, beliefs, and narratives. I have come to understand myths as, in the words of Joan Didion, stories that we tell ourselves in order to live, or more specifically, in order to stabilize and affirm our ways of living. As it follows, then, I understand mythology as a collective of interrelated myths.

tasks the ranch requires. Phil's refusal to wear protective gloves leads to an open wound, which protagonist Peter, a young queer man, understands as an opening through which to fatally disempower Phil, thereby proving Phil's frontier masculinity, and frontier mythology more broadly, vulnerable to de(con)struction.

In the very opening of the film, Peter, speaking in voice-over, informs audiences that he has recently experienced the death of his father, a doctor who died in 1921. In response to this disclosure, Peter asks, "What kind of man would I be if I did not help my mother? If I did not save her?" (01:00-01:30) These questions introduce the film's central examination of gendered roles and expectations in the context of the early twentieth century "American West." After Peter's voice-over, the film opens to arid mountains rising in the distance against a dusty golden afternoon on the Burbank ranch.¹²³ We are then introduced to Phil and his brother George, who is soaking in a large bathtub in a spacious and bright bathroom. Phil walks loudly through what is referred to as the "Big House" in his boots; he has clearly just come in from working out on the ranch. Without exposition, the film communicates not only the brothers' division of labor, but the assumptions—related to structures such as gender, sexuality, and class—carried inside these divisions by implicitly tapping into deep stories that align manual labor with heterosexual masculinity (Fellows 1998).¹²⁴ While I

¹²³ Compared to movies, novels often offer more to their readers in terms of context or exposition, often through a narrator. In the case of Savage's *The Power of the Dog*, a close-third narrator offers readers deeper context about who the Burbanks are and how their lives on the ranch came to be. Operating in close-third, this narrator is omniscient, but leans closest to the perspective of Phil Burbank, often offering the reader a lens through which to see through Phil's internal thoughts and feelings. The narrator informs readers that the Burbank ranch is much larger than the other ranches that surround it, and that many of the smaller ranches around theirs have failed or are failing, owned by Norwegians, Swedes, and Austrians who were "lured by the promise of land and little rain," but as it turns out, only those ranches with control of nearby creeks and rivers, like the Burbanks', could thrive (Savage 30). The Burbank ranch is in southwestern Montana near the cattle-shipping town of Beech, and it was operated for many years by Phil's (40 years old) and George's (38 years old) parents, who are "moneyed easterners who maintained relatively luxurious lives in their years on the ranch" before they moved, twenty years before, to Salt Lake City to live in a luxury hotel, leaving the ranch to their sons (Proulx 286). This process—either through succession (i.e., a gradual transfer of control from one generation to the next) or inheritance (i.e., the legal transfer of ownership and possession) has long been and continues to be significant to the economic, political, and familial practice of family farming and ranching (Hutson 221). The narrator also informs readers that the "old gent," the brothers' father, was not a "real rancher," but more of just the landowner (73).

¹²⁴ As I will examine later in the chapter, this rhetorical and narrative power of this scene is also fueled by deep stories related to the relationship between hygiene and civilization, and on the other hand, dirt and the wildness of nature, as

explore these deep stories regarding masculinity below, for now it is important to note that it is George who courts and marries Rose while Phil remains single and is even disgusted by the prospect of George's marriage to the widow, or any woman, it seems. Instead, he is enraptured by a man named Bronco Henry, who once lived and worked on the ranch, and apparently taught him everything he knows about ranching and riding and died in some tragic (though unspecified) accident that a younger-Phil bore witness to. Slowly, as Phil continues to talk about his relationship with Bronco Henry throughout the film, we understand their relationship was sexual, and perhaps even romantic. Herein lies, according to Proulx, "The major key to Phil's complex personality...that in wanting to touch and have Bronco Henry, he was forced to recognize and confront the enormous fact of his own homosexuality" (289). However, "Following the code of the west, he remade himself as a manly, homophobic rancher" (Proulx 289) in the hopes that his dogged embrace of frontier masculinity would veil his queer desire. This seems to work for Phil right up until Peter arrives on the ranch, having the summer off from boarding school.

As this chapter will examine, *The Power of the Dog* blends counter- and anti-nostalgic rhetorical tactics to offer audiences a pedagogical re-visioning of nostalgic frontier mythology and its stronghold on rhetorics of gender and sexuality. By re-visioning, I mean once more to evoke Rich's proposition of re-vision as a critical feminist rhetorical and compositional method, summarized by "the act of looking back...of entering an old text from a new critical direction...not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (18-19). Through its re-visionary rhetorical tactics, the film opens paths for the development of a more reflective, rather than restorative, nostalgia in relation to rurality in general and "the frontier" in particular. Restorative nostalgia, Boym asserts, protects

audiences subconsciously understand and align George with the domestic and the civilized and Phil with the rough, unruly, wild frontier. However, as the narrative unfolds, audiences understand the dualities through which the brothers *seem* divided are far more complex, and even blurred. For example, Phil, we learn, was formally educated at Yale, and is, by many accounts, intellectually brilliant. George, on the other hand, could not make it through college. This, as I will examine, reveals contradictions in assumptions related to education, intelligence, and occupation.

dominant narratives positioned as truth and tradition, while reflective nostalgia casts these narratives into the light of doubt (xviii). In this way, reflective nostalgia is not only a creative endeavor but, like Rich's framing of re-vision, a "strategy of survival" (Boym xvii)—a method of fracturing and re-composing collective memories of the past in a way that makes alternative present and future relationalities possible.

In this chapter, I rhetorically analyze *The Power of the Dog* with the purpose of uncovering how the film serves as a model for this reflective, re-visionary labor, especially in reference to frontier mythologies and their entanglements with nostalgic (but still dominant) narratives of gender and sexuality.¹²⁵ In the next section, I position the cinematic version of *The Power of the Dog* in the context of Savage's novel. From there, I examine the rhetorical construction of the frontier and its deep entanglements with conceptions of nationhood and manhood, contrasting this rhetorical construction with the historical and contemporary realities of the western region of the United States. I then take up a scan of the Western genre and the ways it been adapted, positioning the genre as a significant contributor to the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia for over a century. From there, I situate the film as a pedagogical model of re-vision, breaking down the rhetorical and narrative methods through which the film teaches us how we may illuminate and even fracture the mythologies carried in our deepest stories, making it possible to understand and begin reckoning with their implications.

¹²⁵ The film's writer and director Jane Campion divides the film, like Savage did his novel, into six chapters. The film, which runs for just over two hours, was produced by Sea-Saw Films and Bad Girl Creek, and distributed by Netflix, and was nominated for and won many awards, including an Academy Award for Best Directing and the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture. Kodi Smit-McPhee, the actor who plays protagonist Peter, won a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actor. *The Power of the Dog* was filmed in the Central Otago region of New Zealand but is set, like Savage's novel, in Montana in 1925. In this way, the film is layered with multiple settler colonial contexts.

The Power of the Dog, from Savage to Campion

Though this chapter will focus on writer and director Jane Campion's 2021 film adaptation of Thomas Savage's 1967 novel (published by Little, Brown and Company), I will occasionally be placing the film in relation to the novel, especially when it is useful for understanding Campion's rhetorical moves as an adapter. My understanding of adaptation is largely drawn from Linda Hutcheon's work in adaptation theory. Hutcheon situates adaptation as a rhetorical process present across rhetorical traditions (20), and importantly, that an adaptation may come second (or third or fourth), but it is not secondary in cultural significance (9). In support of Hutcheon's argument, Julie Sanders adds that as both critics and consumers of culture, we should recognize (and celebrate) adaptation and appropriation as a form of cultural production, rather than dismissing it as mere copying of the original text (53). Across this chapter, I theorize adaptation as a rhetorical practice that opens possibilities for the reflection and re-vision of collective mythologies. Through this lens, adaptation is a critical tool in movements to destabilize the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, and for this reason, it is important that we—scholars, instructors, and cultural workers concerned with the circulation of rhetoric, language, and stories—take up adaptations as pedagogical, learning from the alternative narratives that adaptations offer, and the rhetorical moves through which they offer them.

Savage's *The Power of the Dog* had been optioned for film five times before it made it all the way to the screen through writer and director Jane Campion's 2021 adaptation. As "Brokeback Mountain" writer Annie Proulx describes, Savage's novel is, "A psychological study freighted with drama and tension, unusual in dealing with a topic rarely discussed in that period—repressed homosexuality displaced as homophobia in the masculine ranch world" (277). However, as Proulx accounts, most reviewers "dodged the homosexuality aspect of the text" (178). In fact, there was only one anonymous reviewer, in *Publisher's Weekly*, who explicitly identified Phil Burbank as a

“repressed homosexual” (Proulx 278). The novel—likely due to the social and temporal context of its publication—is far more subtle and nuanced in its treatment of Phil’s queerness than *Campion’s* film, and it is even possible for the reader to nearly have finished the novel before coming face-to-face with it.

Many, including Jane *Campion*, read *Savage’s* novel as largely autobiographical, especially given his identity as a gay man who came up in a time and place where homosexuality was often hidden—due to the danger (and criminalization) of being out.¹²⁶ And as Proulx assures, at the time of his early-twentieth century upbringing, the county where *Savage* lived in Montana, called Beaverhead, was “rough and masculine in ethos, only one or two generations removed from pioneer days. It was a man’s world of cattle, sheep, horses, dogs, guns, fences, and property” (280).¹²⁷ Like the Burbank’s’ home in *The Power of the Dog*, the ranch and home where *Savage* lived with his family had electricity at a time when its existence in the region was rare. As is depicted in the novel and film, though there were a growing number of automobiles in the region, transportation by rail and horse were still most prominent, and because of this, normatively masculine bodies were valued for their ability to work with horses and livestock (Proulx 280). As I will examine in the following

¹²⁶ *Campion* says she was not looking for a film project when she first read the book, but she kept coming back to the story and felt that it was haunting her: “Whoever wrote it, I thought, they lived this experience,” she says. She goes on to say that she learned that *Savage* did live this story in a way—he lived on a ranch in Montana and, like Peter, he had a “demonic step-uncle.” *Campion* also mentions that *Savage* was gay, “but at that time, people often still got married and had kids, which he did” (“Behind the Scenes with Jane *Campion*”). Confirming this through his study of *Savage* and his family’s interviews and papers, in “Thomas *Savage’s* Queer Country,” *Weltzien* writes, “Although he was married with children, *Savage* had a conflicted sexual life. According to their daughter, when *Savage* proposed to [his wife] Elizabeth, he told her he was gay, but she thought she could ‘cure’ him.” However, *Savage* had romantic relationships with men throughout his life, and temporarily left his family to pursue his relationship to children’s book author and illustrator Tomie dePaola. As *Weltzien* writes, “*Savage* began a novel based on his liaison with dePaola, but after his agent, *Blanche Gregory*, read it and informed him he’d never get it published, *Savage* threw the manuscript into the Atlantic.”

¹²⁷ *Savage* was born in Salt Lake City but raised on a ranch in Montana, where he moved after his mother, the daughter of a wealthy sheep-rancher, divorced his father and remarried a wealthy Montana rancher (279). For the first twenty-one years of his life, *Savage* was surrounded by western ranching culture, then after leaving the family ranch and graduating from Colby College, *Savage* worked as an insurance adjuster, wrangler, ranch hand, plumber’s assistant, welder, railroad brakeman, and teacher of English at colleges and universities such as Suffolk, Brandeis, and Vassar (Proulx 281-282). *Savage’s* family life, like the social, political, and economic family relations portrayed in *The Power of the Dog*, bring to mind *Cram’s* argument that, “The form of the heteronormative white settler family unit is a consequence of and a violent legacy enmeshed in making a national landscape” (xiv).

section, because of the significant shifts impacting the western region throughout the twentieth century, questions and anxieties related to “manhood” bubbled to the surface of daily life in and beyond the region. It is no surprise, then, that these are the questions and anxieties that animate Savage’s (and later Campion’s) *The Power of the Dog*.

While Campion has explained that she was drawn to the complexity of Savage’s characters, this complexity relies on their positioning in the broader context of the Western genre of film, television, and literature.¹²⁸ As I examine across the next two sections, since the late-nineteenth century, the Western genre has persistently produced and circulated nostalgic narratives about nature and nation that impact our social, political, and economic lives in the United States and across the globe—not to mention, the wellbeing of our environment and all of its inhabitants. As I will explore below, the Western genre is largely responsible for continually reproducing and restoring the rhetorical construction of the frontier as a nostalgic other, trapping the western region of the United States in a mythologized version of the past, and in so doing, inviting us to “remember to forget” (Stuckey 230) its history. This invitation veils the ways the region’s past bleeds into its present, and further, veils the region’s interconnectivity to other similarly occupied, exploited, and extracted-from regions across the globe. For these reasons, it is vital to study and learn from texts, such as *The Power of the Dog*, that work to lift this veil.

How the Frontier was Rhetorically Constructed

In order to better understand the ways the construction of the frontier contributes to contemporary life in and beyond the western region of the United States, my research for this chapter included the

¹²⁸ Campion describes her draw to Phil’s character in terms of both his queerness and the nostalgia it necessitated. “Everything he’s done is in the past,” Campion says, “He can only love safely in the past. To love presently as a closet homosexual as he was, or as a homophobe, is kind of impossible, so I found him moving and I found the relationship—the mysterious relationship between him and the boy exciting and satisfying” (“Behind the Scenes with Jane Campion”).

collection of articles published in local and state news outlets across Wyoming, where I was living at the time (these included publications such as the *Laramie Boomerang* and *WyoFile*). I was especially drawn to articles about soaring ranch prices across Wyoming and the region, largely due to an increase in people moving to the state throughout the pandemic, inspired by, as a Wyoming rancher and real estate agent puts it, “the story of it” (Taylor). Nearly every day, I came across articles that capture the tension of a region in transition, with land that is finite and its uses contested, often divided across stakeholders—there are those most interested in conservation, in tourism, in profit, in the protection of public land, and in the safeguarding of private land (Bleizeffer 2023). There are billionaires with big plans and even bigger rhetoric—luxury resorts pitched as conservation efforts in areas with little traffic, tourism, and private development, soon to be subjected to wealthy visitors from the coasts, searching, too, for the story of it (Koshmrl 2023). As Ladino describes, “being one with nature” has largely become a spectacle (191). As Ladino argues through her analysis of the long-running reality show *Survivor*, the ways frontier narratives “play out in so many spaces and via so many mediums means that the process of evaluating their ideological stakes is more difficult, and more important, than ever” (Ladino 193).¹²⁹ Especially because, as Town assures, “the small pockets of remaining wilderness” have “become the repository for an ever-increasing nostalgia for complete escape and unrealized dreams” (195). The catch is that, as I will explore throughout this chapter, “complete escape” is a rather fraught (i.e., violent) national fantasy embedded and continually reproduced within the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. Relatedly, frontier dreams cannot be realized, as they are constructed by falsities, falsities that cannot be chased—whether that be through

¹²⁹ Similarly invested in the implications of popular culture, Ladino points to the long-running success of the *Survivor* reality series as proof of the “durability and flexibility” of the frontier myth, with its “contemporary renditions of cultural imperialism via an explicitly racialized tourism,” a tourism that harkens back to “white patrons visiting Native American schools, white tourists slumming in Harlem’s cabinets, and the counterculture’s romantic appropriations of American Indians” (*Reclaiming Nostalgia* 192).

tourism, private development, or—as we learn through the *Power of the Dog* character of Phil Burbank—an embrace of frontier masculinity—without consequence.

The region known as the American West is a mythic space, home to the vast and varied land known as the frontier. Like the figures of rural nostalgia examined across my dissertation, the frontier is rhetorically constructed in ways that connect to and serve deep national stories about who Americans are and where “we” come from. For example, as Ladino argues, the once-upon-a-time existence of the frontier—and most importantly, the settling and conquering of it—is often understood as “proof” of so-called American exceptionalism (10). Wyn Wachhorst writes that the conquering of the frontier marks America’s creation myth—i.e., “the national nostalgia” (12). And because the Census Bureau labeled the frontier “closed” in 1890, dominant (i.e., settler) narratives related to the western region are often fueled by what Rosaldo refers to as “imperialist nostalgia,” or longings for what settler colonial practices and logics (such as Manifest Destiny) have destroyed (or severely threatened to destroy). In this way, the rhetorical construction of the frontier can be characterized by the dualistic logic that I’ve found to accompany the process of nostalgic othering, as it has long been imagined as a natural wonder and national treasure, as well as a wilderness to conquer. And like each of the nostalgic others examined across my dissertation, the frontier has long been romanticized, essentialized, fetishized, commodified, appropriated, and extracted from. As a rhetorical construction, the frontier devises an “imagined relation to the past that *also* invites particular action in the present” (Cram 15). In other words, the continued circulation and restoration of nostalgic narratives about the frontier hold material implications for the past, present, and future.

A wide range of scholars, spanning across several disciplines, have investigated the origins and circulation of frontier rhetorics and narratives, studying and theorizing their consequences in the United States and across the globe. More specifically, rhetoric scholars have revealed the myriad of ways frontier mythology undergirds and strengthens settler colonial perspectives and ideologies

(Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki 2005; Jones 2011; Stuckey 2011; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011). In a study of the ways collective memories of the frontier have been commodified, rhetoric scholar Mitch Combs finds that the “Old West” signifies not only the “last wilderness,” but the “last locus of freedom from social responsibility,” as the region is characterized by collective memories of the frontier as an “untamed expanse where a man controlled his own destiny” (719). In this way, the frontier is constructed by narratives of individuality and escape, purity and authenticity, freedom and control, and importantly, normative masculinity. However, rhetoricians have proven that these are “ideological myths” (Combs 719). As the subjects of commodification, then, ideological myths of the frontier become social products, often packaged and sold with a primarily white audience in mind (Combs 724). This process aligns with Lyons’ notion of rhetorical imperialism, explored in the previous chapter, as frontier mythology rhetorically reproduces the narrative erasure and othering of Black, Indigenous, Mexican, Asian, and other marginalized communities and cultures that have long been present in, and contributed to, the western region (Callier 2012; Combs 2021; Deloria 1998; Ladino 2012; Stuckey 2011). Working alongside the rhetorical construction of the “Indian Other,” dominant frontier mythologies attempt to stabilize white settler American identities and origin stories (Combs 724), especially throughout periods of transition and insecurity, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and conflicts with the Middle East (Carpenter 1977; Goulding 2000; Jones 2011; Ladino 2012; Stuckey 2011).

Through rhetorical imperialism, settler narratives of the frontier are deemed “authentic,” and therefore, more widely commodified, circulated, and consumed.¹³⁰ For example, Ladino traces the

¹³⁰ The reification of frontier mythology circulates through what Combs refers to as “frontier authenticity,” which Combs defines as “a rhetoric that embodies various elements of the frontier myth as a way of authorizing collective memories of the Old West as ‘authentic’” (716). Through rhetorics of frontier authenticity, collective mythology related to the frontier are interpreted as history, and as a stabilizing rhetorical force, “frontier authenticity rhetoric works to perpetuate settler colonialism to provide a consumable collective memory of the frontier that caters to white affluent tastes and perpetuates Whiteness” (Combs, 717-8). As Bucholtz argues, longing and searching for authenticity is often tied up in a “desire for origins” (399), and frontier authenticity in particular is also connected with the search and longing

ways “Old West” ideals related to exceptionalism, freedom, escape, and the opportunity to achieve independence through hard work were maintained even as the region became the setting for internment camps throughout the 1940s (87). As this example shows, frontier mythology “invites us to remember to forget” (Stuckey 230) by composing dominant collective memories of westward expansion that operate on a positive feedback loop—a loop which must be broken for alternative histories and narratives to disrupt their reproduction, circulation, and consumption (Outka 2008; Callier 2012).¹³¹

Though it seems nearly impossible, or at least ironic, to attempt to mark the origins of an origin story, many scholars, including Ladino and Combs, trace the rhetorical construction of the frontier—and as it follows, the process of “remembering to forget”—to Frederick Jackson Turner and his widely circulated essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” published in 1893. Writing just three years after the Census’ “closing” of the frontier, Turner mourns its loss and harnesses a nostalgia for nature deeply entangled with a nationalist narrative rooted in “vanishing Indian” ideologies (Cram 55).¹³² Using rhetorical tactics, Turner filtered settler violence and genocide

for an ideal, essentialized “American” identity (Combs 714). Further, as frontier narratives continue to circulate, the rhetorical power of frontier authenticity is continually strengthened, and the myth continues to stabilize “national identity crises and to confirm values and experiences of white, European settlers” (Combs 720).

¹³¹ Relatedly, as Paul Outka argues, the link between the landscapes of the American West and white national identity provided space through which “the racial trauma that had organized the national geography for much of the nineteenth century could be left behind” (154). And as Durell M. Callier, a queer Black scholar, examines in his autoethnographic essay, “But Where Were They? Race, Era(c)Sure, and the Imaginary American West,” the rhetorical process of “remembering to forget” results in a “systematically conscious project of era(c)sure,” which both necessitates and perpetuates “a cultural amnesia, disappearing the lives, stories, and histories of not only native and indigenous people but that of all other racial and ethnically marginalized peoples” (502). Beyond erasing legacies of settler violence, this cultural amnesia also threatens solidarities across racialized communities. Writing specifically about the connections across Indigenous and Black experiences of settler colonialism, Callier writes, “We toiled land together as slaves, shared wounded knees, were both forcefully displaced and systematically removed from our homelands” (503). And further, in Callier’s words, “We know what state sanctioned disenfranchisement, and government swindling feel like, as well as the specter of death which ravages our communities with health disparities, lack of educational attainment, high incarceration rates, lower life expectancies, etc.” (Callier 503). And yet, settler colonial logics and their bedfellow, cultural amnesia, attempt to sever these solidarities and connections.

¹³² Aligning with Deloria’s analysis of the process of Indigenous othering, in *Violent Inheritance*, communication scholar E. Cram argues that Turner “shaped a narrative of U.S. history and national identity as premised on the displacement of indigeneity—a land grab that would make settlers and their political systems ‘indigenous’ to the transformation of the greater West” (55).

through the language of Manifest Destiny and “uplift.” From this framing, Turner’s essay rhetorically situated (collective memories of) the frontier as an “opportunity for constant rebirth and renewal” as white Americans continued their imperialist expansion (Ladino 187).¹³³ It likely goes without saying that Turner’s message was meant for elite white men, or in Ladino’s words, “the people who profit most from the exploitation of nature” (29).

If the central setting of Turner’s essay is the frontier, the central character is another rhetorical construction: the frontiersman. According to Cram, Turner adopted his characterization of “the frontiersman” from Roosevelt’s *Winning of the West*, first published in 1889 (Cram 55-56). Drawn from “Roosevelt’s seemingly homoerotic attachment to the mobile settler’s embodiment of masculinity,” the frontiersman is a white masculine able-bodied subject whose vitality, modernity, and masculinity is constructed “through violence or by taming the so-called wild environment” (Cram 55-56). The frontiersman craves the freedom promised (or so the story goes) by the wilderness, and the sense of power offered by (his delusion of) controlling it. He gets off, in short, on gunshots and conquest. Further, Turner generated “nostalgia for an explicitly rural West,” and as Cram argues, his claims to “the rural roots of U.S. culture” continues to reproduce national identity myths (Cram 55-56). Importantly, as I have argued throughout this study, this nostalgic rooting of national identity in the rural imaginary fuels the stark and damaging political and social divides across the rural, urban, and suburban communities that are far more interdependent than our cultural narratives claim.

The cowboy—another essential figure of the frontier myth and frontier masculinity—is entwined with conceptions of masculinity proposed by figures such as Roosevelt and Turner. As an extension of the frontiersman, the heroic cowboy embodies the spirit of frontier mythology,

¹³³ Here, I think of Julie Sze’s argument that settler colonialism denotes “the ownership of the earth forever and ever,” resulting in a “death cult of whiteness, carbon addiction, and capitalism” (quoted in Cram 175).

especially its love affair with isolation, independence, and toughness. As historian David Davis writes, the cowboy represents “the last image of a carefree life” (quoted in Wachhorst 12). The nationalist image and mythology of the cowboy has been perpetually reproduced in popular culture, compressing and encapsulating frontier mythology, despite the fact that cowboys and large cattle drives make up a “minor chapter in western history,” and a quite backbreaking, unromantic one at that (Wachhorst 12).¹³⁴ Despite his own alignment with the figure of the cowboy, in Savage’s original *The Power of the Dog*, Phil Burbank repeatedly bemoans how the young men he employed on his ranch viewed being a “cowboy” as more of a performance than labor, spending all of their money on silver spurs and headstalls, silk bandanas, and creased hats to emulate the cowboy characters they watched in moving pictures and heard about in cowboy songs (5-7, 15-16, 181). In this way, the novel itself takes up the implications of popular culture representations on our social practices and beliefs, as Phil wishes his ranch hands were far better at their jobs and far worse at playing and looking the part of cowboys. Similarly, rhetoric scholars Katie L. Gibson and Amy L. Heyse argue mythic depictions of the cowboy, such as those represented by the “Marlboro Man,” have significantly influenced contemporary hegemonic masculinity (101). And education scholar Durrell M. Callier writes about the impossibility he experienced growing up, as a young Black gay man, to imagine the existence of Black cowboys and cowgirls, despite their very real existence, and argued that this is due to their relative absence from film and television (504).¹³⁵

¹³⁴ This “minor chapter” is characterized by Texans’ return home after the Civil War, where they were met with six million head of roaming longhorn, a portion of which they drove to cattle markets in the north, starting in 1866, which launched a twenty-year boom before the industry’s eventual collapse (Wachhorst 12). These “real cowboys,” who were hired for the drives from Texas to the railroads in Kansas, “were illiterate, uncouth, unwashed, unglamorous, and often so bored that they memorized the labels on tin cans and played games to see how well they could recite them” (Wachhorst 21). These are the “drab historical figures” from which the mythical figure of the cowboy was crafted (Wachhorst 21).

¹³⁵ At the time of Callier’s writing in 2012, he noted, “To date the only African American Western major picture, *Posse* (1993), was a film directed by and Starring Mario Van Peebles. *Posse* was meant to serve as a corrective to the omission of African Americans’ contributions to Western expansion” (505). More recently, *The Harder They Fall* (2021) fictionalizes the lives of Black cowboys, such as Nat Love and Rufus Buck, with an all-Black cast.

All of this cultural rhetoric accumulates into what Cram calls a “bad romance” with “the regional myth” (9). Cram posits the American West (or what I more often refer to as the western region) as “central to the development of North American energy extraction, racial capitalism, and imaginations of vitality,” and aptly frames the region itself as a regime, from which “a symbolic resource of nature-based nationalism” is extracted and “relationships between land, body, and nation” are structured (4). While scholars across disciplines such as American Studies and New Western Studies have long examined the mythological construction of the American West, there remains a gap in our understanding of the way nostalgia is entwined with nature-based nationalism, and as such, is used as a rhetorical force to not only reproduce what Cram calls “memory cultures of violence,” but to, alternatively, open paths toward re-vision. As I have investigated across this study, nostalgia—a powerful rhetorical and affective force—can also be deployed toward both the stabilization and destabilization of dominant, violent narratives. Herein lies, then, the significance of nostalgia, and further, the importance of using the tools of rhetorical study to better understand not only how it works, but how it can be harnessed toward reflective and re-visionary ends.

While Turner’s essay and much of the frontier rhetoric reproduced from it has attempted to veil the way settler colonial violence shaped and continues to shape the western region and the lives of its inhabitants, legacies and remnants of settler colonial violence have also been rhetorically rendered in ways that carnivalize and commemorate violent memories and mythologies of frontier history. While this strand of frontier nostalgia—first popularized by Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show (Cram 56; Dickinson, et al. “Memory and Myth” 85), Owen Wister’s novel *The Virginian*, and the massive popularity of Western dime novels—presents a particular version of settler colonial violence, it does so in ways that restore dominant frontier mythologies and foreclose reflection and

re-vision.¹³⁶ In this restorative strand of frontier nostalgia, violence is not masked but is rhetorically proposed as essential to national progress and the conquering of the expansive, unruly Western wilderness. As examined in my second chapter, Indigenous communities were imagined as part of this unruly wilderness, and therefore, in need of various (and violent) forms of exploitation and civilization.

Scholars point to Theodore Roosevelt as one of the most influential voices of this overtly violent version of the frontier narrative. Because Roosevelt viewed nature as a resource for imperialism, and imperialism itself as patriotic, violence toward imperialistic ends was justified, as were masculinist, white supremacist notions of who has access to this resource (Ladino 30-1, Slotkin 634). Aligning with rhetorics examined in my previous chapter, and aligning with Phil Burbank's internalized beliefs in *The Power of the Dog*, Roosevelt proposed visiting the wilderness as a way of adopting a "temporary savageness." In Roosevelt's view, this "temporary savageness" would act as a salve to the decrease in "male virility," which he blamed on industrialization and the rise of middle-class culture (Bederman 13, Cram 41, Town 194), and as an antidote to "race suicide," or "the fear that white race was dying out due to excessive civilization, unfit to compete with more 'primitive' races (i.e. communities living "closer" to nature)" (Ladino 32).¹³⁷ As Roosevelt's rhetoric makes clear, and as Phil's character demonstrates through his disdain for various emblems of modernity,

¹³⁶ Analyzing Buffalo Bill Cody's "Wild West Show" and its run at the Chicago World Fair, Cram writes that Cody billed the show as "realism" akin to a "Wild West Reality," which "afforded the coexistence of fiction and reality, where a historical space was translated into myth (Cram 56). Further, the legacy of Buffalo Bill Cody's show lives on, as Dickinson, et al. show how American frontier myths emanating from props, posters, and films displayed today at the Buffalo Bill Museum perpetuate "images of masculinity and Whiteness" that "carnivalize the violent conflicts between Anglo Americans and Native Americans" ("Memory and Myth" 85).

¹³⁷ Doctors such as Silas Weir Mitchell, in texts such as *Nurse and Patient, and Camp Cure* (1877), prescribed extreme shifts in lifestyle, arguing that visiting the wilderness for brief periods was to "use the remedy in a weak form" (Cram 41). Instead, Mitchell argued for more permanent "returns" to "barbarism," competing against and convening with the rugged, mountainous American West. In other words, Mitchell viewed the landscape, climate, and ecology of the region as a resource wealthy white men could extract.

the construction of the frontier relies on the oppositional construction of civilization—much in the same way the construction of the small town relies on the construction of the city.

Thomas Jefferson is another essential figure in the construction of frontier masculinity from which *The Power of the Dog* draws, particularly through his generation and circulation of nostalgic narratives related to nature, the pastoral, and agrarianism. In “Beyond Agrarianism: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Place,” Charlotte Hogg draws from anthropologist Deborah Fink to define agrarianism as “the belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over other industry,” which, masculinist in nature, erases the presence of women’s lives and labor in farming and ranching settings (Fink 11, quoted in Hogg 122).¹³⁸ Further, as Ladino explains, drawing from Marx’s examination of the oxymoronic nature of pastoralism, while Jeffersonian ideologies and policies “bolstered U.S. expansionism and the destruction of the ecosystems to make way for agrarian practices” they also adhered “to the pastoral belief in ‘the allegedly superior moral integrity of people who live closer to the soil’” (110). As Eileen E. Schell examines in Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” for example, Jefferson (a slaveholder who claimed to abhor slavery) situates “those who labour in the earth” as not only “the chosen people of God” (290), but as the embodiment of American character (Schell 78).¹³⁹ Similarly to Roosevelt and Turner and their perspective on the frontier, Jefferson argued “the agrarian ideal should serve as the backbone of American society” (Schell 78), and as example of the ways deep stories become material reality, Jefferson negotiated the

¹³⁸ As a result, according to Fink, “Researchers who have examined rural development in diverse settings have asserted that women have shouldered extra burdens” in the face of rural development, without experiencing the benefits of such development (4).

¹³⁹ Just as the closing of the frontier opened the floodgates of nostalgic frontier rhetoric, the residue of Jefferson’s agrarianism retains its rhetorical power even as the realities of farming and ranching in the United States have significantly shifted since the twentieth century, causing small family farms to experience a steep decline (Schell 77-78). In this way, nostalgic farming and ranching rhetorics, influenced by Jefferson’s agrarianism, fuels the memorialization, romanticization, and commodification of family farming while agricultural policies remain unchanged, never shifting “toward giving family farms a fighting chance in the global economy” (Schell 79)

Louisiana Purchase in 1804, which doubled the size of the country, including much of what would become the American West.

In *Violent Inheritance*, Cram reviews scholarship across the medical humanities, sexuality studies, and disability studies to connect the rhetorical construction of the frontier to neurasthenia, which is, broadly, the belief and fear that white men would lose their masculinity and virility if they continued to lose contact with the wilderness and the physical exertion required to conquer it. Conceptions of neurasthenia are deeply rooted in twentieth-century popular culture, to the extent that evidence of a belief in neurasthenia lives on in medical research and practice (Cram 34). Interestingly, the anxiety and fear of neurasthenia travels across regional landscapes and mythologies, and rhetorical studies scholars focused on Appalachia have found evidence of its political and social implications on the region (Hartman 2014).¹⁴⁰ As arguments proposed by the likes of Roosevelt and Turner show, the rhetorical construction of the frontier is deeply rooted in conceptions of the western region of the United States as an individual and collective “cure” for the ailments of modernity. These ailments, as Cram explores, and as the diagnosis of neurasthenia makes clear, were entangled with anxieties related to masculinity, sexual reproduction, and heteroproductivity (35-36).

Though I analyze the film’s treatment of masculinity more deeply below, the following scene surrounding a dinner party at the ranch demonstrates how the film holds up, and even pulls at the threads of, these anxious entanglements across conceptions of civilization, education, masculinity,

¹⁴⁰ Hartman, for example, studies the binding together of white masculinity and “the unforgiving landscape” of states such as West Virginia and Kentucky, noting the ways Kennedy’s campaign speeches and the writings of Harry Caudill positioned Kentucky frontiersmen at the center of United States history. Hartman shows that Caudill’s writing effectively linked manliness to muscular work and a physically strenuous life, which connected back to Madison Grant’s earlier arguments related to the ways avoiding manual labor would lead to the white man’s extinction through the contraction of “a disease known as neurasthenia, rendering them permanently lame and inadequate” (673). Hartman’s analysis of Caudill’s and others’ texts reveals the ways conquering—land, bodies—is bound up in conceptions of white masculinity.

and hygiene. Scholars, and rural studies scholars in particular, have long studied the relationship across conceptions of “good hygiene” and constructions of civilization as well as race and class, gender and sexuality (Greer 2015; Hartman 2014; Kristeva 1982). Importantly, as also explored in chapters two and four, rhetorics of civilization rely on and are constructed alongside rhetorics of savagery. And through these oppositional framings, notions of “good hygiene” rely on and construct notions of dirtiness and filth (Ladino 2012, Deloria 1998).¹⁴¹ Related to the “temporary savagery” embraced by frontier masculinity, “real men” are permitted and even expected to reject practices of “good hygiene” as they labor outside with the animals and the earth.¹⁴² In the context of frontier masculinity, cleanliness is associated with a disconnection from nature and manual labor, and is therefore read as a sign of disconnection from real manhood (i.e. making one vulnerable to neurasthenia). However, even a temporary visit to the wilderness, and the dirt that comes from it, was understood as a “cure” (Cram 2022). And though *The Power of the Dog* does not directly use terms such as neurasthenia and “race suicide,” it is notable that in one of the very first scenes of the film, George soaks in a large bathtub before dinner while his brother Phil stomps through the house in his boots, ranch attire, and filth. Due to the circulation of deep stories that entangle Phil’s filth with the manual labor essential to frontier masculinity—and George’s hygiene practices with the leisure, feminized masculinity, and neurasthenia of men who are likely of higher classes but disconnected from nature—audiences immediately and perhaps even unconsciously understand and situate Phil as a “real man,” especially in the context of Montana in the twentieth century, and George as more civilized and therefore less of a “real man.” These differences come to a head when George plans a

¹⁴¹ As Ladino explores in *Reclaiming Nostalgia*, “Rhetorics of civilization often require a ‘savage’ counterpoint (111), which constructed the civilization–savage binary, of which Native American people were constructed as savages with “primitive” practices and “wild roots.”

¹⁴² Importantly though, the acceptance of this rejection of cleanliness depends on racialized, classed, gendered, and ableist identity markers—women, queer people, people of color, people who are disabled, and people who are not middle class or higher, and other marginalized groups are likely to experience discrimination if they do not adhere to conceptions of “good hygiene.”

dinner party with his parents, who will take the train from Salt Lake where they have retired from ranch life, and the governor of Montana and his wife.

Days before the dinner, George—dressed in his usual business attire—walks out to the barn to tell Phil about the upcoming dinner and mentions, sheepishly, that “his nib’s wife” would probably like Phil to wash up (49:42-52:20). Phil only grunts but is clearly bothered. For the dinner party, George dresses in a tux and Rose dresses in a satin gown and gloves. George serves his guests orange blossom cocktails with flowers placed in ornate glasses. The governor looks around, pleased, and remarks, “It’s an island of civilization here.”¹⁴³ While they stand around sipping their drinks, the governor notes that he has heard that Phil was a Phi Beta Kappa at Yale.¹⁴⁴ “In classics,” George adds with strange pride. The governor grins, “So he swears at the cattle in Greek or Latin?” (53:44-54:30) When George’s parents arrive at the dinner party, George’s mother, originally from the East Coast, remarks that she is an encyclopedia because all she does is read (54:30-55:00). Here, literacy and education emerge as important hallmarks of civilization (along with race and class). When Phil finally joins the dinner party (after dinner), he is unbathed and whistling a tune that is meant to mock Rose’s inability to play the piano for the company, as she is stifled by her fear and nerves (57:34-1:00:10). Phil explains that he could not come because he did not wash up. The governor is quick and charismatic in his response, says Phil’s filth is “good honest dirt” as he is a “ranch man.” As his response shows, the governor romanticizes and perhaps even admires Phil’s “good honest dirt” in the context of his prestigious education and intelligence (59:00-1:00:04). In other words, Phil’s filth is accepted because of his educational background and class identity in conjunction with

¹⁴³ Interestingly in the novel, the governor also remarks that orange blossoms are a “ladies’ drink” (Savage 149).

¹⁴⁴ In her adaptation from novel to film, Campion made slight, but not insignificant, shifts in George’s and Phil’s educational backgrounds. In the novel, Phil attends and graduates from an unspecified “university in California,” and George flunked out of this same university (Savage 6). In the film, Phil also alludes to George’s flunking out of college, but it is Yale (a more recognizably prestigious and, importantly, East Coast university) that Phil has graduated from.

deep stories regarding frontiersman and cowboys, manual labor and heteroproductivity.¹⁴⁵ For audiences, it is not only Phil's queerness, but also his educational background, that troubles the borders of frontier masculinity. Interestingly, the only scene in which the audience sees Phil cleaned and groomed is when, after he has died at the hands of Peter, two men clean, groom, and dress his body, carefully shaving his face and straightening his suit for his funeral in the closest city of Herndon (1:56:00-1:57:05). In this way, death is the final erasure of the facade of frontier masculinity and its reliance on "good honest dirt."

Beyond the dinner party scene, Peter's and Phil's characters offer a reflection on the narratives and anxieties across civilization, education, cleanliness, and masculinity: Phil is drawn to Peter's intellect, it seems, as much as he is his queerness. Though Phil decided to leave the academy behind for his work on the ranch, Peter attends a boarding school and is aspiring to become a medical doctor like his deceased father.¹⁴⁶ Phil is bothered by and critical of the way Peter dresses—in crisp white linen shirts and clean white canvas tennis shoes—and encourages him to wear boots that will better align him with the dirty work of ranch life. Further, rather than by gun fight, which would follow the traditional Western formula examined below, Phil is killed by Peter's intellectual cunning, education, and skill—and his willingness to pursue intellectual endeavors against the dominant frontier masculinity of his temporal and geographic context, as he learned how to poison Phil from his father's medical books (1:27:45-1:27:55). As the film reveals, entangled and complex rhetorics of civilization, cleanliness, and masculinity are also threaded with dualistic narratives related

¹⁴⁵ Early in the novel, we learn that Phil's intellectual prowess and abilities, in contradiction with his appearance and occupation, often forced people to reexamine their conception of the constructed binaries between the civilized aristocrat and the dirty work of ranching. And because their parents are from the East Coast, Phil's "Eastern breeding" stands in contradiction to his rootedness to the Western culture and landscape (Savage 9).

¹⁴⁶ The film features Peter carefully dissecting a rabbit upstairs in the room he stays in, mapping the rabbit's internal organs. When Rose tells him not to do such things in the house, he says, "If you want to be a surgeon, you've got to practice," perhaps foreshadowing his careful plot to murder Phil, which involved carefully cutting the hide off a diseased cow (1:06:46-1:08:13).

to intellectual and manual labor, which are deeply rooted in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and its circulation of national narratives and frontier mythologies regarding education and ability, gender and sexuality, and race and class (*Reflections West*).¹⁴⁷ And as I explore in the next section, though the rhetorical construction of the frontier and the mythology it circulates remains rhetorically powerful and socially and politically consequential, the region known as the American West continues to shift further and further from the nostalgic narratives it is encased in. In other words, the new west is not the “Old West,” and as *The Power of the Dog* engages visual rhetoric to suggest, the “Old West” never *really* was.

The New “Old West”

As no region exists in isolation, the shifts happening across the western region are deeply entangled with social, economic, and political shifts happening across the United States and transnationally. That said, the particular ways the western region is shifting are also grounded in its specific histories of natural resource availability and extraction (timber, minerals, agriculture, and ranching), and how extractive industries have created cycles of boom and bust (Nelson 2001). In this section, I examine the relationship between nostalgic narratives of the “Old West” and the contemporary realities animating the region today. Alongside this examination, I analyze the visual rhetorical tactics through which *The Power of The Dog* pokes holes in the premises of these “Old West” narratives.

¹⁴⁷ In contrast to the Burbank brothers’ education (the novel informs readers that they were sent to a high school in Salt Lake before attending university), we learn from the novel that many of the ranch hands could not read, write, or do math. These differences in education level and class are explored in more depth throughout Savage’s text (4). Relatedly, we learn more about the younger housemaid’s backstory, Lola, and the politics of being a “hired girl” in this temporal and geographic context (122-3). Though these gendered and class-related politics are only implied in the film, in the “Behind the Scenes with Jane Campion” documentary, audiences are offered a deeper look at the ways Campion understood these politics. In a scene that shows the two actors who play the Burbanks’ housemaids—minor characters at best—preparing for their roles, the older housemaid, Ms. Lewis, interviews the younger housemaid. Campion directs the actress playing the younger housemaid to keep her voice very low and trodden down, to express “how little of life they had.” The young actress doesn’t seem to quite understand but takes Campion’s direction and begins to speak more softly and meekly.

As more people visit and move to the region, often inspired by their imagined connection to frontier mythology, increased divides and debates emerge related to land use (Nelson 395). Though economic, demographic, and environmental forces have combined to reshape the regional landscape, Nelson's "Rural Restructuring" argues that migration is the most powerful force impacting the region (395-6).¹⁴⁸ Of course, this has long been the case, given the region's histories of land possession and dispossession under the settler colonial imperative. Nelson remarks that the middle and upper classes, in particular, have transformed the region "from a place of production to a landscape of consumption," and the nature of this transformation further heightens class distinctions in rural communities throughout the region (398). The implications for these transformations are broad and complex and have vast impacts on communities and their ecologies. For example, Nelson finds in his qualitative research across the region, "many residents perceive recent economic and land use transformations are making rural places less conducive to tightly knit family relations" (403).

As noted, transformations in agricultural practices and industries, along with the structuring of private and public land, have been impacting the region since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Savage's novel, which offers readers a close-third perspective of Phil's internal thoughts and feelings, we learn his disdain for the barbed wire fences suddenly blocking many of the original cattle trails through the mountains. Phil, a "burning patriot" blames "foreign dryland farmers" (Savage 162-3) as well as increases in federally owned land (Savage 182). Today, there is much debate about environmental conservation across the region, and whether private rangeland does or does not contribute to conservation efforts. As environmental scientists Brunson and Huntsinger argue, ranches can "safeguard ecosystem services, protect open space, and maintain traditional ranching

¹⁴⁸ As alluded to previously, the region, and the federal land managers who govern much of it, must now attempt to balance the interests of environmentalists, recreationalists, and those with a stake in the mining, timber, and ranching industries.

culture,” which is, as they note, dear to “a unique and cherished American heritage” (Brunson and Huntsinger 137).¹⁴⁹ However, in connection with Nelson’s findings above, Brunson and Huntsinger find that the current supply of traditional, full-time ranch owners cannot meet the conservation demand, especially as studies across California and Colorado reveal that many ranchers do not have a willing heir to pass their land onto (137-144). As rangeland becomes preserved primarily for its “natural beauty and lifestyle values,” rather than for agricultural purposes connected to family businesses, Brunson and Huntsinger conclude that hobby ranching, which was “historically looked down upon as a reason for depressed livestock prices, may be transformed into the ‘conservation’ ranch in the new West” (144). These findings parallel the decline of working family farms across the country, as “the economic base that once was the heart of rural America—family farms and ranches—has been radically transformed” (Schell 83) in ways that impact communities across the nation, not just rural ones (Schell 88).

Today, due to exurban sprawl and rural population growth, more than seventy-five percent of people living in the western region do so in metropolitan areas (Brunson and Huntsinger 138).¹⁵⁰ As regional population has grown, “amenity development,” such as outdoor recreation space, has replaced rangeland all across what researchers call the “New West” (Shumway and Otterstrom 2001). Contrary to much popular belief, ranches have been found to have higher ecological value

¹⁴⁹ Further, Brunson and Huntsinger find, “Maintaining lands as working ranches is held to prevent deterioration of the tax base by public acquisition, preserve infrastructure, support the ranching community, and maintain local culture,” and ranches protect land “from development and high-intensity land uses that would clash more severely with wildlife, scenery, recreation, and management practices such as controlled burning” (140).

¹⁵⁰ In considering this, I think of Farrar’s “Nostalgia and the Politics of Place Memory,” which revealed the way urban and suburban sprawl veils and erases history and contributes to a collective amnesia with its emphasis on the temporary. In response to the limitations of both historical preservation and exurban sprawl, Farrar draws from Walter Benjamin’s notion of “porosity,” which she employs to make an argument for “a sense of place that understands how history and memory seep into landscapes, allowing the past to coexist alongside the present” (731), and attends to how places “multiply possible readings of space and of history” (733). What would this look like in the once-rural West? While difficult to answer, asking the question itself is importantly, especially as Farrar finds that the kind of historical erasure perpetuated by urban sprawl causes a “widespread sense of ennui, at best—and at worst, widespread psychological distress” (726).

than amenity development, including nature preserves and outdoor recreation spaces (Maestas et al. 2001, 2003; Lenth et al. 2006; Scott et al. 2001). In addition to practices such as rotational grazing that work to prevent soil erosion and desertification, ranches also have far fewer visitors seeking outdoor recreation and disturbing wildlife, terrain I explore in more depth in the next chapter (Brunson and Huntsinger 139). Interestingly, studies conducted across Oregon and Utah have concluded that recreationists from urban areas are more critical of rangeland conditions than other stakeholders (Brunson and Huntsinger 142). This said, it is also true that some conservation scientists find ranching less ecologically beneficial, as they consider the ecological consequences of grazing livestock. Even in the face of negative impacts from grazing livestock, especially those related to meat production and consumption, Brunson and Huntsinger convincingly note there is “no research showing that exurban housing development is less environmentally damaging than ranching” (140).

Despite various debates and critique, a well-documented and widespread enchantment with the ranching lifestyle has contributed to legal protections for private rangeland and other rural spaces, as well as their inhabitants (Pruitt 2006).¹⁵¹ Further, the nonprofit Land Trust Alliance found that land conserved in the United States by local, state, and national land trusts increased by fifty-four percent in the period between 2000 and 2005. Importantly, nearly half of the land conserved by

¹⁵¹ In her review of the way rural rhetorics make their way into our laws and policies, Pruitt finds several legal cases where the law ruled that rural areas in the western region “should be kept free of development to the maximum extent possible to help preserve rural character, critical wildlife habitat and important image-setting scenic vistas and river corridors,” and where lawmakers showed an interest in protecting “a rural atmosphere consisting of small farms and large residential tracts, where farm animals and poultry would be permitted, bridle and walking paths be provided, open space be preserved and noise and traffic congestion be eliminated,” and the desire to “encourage the continuation of ranching and other types of traditional agriculture as a vital part of the community's character” (218). In her review of frontier rhetoric in the law, Pruitt finds that, especially in the West, rural places may be favorably associated with the frontier or wilderness (214). For example, in *Lopez v. Cheniwe*, parents had left their 13-year-old son alone at home with a loaded gun, which he used to kill another child. The court ruled that the parents were not liable for the child's action and invoked the rural, frontier image as a justification for gun ownership, stating: “From the landing of the Pilgrims in 1620 until the last Indian menace on the Kansas frontier in 1885, the rifle over the fireplace and the shotgun behind the door were imperatively necessary utensils of every rural American household. And it was just as imperative that the members of such household, old and young, should know how to use them.”

land trusts were located in western states, with the majority of those acres being reserved for grazing, a characteristic of the western landscape since the seventeenth century (Brunson and Huntsinger 141). However, like *The Power of the Dog*'s Phil Burbank, many residents of the western region, whether ranchers or not, "tend to be suspicious of government land acquisitions," especially as more than half of the land in many western states is managed by federal and state agencies (Brunson and Huntsinger 143).

Throughout the film, *Campion* employs transitional shots of roads and automobiles, and railways and trains, cutting through the mountains. In relation to these transitional shots, the film also references the Burbank ranch's proximity to nearby towns and cities. Through this visual rhetoric, the film rejects and re-visions nostalgic narratives that portray the western region as a disconnected and desolate, wild and free utopia untouched by industrialization and modernity. This is especially critical because, despite frontier myths and their fixation on cowboys, horses, and cattle, the development of the railway and train transportation were far more significant in shaping the Western region. Importantly, as Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *China Men* examines, the railroads were constructed by invisibilized Chinese labor and exploitation, despite the patriotism with which they are celebrated (Ladino 139). Later, the transition from train to automobile travel only further solidified national narratives related to individualism and mobility (Cram 19). For settlers, Cram writes, these many layers of infrastructure "are engineered to seem 'natural' and hidden away" (Cram 19). But in *The Power of the Dog*, they are visually denaturalized against the mountainous landscape, shown directly cutting through the wilderness on which the frontier myth is largely based. In this way, there is a rhetorical cutting-through of the frontier myth itself. Further, the shots insist on the entwinement of nature and culture, the rural and the urban, the East and the West; and emphasize the flimsiness of narratives that purport to treasure the untouched and pure wilderness of the frontier.

For those of us transfixed by frontier nostalgia, throughout the film, there is a disturbing grotesqueness to the images of large automobiles and long trains chugging across the otherwise open and “pure” landscape. Because of this disturbance, and the internalized dualities it challenges, I read the visual rhetoric of these industrialization-focused transitional shots as anti-nostalgic. As opposed to counter-nostalgia, in anti-nostalgic texts, nostalgia is the object of critique, rather than the vehicle through which critique happens (Ladino 15). Anti-nostalgia, in Ladino’s view, forecloses the rhetorical possibilities of harnessing audiences’ nostalgia toward critically reflective ends (15). However, anti-nostalgia is also a less nuanced, more direct rhetorical tactic, and for this reason, can have powerful impacts even when rendered in seemingly subtle ways, and further, can work alongside (and even strengthen) the more complex counter-nostalgic tactics a text offers its audiences, ultimately leading to a greater chance of critical reflection.¹⁵²

As explored across this study, the visual elements of popular culture texts work just as powerfully as other rhetorical elements such as plot, character, and dialogue. Even more striking and potentially more destabilizing than *The Power of the Dog*’s transitional shots is the obviously “fake” nature of much of the film’s landscape footage.¹⁵³ Through a reparative rhetorical analysis, I read the fabricated scenery shots as counter-nostalgic in that, by offering audiences overly-romanticized, overtly-inauthentic landscape imagery, they propose great distances between the romanticization and the reality of the frontier and its mountainous wilderness landscape.¹⁵⁴ In “Revisiting the

¹⁵² In addition to the visual representation of the implications of transportation and industrialization, the Burbanks’ housekeepers have a brief but interesting conversation on the topic, as Ms. Lewis (the older housekeeper) tells Lola (the younger housekeeper) about how “they” recently dug up an old graveyard to make room for a new highway, and how her friend was buried there—she goes on to tell a story about how long her friend’s hair had grown even though she was dead (1:06:00-1:06:46).

¹⁵³ Audiences who watch the “Behind the Scenes with Jane Campion” documentary will see that many of the shots of the mountains rising in the distance surrounding the Burbank ranch were filmed in a studio. Rather than “real” mountains, audiences of the film gaze at images of mountains stretched across canvas (12:15-12:20).

¹⁵⁴ As explored in the previous chapter, rather than justifying the present and stabilizing history, counter-nostalgia is strategically deployed to tactically reappropriate dominant strands of nostalgia through creative means. It often shows that our stories regarding “home” and “origins” are fragmented, complicated, and layered. Counter-nostalgia can be restorative and reflective (Boym), in that it “mimics totalizing or coherent narratives in order to challenge or reinvent

‘Revisionist’ Western,” Barry Langford comes to a similar conclusion in his analysis of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. As he writes, the film features, “Modest exteriors filmed on the studio backlot, and most notably on manifestly unreal studio sets” (30). This, as Langford notes, defines the film’s style: “the patent artificiality of the prairie set...seems intended as much as anything else to advertise the subjective and reconstructed nature of the history being told” (Langford 30). Similarly, but with a focus on audio rather than visuals, in “The Revisionist Western and the Mythic Past,” Daniel Bishop argues Western filmmakers interested in attempting to counter frontier mythology can use sound to “deform existing tropes, maintaining their recognizability but rendering them hypertrophied and grotesque to the point where the mythic West is deconstructed through self-conscious exaggeration” (Bishop 64). Interestingly, Cooper notes that *The Power of the Dog’s* instrumental score (often featuring cello, guitar, or piano), composed by Radiohead’s Jonny Greenwood, “gives the film an off-beat air from the outset, with instruments not played in the usual way” (4). Similar to what Cooper recognizes in the *Power of the Dog’s* score, the obvious artificiality of the mountainous landscape works alongside the dusty, faded, near-sepia tone of the film to represent an overindulgence in frontier nostalgia, harkening directly back to the heyday of low-budget Westerns. Rhetorically, this overindulgence invites audiences to take important steps toward re-vision of the genre and the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia from which it draws, noticing and perhaps even critiquing their own internalization of nostalgic frontier mythology and how this mythology is often perpetuated by the Western genre. In this way, and as I continue to explore in

them for its own ends” (Ladino, *Reclaiming Notalgia*). Further, “When the counter-nostalgic text envisions a home that is a pure origin—a cohesive site or event constructed by simplifying and romanticizing a complex past—it has devised that origin in a performative, strategic manner” (15). In other words, counter-nostalgic narratives toy with dominant narratives of nostalgia to subvert them. They manipulate their readers by eliciting nostalgia, but then turning that nostalgia on its head, or revealing it to be constructed or empty in some way. Counter-nostalgic texts work within the realm of emotion rather than argument, asking us to construct the “argument” and grapple with the stories we have been told (15). This can be a limitation of counter-nostalgia, as it trusts and requests the audience to do critically reflective work as it “revisits a dynamic and destabilized past in order to challenge dominant histories and reflect critically on the present” (16).

the remainder of my analysis, the film offers a pedagogical model for a careful, nuanced, and audience-aware blending of anti- and counter-nostalgia.

This is critical rhetorical labor because, even as the western region continues to shift further from its mythological construction, the cultural narratives and ideologies that drove the settlement of the region maintain their stronghold. In fact, nostalgic frontier narratives and their role in our national imaginary continue to have profound impacts in the region and across the globe, as frontier rhetorics structure our social, political, and economic realities. In his examination of the Western genre, film scholar Barry Langford considers how, at the time of his writing just after 9/11, Bush (“another Texan president”) and Cheney (“his vice president from Wyoming”) were “conspiring to launch a series of devastating assaults on non-Western nations,” and by the time of his essay’s publication in 2003, the international community had accepted “the vigilante justice of the Old West of George W. Bush’s imagination—Wanted, Dead or Alive—as a new hegemonic model for contemporary international relations (34)” Importantly, Langford goes on to argue, “If this prospect is to be properly understood, let alone challenged, we—Americans and non-Americans alike—may turn out to need the Western back, and rather urgently at that (34).” By needing the Western back, Langford does not mean that what we need is a long weekend spent watching classic Western movies. Rather, he means—as I will explore in the next section—that the expansive and seemingly ever-lasting Western genre of art and entertainment has had a significant influence on the persistent circulation of frontier rhetorics and practices, and of frontier masculinity in particular. And further, the persistence of this influence demands a reckoning with the genre, followed by a re-vision of the sacred frontier mythology it upholds and the deep-seated stories it traffics. As I work to show, *The Power of the Dog* contributes to this important project, and by doing so, clear rhetorical and narrative paths toward individual and collective reflection and re-vision.

Wrangling the Western and Destabilizing Genre through Adaptation

This section offers an overview of the Western genre in order to make a case for the ways *The Power of the Dog* attempts to destabilize it. Throughout my dissertation I have argued that popular culture texts, especially film and television, can function—like museums, artifacts, and archives bent overtly toward memorialization—as “powerful rhetorical sites in which the past is selectively presented” (Armada 236). This is especially true for art and entertainment in the Western genre; a wide-ranging, expansive category that includes (but is not limited to) oral storytelling, literature, film and television, music, theater, video games, and visual art that focuses on depictions of the “American West,” often in ways that mythologize this region and its figures (the cowboy, the Indian, the outlaw, the damsel in distress) across various historical time periods. As Garrett-Davis writes, because of the genre’s expansiveness across mediums and modes, it can be hard to define (3). And as Aquila explores, the “problem” of defining the Western genre is exacerbated by complex questions (389), such as those explored in the previous sections: What is the American West? Is it a geographic location, or an imagined one, or both? Taking up these questions in the mid-twentieth century, film critics such as Robert Warshow and André Bazin defined the Western genre primarily through the lens of its reliance on and reproduction of mythology (Bishop 60). In fact, critics such as J. Hoberman have argued that Western films are ritual and myth before they are films (Langford 26).

Westerns have long worked to stabilize and affirm nostalgic frontier narratives, which, as examined above, are essential to stabilizing and affirming a national American identity and imaginary of who “we” are, both in relation to and beyond rural space. Relatedly, as Jane Gaines and many others have argued, the Western relies on and reproduces a “fantasy of authenticity,” strengthened by “the impossibility of ever knowing but all-the-while-reaching for the ‘real’ West” (quoted in

Langford 29).¹⁵⁵ Fantasies of authenticity are an essential part of the circulation and commodification of rural nostalgia, and frontier nostalgia is certainly no exception. As Combs argues, by exploiting such fantasies of authenticity, the commodification of the frontier mythology is made “palpable and consumable for, most often, a white American audience desiring to learn about their past” (Combs 715-6). In other words, the Western genre, in its dominant or traditional form, can be understood as a commodification of frontier mythology, through the packaging of that mythology as authentic, which strengthens the rhetorical power and prowess of structures (and narratives) of settler colonialism and white supremacy.

Though I maintain a healthy suspicion related to the ability to trace the Western back to any sort of original or root text, scholars often point to a handful of key texts as primary machines in the reproduction and circulation of the genre and its dominant form. Wachhorst, for example, traces what he refers to as the “Western formula” back to James Fenimore Cooper and his *Leatherstocking Tales*. Alongside Cooper’s work, Wachhorst points to the popularity of Western dime novels, and popularized figures such as Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill Cody, who further strengthened and gave narrative structure to the genre. Wachhorst writes that Cody’s “Wild West Show,” toured the globe and “established most of the themes and images that still shape the myth of West” (13), including the construction and circulation of rhetorical figures such as “cowboys and Indians.” Wachhorst also marks Owen Wister’s novel *The Virginian* (published in 1902) as a text that helped to funnel the Western into its “classic form,” a form solidified later by movie characters such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Bronco Billy (13).

From the inception of movie production to the mid-twentieth century, film scholars estimate, conservatively, that Westerns accounted for 25-30 percent of all films made in the United

¹⁵⁵ In this way, Western texts—and frontier mythology more broadly—aligns with Boym’s theorization of nostalgia as an affective force that thrives in long-distance relationships.

States (Wachhorst 13-14). During the period from the 1910s to the 1950s (or what is known as the classical period in Hollywood film), the Western was the most popular, largest grossing genre, and “was central to the popularity and profitability of the Hollywood film industry” until the 1970s (Lusted 11). As many as 200 “B” (or low-budget) Westerns were turned out per year throughout the mid-twentieth century, and prior to this period of mass production, the first “long” movie produced was a Western—a nine-minute film called *The Great Train Robbery*, which premiered in 1903 (Wachhorst 13-14). During the 1950s, the decade in which the genre peaked in popularity, 35 million copies of Western paperbacks were sold per year, Country and Western music gained a broad audience, and eight out of the ten most popular television shows were Westerns (Wachhorst 14). In *The Western*, Lusted notes that despite initially being reductively referred to as “horse opera” (13-14), the genre quickly became a “central American art form” (22), and was distilled through popular culture, advertising, fashion, and tourism (37). In *Landscapes of the New West*, Krista Comer addresses the reciprocal relationship between tourism and the production and consumption of Western texts, specifically pointing to the mid-1980s when a boom in western regionalism increased the popularity of the Southwest and Rocky Mountain West as tourist destinations, which in turn increased the sales of Western literature (15).¹⁵⁶

Aligning with broader discussions regarding cultural upticks in nostalgia, Wachhorst writes that production and consumption of texts in the Western genre peaked in the United States in the uncertain tumult post-World War II era, when a “nostalgia for a simpler, more personal time was manifest throughout popular culture” (Wachhorst 14). As explored across my dissertation, nostalgia, deeply entangled with the generation and circulation of mythology, works as a rhetorical force to shift and shape our collective and individual identities, beliefs, and narratives as we extract from a

¹⁵⁶ Comer also critiques how the romanticization of the “unpopulated” wilderness of the West has, ironically, resulted in overcrowding and pollution (124).

particular version of the past to make sense of our present and feel a sense of control in relation to the future. In other words, like the other rhetorical constructions studied throughout my dissertation, the frontier and its distillation in the Western was (and is) a “vehicle America used to explain itself to itself,” becoming an essential part the “American ‘social imaginary’” (Langford 26). Jane Tompkins examines this cultural phenomenon in *West of Everything*, positing that the psychological itch Westerns scratch is not for adventure, but for meaning (Wachhorst 17).¹⁵⁷ And while it’s true that the market dominance of the Western genre has decreased, a brief scan of our most popular streaming platforms will reveal the continued presence and popularity of the Western genre, both in its dominant and re-visionary forms.

As I’ve begun to discuss, and in alignment with the broader circulation of rural nostalgia explored across my dissertation, traditional Western texts are often reactions to reproductions of culturally constructed dualities—such as civilization versus wilderness, cowboy versus Indian, freedom versus limitation, the Western region versus the East Coast, good versus evil, femininity versus masculinity—and rhetorically manipulate these dualities toward particular social and political ends.¹⁵⁸ Writing specifically about gender politics, Jane Tompkins argues that the Western originated as a reaction against the dominant Victorian culture of domesticity, as well as the increasing presence

¹⁵⁷ Relatedly, in his exploration of the Western genre as “the national nostalgia,” Wyn Wachhorst asks, “If the legend of the West is in many ways overly romantic, shallow, inaccurate, and racist, why, if not for those very reasons, does it still appeal?” In attempting to answer his own question, Wachhorst writes, “We romanticize a mythical West that never was, longing not for the hard facts of pioneer life but for the infinite potential of open land and unlimited options beyond the labyrinths of bureaucratic and technological constraint. We long for a sunrise over mysterious mountains and unchartered rivers, for the exhilarating adolescence of America, when the future stretched away to forever. We long, that is, for the lost clarity of our own youth, for a time when innocence and hope could carry the day” (25). More anecdotally, when I shared some of this research with my dad, a longtime consumer of the genre across mediums and modes, he emphatically agreed with the scholars’ observations and arguments related to the significance of the genre, noting that, from his perspective, the Western defined the dominant ideological engine of the Baby Boomer generation, as it was especially mainstream and dominant throughout their lives.

¹⁵⁸ This genre’s tendency toward this rhetorical manipulation is made clear by the fact that most Westerns are set between 1865 and 1890, a time period which included the mining boom, building of railroads, possession of Native land and displacement of Native peoples, large cattle drives, the rise of farming, the end of the Civil War, and the closing of the frontier (Wachhorst 14). Western texts set in this time period, then, are set up to propose arguments for navigating divisions between settlement versus wilderness, civilization versus savagery (Langford 29).

of women in the public sphere (39). In response, Western texts offered men rhetorical models for maintaining their dominance and power, and as it follows, their identity—maps for navigating the shifting social and political landscape were offered through masculine characters. In opposition to the dangerous lure of the corrupt, yet passive, powerless, and objectified feminine character (Wachhorst 15-16; Smelik 491; Budzyńska 71; McHugh 4), the masculine hero of the Western is an active and powerful agent.¹⁵⁹ In this way, the Western formula reproduces the cult of domesticity, where women and children are “cowering in the background” as men enact a legitimized violence in the name of their protection (Tomkins 41). This is despite the fact of women’s significant contributions to the reality of life on the frontier. Ultimately, a lack of agency for women and feminized characters, along with racially and nostalgically othered characters (such as Indigenous peoples), is an essential part of the dominant Western formula. In this way, like frontier mythology itself, Westerns are a “masculine rhetorical construct” (Gibson and Heyse 101)—a bolster to patriarchal and imperial logics. However, as I explore in the next section, once we understand the genre’s role in persistently perpetuating such logics, we can begin taking steps toward learning from and engaging practices of adaptation and re-vision.

In fact, for decades, filmmakers have been attempting to destabilize the genre, often through manipulating the rhetorical and affective force of frontier nostalgia, and ultimately laying the foundation for Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog*. In *The Cultures of the American New West*, Neil Campbell argues that, “to look again at the West is not just an academic game, but a political act concerned with survival, especially for all those previously omitted or silenced in the old histories” (9).¹⁶⁰ But along with the difficulty of engaging the “utopian force” of nostalgia—which, as

¹⁵⁹ Though the occasional heroine “rode opposite the cowboy heroes,” it is far more common for traditional Westerns to characterize women as “hapless maidens” (Budzyńska 71)

¹⁶⁰ This, of course, aligns with Adrienne Rich’s conception of re-vision as an act of survival, along with Boym’s positioning of reflective nostalgia as an act of survival.

examined across this study, necessitates critically reflecting on the past in a way that offers an alternative understanding of the “present that this particular past has generated,” and the future possibilities it does or does not open (Ladino 71)—revising a genre as stable and sustaining as the Western is difficult if not, as Langford argues, impossible (71).¹⁶¹ However, it’s for this very reason the Western genre offers a fascinating and important case study for understanding the rhetorical tactics through which well-established genres can, in fact, be revised and adapted, even if in ways that are limited, incomplete, or even unsatisfactory. Through a rhetorical lens, genre functions as a “a contract between a specific audience and a cultural producer whose function is to specify, or to delimit, a range of meanings and uses” (Langford 28), and because of this interactive contract, possibilities (and limitations) for revision depend on both the audience and the producer of a particular text. In other words, the Western audience, as I examine in my analysis of *The Power of the Dog*, must either be ready and willing for a re-vision of the traditional Western formula, or must be rhetorically led to such a re-vision, the way one might lead a horse to water.

Ultimately, the so-called Revisionist Western begins from the conviction that the nostalgic, historical narratives from which the genre has traditionally drawn are a problem, and from this conviction, it attempts to work from, and perhaps even stretch, the possibilities and limitations of re-visioning the genre and its narratives, always in the context of questions and tensions related to the audiences’ willingness to come along for an alternative, often destabilizing, kind of ride. With this understanding, it makes sense that the cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s—i.e. the Civil Rights movement, counterculture movements, Vietnam War protests, feminists movements, and the collective struggles of Black, Asian, Latinx, Chicanx, Indigenous, and disabled peoples—made way

¹⁶¹ This is because, in Langford’s words, revising the genre requires a breaking of the generic contract and its “iconographic, characterological, narrative and indeed ideological conventions” (27).

for the first wave of Revisionist Westerns.¹⁶² Marking a similar cultural and temporal context, in *What is a Western?*, Josh Garrett-Davis shows how representations of the mythic West have shifted in the years since World War II, becoming more diverse and multicultural, especially in the context of the ways Indigenous peoples are represented across the genre. As Daniel Bishop posits in “The Revisionist Western and the Mythic Past,” during this time period, there was an increased awareness that “traditional narratives of the inevitable advance and triumph of white civilization” are politically objectionable (62). Though Langford argues revisionist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century ultimately failed, largely due to their lack of critical understanding of the “ideologies they sought to challenge” (34), Bishop finds the production and consumption of Revisionist Westerns in the 1960s and beyond “exposes the deep-seated contradictions built into such powerful words as ‘frontier,’ ‘progress,’ and, perhaps most of all, ‘freedom’” (62). In other words, though no easy task, the very rhetorical prowess and power of these concepts continues to offer filmmakers and their audiences with opportunities for reflection and re-vision, uncovering connections across the region, its history, and the stories we tell about it carry impacts across place, time, and context.

Looking across the Revisionist Western subgenre, Langford finds a few dominant rhetorical tactics through which the texts attempt to revise the traditional Western formula. The first is a reversal of the dominant (white supremacist) narrative subject position (Langford 32-33). Secondly, there are the “mud and rags” and “tell it as it was” Westerns, where there is an attempt to replace

¹⁶² On the heels of the wave of Revisionist Westerns produced during the counterculture and Civil Rights movement came shifts in the ways scholars studied the West as a region, and generated movements toward “New Western” scholarship and literature. Krista Comer’s *Landscapes of the New West* considers the ways women writers such as Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Wanda Coleman, Barbara Kingsolver, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Mary Clearman Blew, Sandra Cisneros, and Pam Houston have contributed to our ways of seeing and understanding the West and its relationship to other regions and contexts, and by doing so, challenge the “Western formula,” through, “Moving outside a tradition that privileges realism, rural settings, and nature-identified protagonists,” and favoring “postmodern narrative conventions and more urban settings,” that turn away from the romanticized and idealized constructions of the West and Southwest (62). Ultimately, Comer shows that feminist values and western subjectivity do not have to cancel each other out, that analyses of cityscapes, studies enhancing multiracial alliances, and postmodern critiques of nature rightfully belong within the field of western American literary studies.

romanticism with realism (Langford 32-33)—though, likely influenced by Langford’s earlier concerns, I wonder, in the context of a region so intensely romanticized, is this de-romanticization possible, and if so, to what degree? I explore this inquiry in more depth in my analysis of *The Power of the Dog*, which most closely aligns with Langford’s definition of the “mud and rags” Revisionist Western.¹⁶³

As Wildermuth finds, there is also a category of Revisionist Westerns that can be considered Feminist Westerns, which aim to represent an “alternative to the masculinist vision of the West as a site only for individualistic competition and aggression” (12). Though much scholarship at the intersection of queer studies and the Western genre focuses largely on *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), there are a growing number of Westerns engaged with queer identities and cultures (Bailey 2022, Chatzipapatheodoridis 2016, Lennon 2013, Mennell 2012). Queer and Feminist Westerns often align with Langford’s categorization of the rhetorical tactic of reversal, though this is not always the case, and as Budzyńska examines, rhetorical reversal is not the only, or necessarily the most effective, option available to cultural producers and audiences.¹⁶⁴

Examining the years beyond the socially transformative sixties and seventies, David Lusted argues that the decreased “appeal of the Western coincided with the development of feminist film theory and cine-psychoanalysis” in the 1980s (28). This strand of scholarship prompted an interest in the ways United States history is represented by the media and developed the perspective that traditional Western texts enclosed women and racialized minorities to the roles of Others (Varner 235). In conjunction with these perspectives, the Feminist Western emerged and was often “characterized by the domination of women, reversal of gender roles, men playing subservient roles

¹⁶³ As Annie Proulx writes in her afterword of Savage’s novel, “Something aching and lonely and terrible of the west is caught forever on [Savage’s] pages” (277).

¹⁶⁴ As I will explore, *The Power of the Dog* is both aligned with, and in other ways, in tension with, genres we may categorize as Queer Westerns and Feminist Westerns.

and women playing typically male roles often wearing male clothes” (Budzyńska 71).¹⁶⁵ Budzyńska connects the rhetorical tactic of gender role reversal to Aristotle’s concept of peripeteia: “a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity” (*Poetics* 1452a).¹⁶⁶ Examining the rhetoric of gender role reversal in the context of the revisionist Western, Budzyńska argues a reliance on gender role reversal limits the revisionary possibilities of the Feminist Western—while role reversal invites audiences “to identify with a strong female character in pursuit of her goal,” they often do so by at least partially reinstating the dominant Western formula (79). For example, the Feminist Western is likely to, in its elevation of feminine characters, confine “the other sex to inferiority, painting it with a broad brush and endowing it with all the negative qualities” (Budzyńska 83).¹⁶⁷ Though it’s also helpful to consider Moore’s *Space, Text, and Gender* here, where Moore reasons, “The fact that women may end up supporting the dominant male order in their efforts to value themselves within it does not imply that women’s interests are ultimately identical with those of men” (142-3). In this way, as Moore concludes, “The continuing dominance of the male order and the appropriation of apparently male values or interests by women are the result of the powerful and reinforced homology between what is socially valuable and what is male” (142-3). Through Moore’s lens, then, it is useful to understand Feminist Westerns’ previous focus on role reversal as an important, though limited, step in reckoning and negotiating with the traditional Western formula and the heteropatriarchal culture that devised it.

¹⁶⁵ Varner identifies *Johnny Guitar* (1954), starring Joan Crawford, as the earliest example of a Feminist Western (87).

¹⁶⁶ Through Aristotle, Budzyńska understands peripeteia, or reversal, as a “powerful dramatic device that can evoke strong emotions and therefore it is closely tied to audience’s expectations. As a result, peripeteia can be understood as either: reversal of the situation, intention or expectation of the characters, or reversal of the expectation of the audience: (70). Gender reversal in Feminist Westerns, as Budzyńska notes, aligns with Judith Butler’s theorization of gender as a performance: “Gender is always doing” (25), and what it is doing, implies Budzyńska, is always rhetorical.

¹⁶⁷ Budzyńska’s analysis of the rhetoric of gender reversal aligns with Bishop’s sense that, as Revisionist Western texts have attempted to introduce anti-mythological ideologies, they have also continued to show “a strong tendency to engender counter-myths, re-navigating and rearticulating the same underlying problems in forms that remain, despite their subversive intention, not antimythic, but rather differently mythic” (62).

In *Feminism and the Western in Film and Television*, Wildermuth finds roots for the Feminist Western in “the earliest traditions of women writers in the frontier” (2-3). Summarizing Annette Kolodny’s findings in *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1869* (1984), Wildermuth writes,

If the iconography of the frontier in its masculine conception represented a virginal Eden to be forcibly possessed by dispossessing its native inhabitants and exploiting its natural resources, for frontier women writers this land was as an Edenic garden to be cultivated and shared by men and women in harmony with nature. (Wildermuth 2-3)

Relatedly, Kolodny notes that the women writing during this time constructed the frontier as a space of “idealized domesticity,” rather than a privatized, virginal space for “erotic mastery” (xiii). Similarly to Kolodny’s study, Jane Johnson Bube considers the women writers of Western dime novels at the turn of the century, whose stories “place women’s experiences and women’s characters as agents and main actors of westerns” (68). As Bube finds, their work attempted to challenge conservative gender norms (69), along with the logics of Manifest Destiny and violence against Native Americans and other marginalized groups (82). Interestingly, however, both Bube and Kolodny conclude that the writing from the women they studied “left no lasting imprint on our shared cultural imagination” of what the frontier was, who it (materially and narratively) belongs to, and why (Kolodny 225). Their conclusions align with similar statements from scholars such as Rick Worland and Edward Countryman, who note that the last three decades of Western historiography, which can be characterized by “advances and often radical shifts in interpretive direction away from the dominant monocultural account of Western settlement and the closing of the frontier inherited directly from Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous essay,” have had remarkably little influence on the Western film

industry, with the potential exception of a handful of mid-90s Westerns that the scholars classify as “post-Westerns” (quoted Langford 27). However, Wildermuth argues differently, writing that the “subversive gestures” of feminists writing the West have long influenced the Western genre across film and television (Wildermuth 4). Like these scholars, this study cannot, and is not out to, measure to what extent Feminist Westerns have transformed the Western genre and its construction of the frontier, it seems clear that there is rhetorical and narrative value in *attempting* to revise and adapt the traditional Western formula and its reproduction of deep stories which support heteropatriarchal, nationalist, settler colonial logics. In other words, attempts to destabilize the Western genre can create opportunities for destabilization of the deep stories the genre produces and circulates—a difficult task, without question, but nonetheless a necessary one. After all, the only alternative would be to evacuate the genre, leaving its narratives circulating without challenge.

Both Savage’s *The Power of the Dog* (1967) and Campion’s *The Power of the Dog* (2021) come out of, and contribute to, attempts to destabilize and revise the dominant Western formula. While *The Power of the Dog* is Campion’s first Western, Savage set eight of his thirteen novels in the West, persistently examining the region as a “scene of gender protest,” where, “The high dry landscapes become a liminal site of potentially reconfigured identity even as that potential is denied” (Weltzien). Powerfully, out of this denial comes a “savage critique” of the relationship between masculinity and loneliness (Weltzien).

Campion brings this critique to the screen, and in their analysis of Campion’s film, Cooper notes the generative conversations related to toxic masculinity and gender binaries that *The Power of the Dog* stokes (2). Further, Cooper situates Campion’s adaptation as part of a wider move on the part of contemporary women filmmakers to critically revisit the Western genre (2).¹⁶⁸ However, the

¹⁶⁸ Cooper remarks that Kelly Reichardt and Chloé Zhao offer other “strong examples” (12).

“queer subtext” of the film has also received attention and criticism, with some critics arguing that it edges toward cliché (Kornhaber), and others offering more affirmative readings (Lodge). Perhaps Western actor Sam Elliott’s response to Campion’s adaptation is the most significant proof that the film is, in its attempt to destabilize and re-vision the dominant Western formula, ruffling some feathers. In an interview with Marc Maron, Elliot referred to the film as a “piece of shit” and insinuated that Campion did not know anything about the “real West.” In a couth response, Campion told a reporter, “When [Elliott] gets out of hair and makeup, I’ll meet him down at the OK Corral on the set with Doctor Strange, and we will shoot it out.” Finishing with, “Look, the West is a mythic space and there’s plenty of room on the range” (Blythe).

As I moved through my observation and analysis of *The Power of the Dog*, and as I continued to study the film alongside Savage’s original text, it became more and more clear that adaptation is—especially when working within stable genres that circulate deeply-internalized stories—an essential rhetorical tool for the practice of re-vision—of offering an alternative lens through which to metabolize the cultural narratives that construct our imaginative and material dimensions. As noted previously, adaptation scholars understand adaptive texts as opportunities for rhetorical reinvention, which Cram defines as “scenes of argumentative creation that draw on already existing myth or stories” (Cram 34). Through this lens, adaptation emphasizes and takes advantage of the relationship between re-vision as a social practice and re-vision as a compositional practice. Especially as, drawing on Benjamin’s notion that “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories,” when we repeat a story, we have the opportunity to revise and even reinvent it (or its elements) in the process. Or, drawing from Freudian notions of repetition—“we repeat as a way of making up for loss, as a means of control, or of coping with privation” (quoted in Hutcheon 8)—the repetitive process involved in adaptation offers Western revisionists the opportunity to reckon with its erasures and silences by reclaiming various forms of narrative power and agency. And further, as adaptations

often happen across temporal contexts (as there are over fifty years of distance between Savage's original text and Campion's adaptive text), technology—as well as shifting cultural, social, and political contexts—drive the rhetorical practice of adaptation and the kinds of re-vision, reinvention, and deconstruction that are possible (Hutcheon 29).

As I see it then, adaptation offers opportunities for, in Cram's articulation, “bury[ing] your nose down deep and smell[ing] the blood in the soil,” and then asking the inevitable question that emerges from this practice: “What can be done with violent inheritances” (xv)? Importantly, though, adaptations, and re-visionary practices more broadly, do not erase the implications of earlier texts or the cultural memories and deep stories from which they sprung. An adaptive text, in other words, cannot help but be marked, like a palimpsest, with the “violent inheritances” (Cram) of both the original text and the genre system it inhabits (Bickmore). As I will examine in the next sections, *The Power of the Dog's* re-visionary force does not come through its easy erasure of frontier mythology and the violent narratives it carries (an impossibility, after all). Rather, much of the rhetorical power of re-vision, as Rich argued, stems from processes of critical reflection and careful reckoning—processes an audience can be invited, guided, and offered pedagogical models for.

The argument I'm working toward here, then, speaks to my broader argument across the dissertation—the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia continues to gather strength and stability, but even so, there are always possibilities for the re-vision of the deep stories that animate it, and perhaps even more critically, as scholars and instructors of rhetoric and composition, there is significant value in studying and learning from re-visionary attempts. With this groundwork laid, I move into a reparative rhetorical analysis of the methods through which Campion's *The Power of the Dog* attempts to destabilize the dominant Western Genre through a de(con)struction of frontier masculinity.

Queering Frontier Masculinity

As examined, nostalgic frontier mythology rhetorically constructs a particular notion of masculinity (and, as it follows in regard to hegemonic gender binaries, a particular and oppositional notion of femininity). According to Budzyńska, the traditional Western genre's commitment to reproducing dominant gender constructions makes it reason enough to continue studying (70). It's also clear that constructions of frontier masculinity and femininity extend far beyond the geographic and temporal context of the frontier, as they impact broad perspectives and practices related to what it means to be a "real man" and a "real woman."

While the traditional Western "makes an absolute and value-laden division between the masculine and the feminine" (Buscombe 181), Jane Campion's work regularly challenges representations of "power as divided neatly along gender lines" (Gillett). Specifically in *The Power of the Dog*, the power dynamics appear braided, challenging the traditional Western formula's triumph of frontier masculinity, as a young queer man (Peter) and his ailing mother (Rose) ultimately overpower Phil, though not without paying their own prices. In this way, the film exposes the weaknesses, and even fraudulency, in the construction of frontier masculinity, revising deep stories that pump at the very heart of nationalist narratives, and urging reflection and re-vision of deep stories related to gender, sexuality, power, and the frontier.¹⁶⁹

As noted, Phil's character aligns with national imaginaries related to the cowboy and the frontiersman. He is the "mythic frontier individualist"—a white and hyper-masculinized subject position that values and romanticizes "unspoiled" or "savage" wilderness as a site of identity formation (Cram 78). A central, and ultimately damning, element of Phil's adherence to frontier

¹⁶⁹ While *The Power of the Dog* most explicitly examines and interrogates constructions of gender and sexuality, these identity categories are inextricable from those of race, class, and ability. According to María Lugones, gender itself is a colonial construct, and as such, it is a "complex interaction of economic, racializing, gendering systems in which every person in the colonial encounter can be found as a live, historical, fully described being" (Cram 88).

masculinity is his refusal to wear any kind of protective gloves while laboring on the ranch.¹⁷⁰ In an early scene, Phil castrates bulls with his hands bare, nicking his thumb on the last cut, then commenting to George that, of course, he would castrate 1,5000 cattle before cutting his hand on the very last (1:01:42-1:02:28). Cooper reads the film's representation of castration as a symbol of anxieties related to masculinity, as the gash in Phil's hand, and the way he continues to reopen it throughout the film, is what leaves him vulnerable to Peter's poisoning through anthrax (11). If it were not for Phil's reliance on frontier masculinity, and his fears of being seen as weak—fears which are heightened by his repressed queer sexuality—it would have been much harder for Peter to poison him. In the traditional Western formula, as examined above, frontier masculinity is the vehicle for an often-violent form of heroism. In *The Power of the Dog*, however, frontier masculinity leads to Phil's illness, death, and utter powerlessness—states of being that shake the very foundations of frontier masculinity, as it was constructed on normative conceptions of power, strength, and wellness. Through this lens, the film offers an anti-nostalgic, counter-mythic narrative to its audience.¹⁷¹

At the Red Mill—the restaurant and inn owned and operated by Rose prior to her marriage to Phil's brother George—Phil and his cowhands dine around a long table adorned with thin vases filled with intricate paper flowers. Noticing Peter serving another table of diners, Phil begins to

¹⁷⁰ In the novel, the narrator notes that Phil even scorned those who did wear gloves for protection from wounds and infection (4).

¹⁷¹ This said, the film is not without nostalgic, romantic representations of cowboys and cowboy culture. While the novel focuses its perspective on Phil's critique of the ways popular culture representations of the cowboy have negatively, in his opinion, influenced his ranch hands, an early scene of the film is reminiscent of romantic representations of cowboys dominant across the Western genre. When Phil and his twelve cowhands arrive in the town of Beech (which is twenty-five miles north of the Burbank ranch)—the destination of their cattle drive and the location where the cattle will be sold and transported elsewhere via train—they walk in a side-by-side formation across the wide and dusty dirt road, their legs spread wide and weighed down by their chaps, boots, and spurs. Their masculine bodies occupy the entire expanse of the street as they walk slowly, stride for stride. In preparation for making the film, Campion says that she watched Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) (Cooper 12). Like Phil and his cowhands in this scene in Beech, *Once Upon a Time in the West* also depicts men walking through space with purpose and command. This, Bruzzi argues, is a major trope that spans across men's cinema, of which the dominant Western genre could certainly be classified (74-75).

fondle one of the paper flowers, even inserting his finger into its center in a way that is “aggressively sexual” (Cooper 9).¹⁷² Then, loud enough for Peter to hear, Phil says, “Ain’t them purdy? I wonder what little lady made these?” Understanding it was Peter and not a “little lady,” who made the flowers, this is Phil’s first attempt to disempower Peter by emphasizing his misalignment with frontier masculinity. Peter, seemingly unphased by Phil, walks over to the table of filthy, drunk cowhands with confidence and a napkin draped over his forearm. Referring to Phil as “sir,” Peter says that he made them, and that they were inspired by his mother’s garden. In this way, as Cooper examines, the paper flowers “bind Peter intimately to his mother” (4). Eventually, after mocking Peter’s lisp, Phil dips one of Peter’s paper flowers into the flame of a candle, then uses it to light a cigarette he has just rolled. After, he puts the flower out in a glass of water (11:00-14:20). As Cooper writes of this inciting incident, “Phil’s connection with Peter is a mix of hostility and eroticism that tries but fails to demarcate the masculine from the feminine, from the scene of the paper flower’s probing and incineration onwards” (Cooper 12-13). From this scene, the narrative begins: Phil uses Peter as a pawn through which to torture Rose, eventually attempting to drive Peter away from her and toward himself; in response, Peter murders Phil to protect both himself and his mother. Though it seems that Phil and his frontier masculinity have overpowered Peter in this first exchange, audiences likely sense that Peter retains a power that Phil likely cannot or will not detect because it does not align with his conception of power as only in the hands of those who pass as heteronormative and masculine in the hegemonic sense.

Relaxing at the table after dinner, Phil becomes misty-eyed and nostalgic as he, for the third or fourth time in the film, brings up a man named Bronco Henry. Though it’s clear to audiences that

¹⁷² At this moment in the novel, while Phil waits for Peter to serve him and his men, he says, “I guess we all must be black” (Savage 60). In addition to Black people (and, of course, “sissies”), the narrator also reveals Phil’s biases Jewish people, Indigenous people, and seemingly, all “foreigners” (60). I find it interesting that these racial dynamics are left out of the film and suspect that Campion saw them as tertiary to Phil and Peter’s relationship (the central plot of the film).

Phil and Bronco Henry had a close relationship, the particularities of their relationship are, at this point, left veiled and blurry. In this way, some audiences—particularly those who chose the film because it is a Western, unaware of Campion as the director or the film’s engagement with queerness—may be gently fooled by Phil’s portrayal of his own straight masculinity. When George scolds Phil, later that evening, for making Rose cry by teasing her son, Phil justifies his behavior by saying “the boy” needs to “snap out of it and get human,” adding that his mother should “damn well know” this, too (21:00-22:10). Here, Phil reveals his sense that to be queer is to be not only other, but other-than-human. Further, he reveals how he understands his own repression of queer sexuality—as a snapping out of it, and as a becoming human. As a queer man who has committed himself to aligning with constructions of frontier masculinity, he is enraged by Peter’s queer presentation, as it destabilizes and threatens his own gender and sexual performance, which are rooted in conceptions of masculinity that are entangled with rural nostalgia, colonialism, and nationalism.

Soon after their night at the Red Mill, Phil’s brother George ends up marrying Rose. At this, Phil is enraged and despondent, and audiences soon learn of his bent toward emotional repression, along with physical isolation and secrecy, all essential elements of his commitment to frontier masculinity. Walking by himself in the woods, Phil uncovers a hidden passage through a tangle of willow roots. At the bank of a slow-moving creek on the other side of the passage, Phil rubs mud all over his naked body in a way that seems sensual and romantic, then he plunges into the water and begins to bathe (42:30-43:57). As in other Western films—*Dances with Wolves* (1990) comes to mind—the naked and heteronormative male body is represented as entwined with nature in ways that are romantic, sensual, and “natural.” Land, as a feminized figure, and one that is often nostalgically othered is extracted from by men not only for production, but also for rejuvenation, restoration, and healing (Cram 2022; Ladino 2012). In the context of frontier masculinity and its

proclivity for delusions of independence and isolation, the natural environment is viewed as a passively and silently supportive companion, aligning with conceptions of frontier femininity. In this scene, *Campion* engages and leaves these familiar, nostalgic relationalities intact. However, as I will later examine, these relationalities and the narratives they are drawn from will later become destabilized, re-visioned as flimsy and false. Not long after this scene, audiences learn that his relationship to the secretive spot, and to Bronco Henry, is more complex than what they may have initially imagined. Once alone, he pulls off his shirt and pulls a long scarf out of the front of his pants, soon rubbing and caressing it across his skin as he lays in the sun-soaked grass and gentle violin music plays. As Phil releases the scarf and begins to masturbate, it becomes clear that this is a sexual experience, and further, if audiences notice the scarf is embroidered with the initials B.H.—i.e., Bronco Henry—this scene serves as a moment in which Phil’s character is thrown into sharp relief, his frontier masculinity revealed as performative and porous (1:11:30-1:14:16).

When Rose’s son Peter arrives on the ranch for the summer. He’s dressed in a crisp white shirt buttoned to his neck, dark denim held up to his slender hips with a belt, clean white tennis shoes he and Rose purchased in town, and a cream sun hat with a wide brim. Talking to his cowhands as two cattle dogs bark and play around Peter in the distance, Phil refers to him as “Miss Nancy” and “Little Lord Fauntleroy,” and says that he will be “creeping all over the place.” The cowhands laugh and hold their gazes on Peter’s long and slim body and pale skin.¹⁷³ At Phil’s whistle, the dogs run away from Peter and the cowhands get on their horses and circle his slim body, laughing and taunting. Phil continues to talk casually to the men as they terrorize Peter. Finally, Peter finds a break in the circle and runs away (1:02:45-1:04:17). Once more, Phil has deployed his frontier masculinity to disempower Peter, first by emphasizing his queerness and misalignment with frontier

¹⁷³ For white people, tanned skin is often a “sign” of “real” masculinity and just the right amount of “savagery,” because of its associations with spending time outside (Deloria 106).

masculinity, and then when that does not suffice, by using verbal and physical force. However, as audiences are beginning to learn, while Peter may temporarily retreat from Phil for survival and preservation, his cunning ability to see through Phil's hyper-masculine mask, ironically, reveals a weakness through which he is able to come out on top in their contest for power.

Not long after his arrival on the ranch, Peter goes for a walk and comes across the passage to Phil's secretive spot along the creek. Inside the passageway, Peter finds a box sitting out and opens it, finding several copies of magazines called *Physical Culture* and *Art Revues* stacked inside the box. As he flips through a copy of *Physical Culture*, he discovers that most of the pages show images of naked men with large muscles posing in artful and athletic stances. Intrigued, Peter crawls the rest of the way through the passage in the willows, coming to find Phil swimming naked in the water with only the B.H. scarf tied around his neck.¹⁷⁴ When Phil turns around to see Peter there, he takes off chasing him and shouting, "Get out of here, you little bitch!" The birds chirp loudly as Phil and Peter run through the lush green wilderness (1:14:28-1:16:46). Interestingly, in the novel, when Phil chases Peter away from the spot, he calls him a "little son of a bitch" rather than a "little bitch." This revision from the novel to the film is subtle but rhetorically significant, as Campion has chosen to emphasize Phil's hatred toward women, femininity, and queer masculinities (including his own). According to Mitchell, "the contradiction of the Western is that masculinity is always more than physical, and that in favoring an ideal of restraint...reveals how manhood is as much learned as found" (183). Knowing that his manhood has been learned, practiced, and performed, audiences may begin to sense that Phil feels the ways this manhood is vulnerable and fragile to deconstruction.

¹⁷⁴ In the novel, we learn that the passageway is a shack built from scrap lumber that George and Phil stole, then once it was built, they stuck willows around it, which kept growing so that the shack became a passage between the willows to the secret spot along what the novel refers to as Black Tail Creek. The narrator says only George, Phil, and Bronco Henry knew about the spot (170-1). Though, in the film, it seems unlikely that George knew about the spot, or that he continued to spend time there. The novel mentions that the brothers would smoke, chew, and read "hot" magazines in their secret shack, but there is no mention of the magazines being queer, or the hideout as an especially erotic space for Phil. In this way, the novel seems to leave Phil's queerness an open question for longer than the film does.

In this way, Peter's visible disregard of frontier masculinity poses a threat to Phil's performance of manhood, which is hinged on a careful secreting away of his queer desire and identity.

Phil and Peter's relationship meets a significant crossroads one afternoon while Phil and the cowhands take a break from their work in a tree-lined pasture, laying on tents and tarps, playing guitar and singing, relaxing, and eating lunch with their shirts opened or off.¹⁷⁵ George, Rose, and Peter emerge at their resting spot in an uncovered wagon. Peter steps off the wagon and appears to take in his surroundings, then begins to walk confidently down an aisle the men have created with their tents and tarps spread on either side. The men watch Peter curiously and begin to call him homophobic slurs. Along with their slurs, their long and intrusive gazes showcase elements of frontier masculinity that include a sense of entitlement and ownership of land, animals, women, and people perceived as queer. Seeming to step into the power gained from his new knowledge about Phil, Peter continues to walk through the aisle of men with his head high and his shoulder back, the wide legs of his dark denim moving with his hips. He stops at the end of the aisle as if it were a runway, gazes up to a tree where two magpies play together in their nest, and maneuvers his body into a sharp pose, mirroring the men from the magazines that he found in Phil's secret hideout. After a moment he turns on the heel of his white tennis shoe and walks back down the aisle, hands in pockets, chest and head held high. With everyone continuing to watch Peter's body move, Phil calls him over to where he is sitting in the shade, braiding a rope. "You want me, Mr. Burbank?" Peter asks in a way that is subtle yet suggestive. Peter senses Phil's desire and understands that it is within this desire that his own power over Phil lies (as it is the desire itself that betrays Phil's adherence to frontier masculinity). Phil asks Peter to call him Phil, not sir, then asks him to look at the rope he is working on, rubbing his fingers up and down the braid as Rose watches fearfully from

¹⁷⁵ Throughout the film, Phil's cowhands display homosocial relationalities to one another (Sedgwick 1985). Similarly, to the homosocial relationships often represented in athletic contexts, these relationalities are permitted and embraced throughout the traditional Western formula because of the (fragile) frontier masculinity in which they are encased.

the wagon. Phil tells Peter that they got off on the wrong foot, but they can still be “good friends,” and says he will teach him how to make and use a rope like the one he is working on. “It’s sort of a lonesome place out here, Pete, unless you get in the swing of things,” he says, gesturing toward his own sense of isolation.¹⁷⁶ Phil suggests to Peter that they will finish the rope together before Peter has to go back to school at the end of the summer. At this, Peter grows even more confident and empowered. “That’s not a very long time then,” he says with a smirk that is both flirtation and threat. As Phil watches Peter walk away, and Peter continues to wear his subtle smile, the audience understands that Peter has achieved an upper hand over Phil (1:17:38-1:21:11). Perhaps most importantly, Phil himself is largely unaware of, or at least unable to control, the shift in power that has taken place between them (which seems largely prompted by Phil’s understanding that Peter likely knows he is not the kind of man he performs). Aligning with an emerging pattern, in the novel, Savage illustrates the exchange that happens in this scene in an even more subtle way that only gestures toward Phil’s queer desire (224).¹⁷⁷ Importantly, in Champion’s adaptation, audiences are more likely to, like Peter, see the holes in Phil’s performance of frontier masculinity. Champion’s more overt engagement with queerness is anti-nostalgic and pedagogical, as it is more likely to lead

¹⁷⁶ Each in different ways, the characters of *The Power of the Dog* struggle with and must navigate their emotional and mental wellbeing in the context of life on the ranch. Western texts often construct and reproduce narratives that relate rugged individualism to the isolation of the frontier, though often in romanticized ways that veil stark mental health challenges of living in isolated areas with harsh social and environmental climates. For example, the loneliness and roughness of life on the frontier is often imagined as a path toward mental and emotional resilience and strength. It is, in a sense, both a bane and a badge of honor, especially in the context of frontier masculinity, where men are made men through their triumph against the frontier and its many elements. In this way, mental and emotional struggle and pain are decidedly counter to frontier masculinity, as the frontier is a “cure” for both physical and mental maladies. Given all this, Cram considers the intensity of isolation and emotional pain that queer people often face in spaces where rhetorics of frontier masculinity, and the frontier myth more broadly, persist to high degrees. Re-visioning dominant narratives related to mental and emotional wellbeing in the context of the western region, *The Power of the Dog* paints a complex portrait of the impacts of isolation and repression, especially through the characters of Phil, a queer man, and Rose, a woman.

¹⁷⁷ However, because of the nature of the genre, and because of Savage’s use of close-third narration, readers are also offered more of Phil’s interiority during this scene, as he watches Peter move “with the slightest feminine twitch of his hips,” reflecting on how Peter, to him, is “not boy and not girl.” Phil also reads Peter’s tennis shoes as “vulnerable and white” (226). Readers also learn more directly that it is in this scene that Phil arrives at the idea to use Peter to torture Rose by “weaning the boy away from his mama,” which he thinks will further drive Rose to the alcohol she has recently taken to, which he hopes will ultimately drive her and George apart.

audiences to reflections related to their internalizations of nostalgic frontier mythology and its entanglements with gender and sexuality.

From this exchange in the pasture, Phil and Peter begin to spend more time together, and Phil soon proposes that they go out, just the two of them, for a couple of days, following the trail from a cliff marked with “1805” carved into its rock. Phil says it must have been from the Lewis and Clark expedition. “They were real men in those days,” he says, directly speaking to the anxiety, fear, and nostalgia that is tangled up in conceptions of frontier masculinity. As Peter contemplates Phil’s proposal, he asks if any of Phil’s calves are killed by wolves. Phil says a few, and others are killed by anthrax poisoning; Peter is intrigued and energized by this news. Soon, audiences see Phil teaching Peter how to ride a horse (1:28:00-1:28:45).¹⁷⁸ While Phil understands teaching Peter how to ride a horse as part of his plot to separate him from his mother Rose, Peter understands that this is an essential step in accessing the anthrax he will eventually need to poison Phil. Once Peter has learned to ride, he and Phil set off together toward the mountains—Rose, drunk and determined to protect her son from Phil, chases after them, but to no avail (1:31:04-1:31:56). Soon they arrive at a broken fence line with its posts scattered and stacked in the long grass. Mirroring his fingering of the paper flower and his rubbing of the rope, Phil picks up a post and begins to use his hips to thrust it repeatedly into the ground, staring at Peter. Peter is distracted and doesn’t notice (or pretends not to notice) as he is picking flowers and gazing into the sunshine (1:32:36-1:33:05). Here, the audience senses, once more, that Peter has an important kind of power over Phil, and importantly, that he knows it. The audience’s witnessing of this power is a critical component of the film’s potential to

¹⁷⁸ Here, I think of parallels with *Godless*, another complex Revisionist Western featured on Netflix, where the traditionally masculine, cowboy character teaches a young boy raised by his mother and grandmother how to ride, so he will not be “ruined” by his mother. As these examples show, physical mobility and ability are essential elements of the rhetorical construction of frontier masculinity.

spur reflection, as Peter's power and agency in the context of his relationship with Phil deconstructs nostalgic frontier mythology.

Later in the same scene, the film foreshadows Phil's murder at the delicate hands of Peter, as Peter notices that Phil's hand has been freshly cut open and is bleeding from his work with the fence posts (1:34:00-1:35:00). He notes to Phil that it is quite a bad wound, but Phil brushes Peter off. Peter and Phil begin to discuss manhood, and Phil tells Peter that Bronco Henry told him, "A man was made by patience and the odds against him." Peter says his father said it's obstacles, and you have to try to remove them. Phil, with snark, makes a comment that Peter's mother is an obstacle in his life, especially now that she has started drinking. Peter says his dad—who we learn was an alcoholic who ultimately hung himself—worried Peter wasn't kind enough and was too strong. Phil scoffs and chuckles in disbelief, as Peter does not match Phil's definition of strength. "He got that wrong," Phil says, which visibly bothers Peter, who allows the silence to rest between them. Ominous instrumental music plays, and long grass tinged with Phil's blood dances in the wind (1:35:06-1:38:00).

When Peter and Phil return, Phil discovers that Rose has given away the hides that he was planning to use to finish the rope for Peter. He becomes irate—not only because Rose gave them to an Indigenous man and his son, which I explore in more depth in a later section, but because she gave them away against his demands that the ranches' hides are neither sold nor given away, even if all he usually does with them is burn them. When George tries to apologize for Rose's "mistake," Phil becomes even more irate, "They were mine! I needed them!" He is so angry he begins to shake (1:42:18-1:45:05). In giving away the hides, Rose exerts her own power and agency on the ranch, even if she did so while severely drunk in response to Phil's taking away of her son. As Cooper writes of this scene, "Phil's forceful declaration of ownership brings together his contempt for the feminine and his sense of colonial entitlement to the land and its animals" (16). Importantly,

however, “from the cuts of Peter’s first paper flower, through the tassels of the gloves Rose accepts in exchange for the hides, to the dangling rawhide on the gate, his dominion is to be unsettled” (Cooper 16). In response to Phil’s anger, Peter offers him some hide that he carefully sliced—with protective gloves on—from a cow that (unbeknownst to Phil) died of anthrax poisoning. Phil says the offer is “damn kind,” and grabs him by the neck. Looking into each other’s eyes as the camera swings around them and string music quickens, Phil timidly massages Peter’s neck as he talks, saying everything will be “plain sailing” from now on.¹⁷⁹ Phil seems to be saying that he will protect and take care of Peter, perhaps like Bronco Henry did for him, and tells him that he is going to finish the rope tonight. “You’ll watch me do it?” he asks, as the camera swings around their bodies and then pans across the mountains (1:45:05-1:46:20). Cinematographer Ari Wegner comments on the camera work of this scene, saying, “We wanted to feel this electricity. He is spun by this very tiny gesture, by this one touch breaking his shell, it cracks. So that was our thought in the spinning camera, which is Steadicam—it’s both an unraveling and a tightening at the same time” (quoted in Cooper 17). Cooper reads this description in relation to an unthreading of Phil’s power. “Phil may have burned Peter’s paper flower, but he accepts his rawhide, and Peter’s artifice brings about Phil’s downfall,” Cooper writes (17). As Phil’s downfall becomes clear to audiences, it also becomes clear—even to Phil—that his plot to use Peter to torture Rose is blurred by his desire for Peter, and more broadly, by his own queer identity and the ways in which he is, perhaps, more similar to Peter (and thus further away from frontier

¹⁷⁹ Interestingly, in the novel, when Peter offers the hides, he touches Phil’s arm and lets it linger (262-3), and Phil internally reflects on earlier in the day when he wanted to put his arm around Peter but resisted. He also reflects on how similar he felt with Bronco Henry. At this time in the novel, it is revealed that Bronco Henry knew about the secretive spot along the creek. “But Phil knew, God knows he knew what it was to be a pariah, and he had loathed the world, should it loathe him first,” states the narrator. Still, Phil cannot help but wrap his arm around Peter’s shoulder, despite swearing he would never give into “this urge” again.

masculinity) then he can face or admit. This, interestingly, aligns in slant ways with Budzyńska's analysis of the traditional Western formula, explored below, where a man's "relations with women always involved the hero repressing his latent sexual urges" (81). Phil's sense of himself as a savage is, of course, made worse by his shame, and even hatred, of his own queerness.

That night, while more ominous string music plays, Peter joins Phil in the barn where they share a beer. Peter brings in a washtub with the hides he has cut from the poisoned cow soaking in water. Phil still has an open wound and we see the water bloody as he reaches into the tub. Peter, sitting coyly on Bronco Henry's commemorative saddle, asks Phil how old he was when he met Bronco Henry: "About the age you are now," he says, then continues to share that they were more than best friends, and that once Bronco Henry saved his life. They were elk hunting and the weather turned, but Bronco Henry kept him warm all night. "Body against body in bed roll," he says, side-eying Peter as he shares this information, trying to measure his reaction. Peter asks if they were naked and Phil chuckles, seeming uncomfortable, and does not directly answer. Peter rolls and lights a cigarette as Phil watches. Then, Peter brings the cigarette to Phil's lips, and they continue to share the cigarette this way, back and forth, from one set of lips to the other. As Cooper posits, "Akin to a post-coital cigarette, this moment recollects but also reverses the power relationship of the earlier scene in which Phil lights his cigarette with Peter's paper flower" (13). Peter smirks a bit, once more understanding the power he has over Phil, and the scene ends abruptly (1:47:00-1:51:07).

The next morning, Phil is not at breakfast, and the cowhands who are gathered around the table say they have not seen him. George finds him sick in bed, the wound on his hand now badly infected. Phil, sweaty and stumbling and dressed formally to see the doctor in Herndon, asks where Peter is as he walks unsteadily around in the sunlight, the finished rope in his hand (1:51:59-1:56:00). Interestingly, because it is a rope—both a tool and symbol of ranching—that brings them together,

audiences are offered an example of queer sexuality that does not, or need not, fully reject frontier masculinity, but also does not fully adhere to it either. Rather, Phil's frontier masculinity is disrupted under Peter's manipulative and powerful embrace of both it and him. As George's car cuts through the hills, the sky turns dark and brooding, telling a story that the characters are not fully privy to. Next, audiences see shots of the city, with automobiles, buildings, and groups of people walking together, and then we are transported to Phil's funeral (1:57:10-1:59:05). On the day of Phil's funeral, Peter is alone on the ranch. A cattle dog follows him as he walks around, without aim now that Phil is dead.¹⁸⁰ Later that night he sits on his bed, elbows on knees, his jaw tight. He has gloves on, and he grips the finished rope in his hands, moving his fingers delicately along the braid. He wears his white shoes and bright white socks again; no longer in the boots Phil encouraged him to wear. He pushes the rope under his bed. As George's car pulls up to the house, Peter gets up and walks down the hallway, watches Rose and George get out of George's large car. They stop outside the large house, in front of an empty fountain, and George takes his hat off and dips Rose into a dramatic kiss in the dim light as Peter watches. Soft piano music plays in the background. Peter walks away from the window with a slightly sinister look on his face (1:59:05-2:01:52). This look helps the viewer understand that he feels that he has successfully protected his mother from Phil, and that they both will be freed by his absence.

In murdering Phil, Peter's character ultimately re-visions frontier mythology by presenting audiences with an anti-nostalgic hero in misalignment with dominant constructions of frontier masculinity. Further, I read Peter's character in alignment with Muñoz's previously discussed

¹⁸⁰ The novel describes Peter's growing relationship with one of the dogs after he kills Phil, gesturing toward a transfer of power. Further, once Phil dies, the close-third narration leans toward Peter's interiority, and we learn that he feels that "The dog is dead" (272-3). That evening, in both the film and novel, Peter sits in the parlor with a large stack of books next to him. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, he flips to a page that is titled, "The order for the burial of the dead." He flips to another page and reads lines from Psalm, "Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog" (Psalm 20).

theorization of disidentification—working beyond a simple rhetorical reversal to engage and repurpose dominant forms with important differences and nuances that perform a kind of cultural work on the dominant forms themselves (90). Peter’s father encouraged his son to “become a man” by removing the obstacles from his and his mother’s life. In this way, Peter’s careful murder of Phil embraces the kind of masculinity his father, a doctor, constructed for him, which departs in significant ways from Phil’s frontier masculinity. Breaking “with the Western’s long-standing convention that death is clean and without cruelty” (Cooper 19), Peter’s preparation and execution of his plan to kill Phil was, primarily, an intellectual endeavor, as he studied his father’s medical textbooks before venturing out to find an anthrax-poisoned cow, which he then sliced into with surgical care and precision, protected by gloves that Phil would have referred to as “sissy.” Peter also deployed Phil’s queerness—more specifically, the fear and shame and self-hatred he harbored regarding his own queerness—against him. In this way, Peter seems to understand his own queerness as a source of power and agency that Phil, trapped in his homophobia, could never have detected, or even imagined.

As Wildermuth writes, “the Western hero is the individualistic, competitive male, whose ‘violence is represented as unavoidable’ and who, after the violent act, ends up with a woman in his arms” (3). Peter’s character clearly re-visions this nostalgic construction, especially as he murders Phil to not only protect himself, but to protect his mother, and ostensibly, to protect her relationship to George. Through this lens, Peter’s heroism aligns with Frank Kermode’s description of “the mechanism of rhetorical reversal” which asks an audience to “look at the matter in another way” (18). What do we make of this queer hero who is first tortured by, then learns from, manipulates, and ultimately disempowers Phil, and in so doing, the rhetorical construction of frontier masculinity? According to Budzyńska, the more daring the peripeteia, or rhetorical reversal, “the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall

feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding something out for us, something real” (Budzyńska 82). What *The Power of the Dog* finds out for us then is the fraudulence and flimsiness of frontier masculinity—not only how destructive it is, but how vulnerable it is to destruction. And as it follows, how the rhetorical construction of frontier masculinity—along with the deep stories it travels through—can (and should) be adapted and re-visioned in order to open alternative possibilities for collective and individual identity construction, habits of mind, and ways of being.¹⁸¹ Especially, as explored earlier, the construct of frontier masculinity and the broader frontier mythology from which it circulates has traveled far and wide—with political and material implications that are carried across the globe.

Though critic Karl Olson reads Phil’s death as “the tragic consequences of homosexual desire” (Weltzien 104), I disagree—it is not Phil’s queerness that left him vulnerable to Peter, or that led to Peter’s decision to murder him. Rather, it was Phil’s adherence to learned mythologies about what it means to be a “real man,” which ultimately left him gloveless, wounded, and dead—still consumed, even at the moment of his death, with hatred for himself as a queer man (and for Rose as a woman, which I discuss in more depth in the next section). Through this reading, Phil’s character, in conjunction with Peter’s, re-visions nostalgic narratives related to frontier masculinity, mythology, and heroism. This aligns with an additional and related anti-nostalgic narrative element: contrary to nostalgic frontier mythology, in *The Power of the Dog*, the wilderness is not a sight of healing, salvation, safe haven, or even self-discovery and fulfillment, as it was so often constructed to be, at least for

¹⁸¹ In considering how re-visioning the Western genre and its deep stories may contribute to possibilities for alternative (individual and community) identity construction, it’s useful to return to Gottlieb’s work on identity construction in Appalachia, where she qualitatively studied how (and to what extent) identities are inherited culturally in the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia (341). Gottlieb notes, “we cannot assume automatic links between identities and the land,” as identity construction is also generated “through historical and cultural events” as well as the interactions between ways of being and ways of communicating (349-50). Gottlieb also found a relationship between identity formation and trauma, including regional trauma (354). Gottlieb’s qualitative study finds, unsurprisingly, that identities are not self-fashioned (354-55), but that education emerges as a significant factor in “breaking away from regional social identities” (344). Connecting to Gottlieb’s conclusion, this chapter argues that popular culture texts can serve pedagogical roles in re-visioning possibilities for identity construction outside of the narrative bindings of frontier mythology.

white men.¹⁸² And while Peter's character learns from the range, ultimately using parts of it in his murder of Phil, it's also true that Peter's heroism does not hinge on his conquering and taming of it, nor his mastery over it. In fact, Peter's use of the anthrax-poisoned cow to murder Phil reveals the ways Phil himself was ultimately ruined by the very land and animals he assumed he had dominion over—a plot point that works to challenge settler views and logics related to relationships between humans and non-human nature. In these ways, the film models methods for rhetorically rejecting nostalgic narratives related to the rural Western frontier and employing adaptation and re-vision in ways that reflect and refract centuries of nostalgic othering. In the next section, I consider through what means and to what ends the film navigates the complex terrain of frontier femininity, and in conjunction, how the moves Campion makes throughout the film contribute to the broader project of grappling with frontier mythology, the traditional Western formula, and the role of feminism in re-visioning both.

Grappling with the Feminist Western and Frontier Femininity

Throughout my analysis, despite temptation, I have not found it ultimately useful to label *The Power of the Dog* as a “Queer Western” or a “Feminist Western.” However, throughout this study, I have continued finding my way back to questions regarding Phil's hatred of women and men who do not align with dominant frontier masculinity, Rose's challenges to frontier femininity, and representations of queer masculinity across the film. Throughout the film it's clear that Phil's adherence to frontier masculinity hinges on disrespect, and even disgust, for women. For example,

¹⁸² As previously discussed, Comer, Cram, Ladino, Deloria and many other scholars speak to the way the frontier was imagined and projected to fulfill a national desire for Eden, and how this Eden was largely situated in the open, “untouched, and pure space of the Western frontier: promised land, a site of redemption from European decadence, a place where Edenic innocence is again at least remotely possible, where the effect of modernity might be remedied, where the mind/body split will be healed (but not with the more profound social consequences that would go with such a healing)” (Comer 137).

when George tells Phil that he has married Rose (who Phil refers to as a “suicide widow” with a “half-cooked son,” and calls a “cheap schemer,” to her face no less), and that she will soon be moving into their large house, Phil stomps angrily out to the barn and begins to beat a horse with a saddle blanket, calling the horse a “fat-faced bitch,” “little bitch,” and “whore” (32:30-33:00).¹⁸³

Interestingly, in the novel, the horse that Phil beats is male, and his slurs are not gendered (Savage 82). However, Savage’s novel directly examines Phil’s hatred of women, with the narrator remarking that Phil associated “bad women” with animals. Like animals, Phil thought that women could (and should) be used as needed (i.e., to serve men). “Good women,” on the other hand, were pure and sexless in Phil’s view (Savage 265). Phil’s feelings regarding women and femininity align with deep stories about the role and value of women, especially in the context of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and the frontier mythologies and agrarianism tangled up in it—which “hinged on the subordination of women” and beliefs that women were made to comfort and support men without getting in their way (Fink 195)—and in the context of the early-twentieth century, when the “cult of true womanhood,” or the “cult of domesticity,” lingered, validating the perspective that women and young girls should be pious, pure, submissive, and mostly inside the home cooking, cleaning, raising children, and staying out of the way of men unless called on. As mentioned, this element of Phil’s frontier masculinity—his treatment and view of women, and of Rose in particular—leads to his death by Peter, as Peter likely would not have murdered Phil if Phil had not been driving his mother toward illness. This offers a revision of the traditional Western formula and its deep stories, as it is certainly not a combination of homophobia and misogyny that typically leads to the death of the character who most adheres to constructions of frontier masculinity.

¹⁸³ Earlier, he had tried to convince his brother not to marry Rose, insisting that George does not need a license to “get some ass.”

Soon after Rose moves into the “Big House” on the Burbank ranch with George, it becomes clear that Phil is determined to terrorize her. It is also clear that, without any work to do at the ranch, and with George often doing various business in town, she feels alone, isolated, purposeless, and thus, trapped in her fear of Phil, who almost never leaves the ranch. At first, audiences see Rose sneaking alcohol from her bureau, trying to make sure George does not see. Soon, Peter finds his mother drunk in bed with a bottle beside her, saying she has a headache (1:25:01-1:27:45).¹⁸⁴ Peter becomes concerned, and understands that it is Phil who is causing his mother’s distress. However, Rose replies that Phil is just a man, “only another man.” This response emphasizes the film’s exploration of masculinity and raises intriguing questions about what it means for Phil to be “only another man.” When Phil becomes aware of Rose’s drinking and understands that it is a response to his behavior, he seems to decide that he will be able to terrorize her even more by developing a relationship with Peter. “Mother, you don’t have to do this,” Peter says to her one afternoon, regarding her drinking, then goes to his room to look through his father’s medical textbooks (1:27:45-1:27:55). Though percolating below the surface, audiences likely begin to understand that Peter connects his mother’s drinking to Phil’s behavior, and that he believes he can (and that it his duty to) find a way to save his mother.

Looking across Campion’s work, Ellen Cheshire argues, “the filmmaker’s heroines are all in search of their own identity” (Cooper 13). Though, in *The Power of the Dog*, it seems more accurate to say that Rose is in the process of losing her identity—first, with the death of her first husband, and then with the marriage to George, which transported her away from her work at the restaurant and inn in town of Beech to the large, cold, and dark mansion on the ranch, where she spends most of

¹⁸⁴ In the novel, there is first mention of Rose’s headaches but not her drinking (a doctor visits the ranch and thinks she needs to eat more, but she does not like to sit at table with Phil). From there, she starts drinking to ease the pain of headaches (203-6), then connects her headaches to the psychological terror of being around Phil (206-7).

her time alone and trying to hide from Phil.¹⁸⁵ As explored, I read Peter as the foremost “hero” of the film. However, we open further possibilities for reflection and re-vision if we read Rose as the heroine of the film instead, placing her role at the center of the narrative. Though she does not kill Phil herself, she *does* drive her son to do so, which ultimately frees them both from his grasp, and further, offers Peter a pathway through which to exercise his power and agency on the ranch, a decidedly heteronormative space. Through this reading, Rose’s heroism is more passive than active, seemingly aligning with Jane Tompkins’ argument in *West of Everything*: “there’s nothing to [the women in Westerns]. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble” (Tomkins 61). It is impossible to argue that Rose is not a woman being pushed and shoved, and in response, crumbling. At the same time, we may also read her crumbling—and her turn toward alcohol in particular—as coping, as she does her best to protect her son from Phil and to cope with the fear she feels toward him, and to survive daily life on the ranch. It is also important to consider, once more, Rose’s giving away of the hides that Phil was keeping, at least in part, for the rope he planned to use to pull Peter toward him. Through this action, Rose proves that she will not be terrorized into fitting with Phil’s ideals of frontier femininity—she will not, in fact, get out of his way. And yet, in his book-length study on the Feminist Western genre, Wildermuth posits that a Feminist Western is “any cinematic or televisual Western that...represents and implicitly endorses the most progressive conceptualizations of the feminine subject empowered politically and socially as an agent” (6). Through this lens, and with Rose in mind, it is quite challenging to argue that *The Power of the Dog* is a Feminist Western, even as I maintain that her character pulls at the frays in frontier femininity. However, if we disturb the gender binary posited by Wildermuth and consider Peter, a character who feminizes and queers

¹⁸⁵ In the novel, audiences are offered a more direct exploration of how Rose feels that she has lost her identity and sense of purpose when she moves to the ranch (234).

frontier masculinity, as the hero—and as such, the central lens through which to measure the film’s feminist re-visioning of the dominant Western formula—it’s impossible not to read *The Power of the Dog* as a complex but critical model for re-visioning deep stories about gender, sexuality, and power. Below, I breakdown a subtle but still striking rhetorical move that invites reflection on multispecies relationality as a re-vision to the traditional Western formula.

Multispecies Relationality as a Re-visionary Move

The Power of the Dog deploys visual rhetoric to propose a multispecies relationality—a relationality that is examined largely by Indigenous scholars and writers and is often veiled, unacknowledged, or flat-out rejected in the traditional Western formula, and, for that matter, traditional Western thought (Kimmerer 2013; Ravenscroft 2018; Tallbear 2017; Todd 2016; Watson and Huntington 2008). Both the novel and film portray its human characters as deeply entwined with and connected to the landscape which surrounds them, even when they are not aware of it.¹⁸⁶ Campion carefully maintains elements of American landscape fiction (a tradition which Savage’s novel contributed to) in her film, as the seasons, the sky, and the shadows often align with, or foreshadow, the characters’ narrative trajectories. The sky, especially, seems to contain a knowledge that the characters themselves are not yet privy to. Though the multispecies relationality proposed by the film seems to lie under the surface of the main characters’ consciousnesses, the visual arguments made by the film suggest the importance and prevalence of multispecies relationality in their lives. Importantly, though, this is achieved in ways that disrupt and challenge frontier nostalgia’s tendency to romanticize—rather than

¹⁸⁶ As Savage has said, “I have always believed that the landscape shapes the people. A person will say, for instance, that there is something different about Westerners. And I think the moment you leave Chicago and go West, you find that people are quite different. For one thing, there is an openness about them. I think the difference in Westerners has to do with the fact that they feel it’s impossible to look at the Rocky Mountains—or to look at the horizon, which is equally vast—and consider that there is such a thing as Europe or neighbors or anything else” (interview with Jean W. Ross for *Contemporary Authors Online*, quoted in Proulx 282).

critically reflect on—human and non-human relationships. Much of the multispecies entanglements explored and proposed in the film happen through visually striking transitional shots that are void of the human characters themselves but seem to communicate the knowledge and agency of the ranches' beyond-human inhabitants. For example, the night after Peter has poisoned Phil, before anyone else is privy to Phil's impending death, the audience is offered a long, exceptionally close shot of a large, brown horse's face and eyes. As the lens widens slightly, a second horse moves just in front of the first, their hair moving together in the wind, the first horse's jaw and eyes moving slowly and carefully (1:51:02-1:52:00). Then, a fly lands on the first horse's back, prompting this horse to shake and shimmy, convincing the fly to buzz away. Though we may read into this interaction between the horses and the fly, drawing connections to the narrative and its characters, I am just as, if not more, interested in considering how the film's slow, careful study of animals, plants, and the sky unfolds throughout the narrative—often punctuating its most elemental scenes—suggests to the audience that these beyond-human beings have knowledge, agency, relationships, and narratives that are both entwined with and independent of the human characters. Like the elements of visual rhetoric previously explored, this multispecies focus sets the film in opposition to the traditional Western formula, and in doing so, works toward the film's larger re-visionary tactics. In the next section, however, I discuss one of the most pressing limitations of *Campion's* adaptation.

Skirting Settler Colonial Logics and Practices

In comparison to *Campion's* film, *Savage's* novel offers a much deeper and more direct exploration of the forced relocation of Native American peoples from Montana, largely to a reservation in Southern Idaho. As discussed in the novel, the land now owned by the Burbank's is home to the gravesite of a deceased chief, a fact that emerges as a significant plot point when the chief's son and grandson arrive on the ranch (14-15). Also in the novel, expressed through close-third perspective,

Phil reflects on the “naturalistic principle” through which he views Native American genocide and relocation, i.e., that “the weak destroyed by the strong.” Directly addressing the rhetorical construction of the “Indian other,” the narrator goes on to say, “Phil had no romantic ideas about Indians. He left that stuff to the professors and dudes from back East with their fancy cameras. Children of nature, my foot” (179). Despite Phil’s views, the narrator offers a different perspective. At this time in Montana, the narrator states, “The government no longer even pretended to believe in treaties,” and feared white voters more than “violence from the Indians” (172), which contributed to their relocation to Southern Idaho, where the weather was brutal and the land far from prosperous for ranching and agriculture. The narrator also discusses assimilation and exclusionary reservation rules, such as prohibition against firearms, alcohol, or leaving reservation (173). In this way, the narrator implicitly rejects Phil’s views of Indigenous peoples and their place on his land, and importantly, in this distance between the narrator’s and main character’s perspective, possibilities for reflection and re-vision emerge.

However, the film and its characters leave “vanishing Indian” ideologies intact. There is little mention of Native American presence aside from Phil’s one mention of “camping Indians,” who he says must be removed from the ranch (he does not specify how this removal should happen) (1:03:20-1:04:00). In the same speech to his cowhands, Phil reminds them that they do not sell hides to anyone. However, as briefly explored, when Phil and Peter are off for their day of fence-fixing, and Rose is alone on the ranch with the housemaids, she finds out that Ms. Lewis has turned away a Native man and his son who were interested in buying hides from the ranch. Ms. Lewis informs Rose that the hides are typically burned because Phil does not want anyone else to have them. Hearing this, Rose runs outside in her silk nightgown, robe, and heels. She tells the man and his son to take the hides, and that she would be honored if they take them. She says her husband owns the ranch. The Native man is wearing a black hat, beaded necklaces, and a white button shirt with a

blazer over top. He speaks Shoshone to his son, who is wearing overalls and a hat over his braids. The young boy then gets a small box out of the wagon and offers it to Rose: a pair of intricately beaded leather gloves. She says they are “so delicious,” and “so deliciously soft” as she rubs them across her face. She then begins to wander around manically with them on, eventually falling down as eerie piano music plays (1:38:50-1:41:03). Speaking to the romanticization of “Indianness,” Cooper writes that Rose is “overwhelmed by the weight of this encounter” (13). After her collapse, George emerges, running to Rose’s rescue, and carries her limp and sickly body back to bed, where she requests to keep her new gloves on. As Cooper writes, this moment “is a fleeting reminder of the troubled settler-colonial history central to the Western genre” (13), as “the hierarchies of colonialism remain entrenched as the Burbank ranch seems here to stay” (17). Meanwhile, the novel offers a more contextualized encounter with the Indigenous character, Edward Nappo, and his son, who have travel to the ranch (land on which their family lived before removal) to visit the gravesite of Nappo’s father, a chief (172-186, 236-247).

Phil’s frontier masculinity and its entwinement with settler colonial logics and practices is certainly placed on display, but it does not become fully or overtly deconstructed. One afternoon in the barn, Peter asks Phil if Bronco Henry taught him how to ride. Phil says that he did, and that he also taught him to use his eyes in ways that other people cannot use theirs. With this, he takes Peter out through the back door and together they look out into the mountains. Phil ominously asks Peter if he sees what Bronco Henry saw in the shadows stretching across the range. “A barking dog,” Peter quickly and confidently replies. “You just saw that?” Phil asks, shocked, but Peter replies that he noticed it as soon as he arrived on the ranch (1:24:04-1:24:50).¹⁸⁷ As examined in my first chapter, this scene calls to mind Mills’ work on the construction of a sublime experience, which relies on the

¹⁸⁷ In the novel, when Peter reveals to Phil that he too sees the “running dog,” Phil runs his tongue across his lips (259-60).

“spectatorial position” of the colonizer, who views a landscape as a vast space of potential, emptied of humans and their work. This emptying out works to permit the colonizer to distance themselves from the material of the landscape—constructing it as “Other,” and then taking a position of power over that “Other,” which makes possible a sense of “transcendence” (131-6). Phil’s construction of a sublime experience hinges on his sense that only he and Bronco Henry, and now Peter, share the ability to see the dog in the shadows on the mountains. In this way, Phil’s experience of the sublime relies on co-conceptions of exclusion, authenticity, and ownership, all important to the rhetorical construction of frontier masculinity and frontier mythology and its place in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia more broadly.

As the film focuses on re-visioning deep stories related to frontier masculinity, it continues to strike me as curious that *Campion* did not attempt to “resist the colonization of collective memory and its consequential erasure of cultural difference” (Combs 731). And that, in fact, Savage’s novel published decades prior does much more to this end. As Combs argues, “The stories and voices of traditionally silenced groups, like Native and Mexican Americans, need to be placed at the center of historical narratives to counter the hegemonic influences of settler colonialism” (Combs 731). The film’s spare and limited examination of settler colonial logics and practices, as well as histories of Indigenous presence on and forced relocation from the ranch, feel like a missed opportunity given the layers of settler colonialism involved in the narrative setting in settler colonial Montana and the film’s production in settler colonial New Zealand (Leotta 2022). Audiences of the behind-the-scenes documentary will also become privy to various other forms of construction and fabrication that went into making the movie, as the documentary shows the crew working to prepare the Burbank home, barn, roads, and pastures—landscaping, bulldozing, and manipulating the land in various ways. In preparation for a scene where George and Rose pull off on the side of the road, into a pasture, to share tea and a dance, we see a man weed whacking and dumping out trash bags

with fake snow inside, then more crew members nail this “snow” substance to the ground. While a mountain range spreads out tall in the distance, many construction and crew vehicles are spread out across the pasture in the foreground (9:00-10:18). It is impossible to watch these behind-the-scenes and not consider the settler colonial relationships to land reproduced by the film industry, and perhaps the Western film industry in particular, as land is not only occupied but manipulated, extracted from, and exploited in various ways in the making of many Western films themselves. Ironically, this manipulation is necessary in order to capture the frontier in the way that it has been mythologized. And yet, these tensions and their narrative legacies are left un-revised by the film. Audiences are not likely to gain any critical literacy regarding the history of colonization or the ways that nostalgic frontier mythology and the Western genre have rhetorically silenced and erased the presence of Indigenous peoples and cultures, continually circulating the collective invitation to “remember to forget” (Stuckey 230).

Barkin’ at a Knot or Re-visioning Frontier Nostalgia

While my analysis emphasizes the rhetorical and narrative tactics through which *The Power of the Dog* (2021) re-visions frontier mythology through a particular attention to constructions of frontier masculinity, I find myself here, at the end of this chapter, recalling an interview with Larry McMurtry, where he lamented:

I’ve tried as hard as I could to demythologize the West. Can’t do it. It’s impossible. I wrote a book called *Lonesome Dove*, which I thought was a long critique of western mythology. It is now the chief source of western mythology. I didn’t shake it up at all. (Valdez)

Here, McMurtry offers a sorrowful though urgent lesson—the kind of lesson one must learn over and over, the kind of lesson Thomas King teaches in *The Truth about Stories*, and the kind of lesson I have been suggesting across my dissertation—cultural narratives become deeply embedded in our imaginations and in our bodies, in our texts and laws and lives and soil. And yet, you won't find me claiming that attempts to disturb, destabilize, and revise the Western genre—to this day one of the most significant (re)producers of frontier nostalgia—are little more than, as some cowboy might say, barkin' at knots. Rather, as I believe my work in this chapter shows, it is crucial that we, both despite and because of the incredible strength and stability and mileage on 'Old West' stories, heed Cram's call to bury our noses down deep, to "smell the blood in the soil," and to both ask and seek answers to questions such as: "What can be done with violent inheritances" (xv)? For, as many of us will learn many times across our lives, our violent inheritances do not heal on their own, without attention or effort, no matter how hard we might try to "remember to forget" (Stuckey).

Through a blend of anti- and counter-nostalgic rhetorical tactics, Campion's adaptation of *The Power of the Dog* (2021) offers one answer to Cram's important question, and through doing so, offers a path toward a more critical literacy of not only the stories we tell about the frontier, but the ways in which these stories continue to circulate in our daily lives. While I don't claim that the film I have closely observed and analyzed here can lead to a national or even international breakup with frontier mythology, what Cram aptly refers to as a "bad romance" (9), I do believe it is crucial that we, as scholars and teachers and storytellers, look again (and again and again) at the West (and as it follows, the Western). Especially because, as Campbell argues, practices of looking again are "not just an academic game, but a political act concerned with survival, especially for all those previously omitted or silenced in the old histories" (9). And further because, as Cram argues, the region (and the blood in its soil, and the stories it circulates about this blood) is "central to the development of North American energy extraction, racial capitalism, and imaginations of vitality," is a "symbolic

resource of nature-based nationalism,” and as such, carries significant consequences for the ways “relationships between land, body, and nation” are structured (4). As I’ve shown here and across my dissertation, popular culture texts, which I argue are our twenty-first century sponsors of literacy, present an urgent and accessible opportunity through which to study the rhetorical and narrative tactics that we can (and must) use to attempt, bit by bit, to re-vision the stories we tell about the past so that we might make alternative futures possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

WILDLIFE JAMS IN AN UNFINISHED WORLD: FROM WILDERNESS NOSTALGIA TO RE-CREATION AT YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

This chapter constructs an analytical bridge across the textual and the material—observing and tracing the ways rural nostalgia, as a rhetorical and affective force, contributes to the construction of both our imaginative and material reality in the United States and, through imperialist practices, across the globe. This chapter also returns to lines of inquiry threaded throughout this project: What does rural nostalgia open up or make possible? And where might we find models for the sort of rural nostalgia that might inspire transformation and progress? By transformation and progress I mean, in part, the de(con)struction and re-vision of the deep stories that undergird the complex tangle of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy threatening the planet and its inhabitants.

The particular terrain traversed in this chapter was prompted by an experience I had while on a run in Laramie, Wyoming during the summer of 2022. Though I had lived in Laramie on and off since 2015, I had never before found my way to Welsh Lane, a dirt road just west of town, lined with barbed wire fences separating the public road from the private ranches. I was struggling to catch my breath running at a pace that would have felt easy if it were not for the high altitude, dry heat, and strong winds (i.e., summer weather in the high plains). Then I noticed what I thought was a very large brown rock up ahead, just behind the barbed wire. As I approached the rock it moved and turned its large, horned head toward me. I stopped in my tracks; held my breath. I had never seen a bison at such close range before, and unexpectedly, I felt an entanglement of deep stories circulate through my body, resulting in feelings of awe and wonder, fear and nostalgia, the seemingly incommensurable pangs of recognition and misrecognition—feelings of knowing and unknowing (Medina-López and Sharp-Hoskins 2022). I veered gradually toward the opposite side of the road

and moved past the bison, glancing over toward him every few strides. We watched each other with curiosity, I felt. For the remainder of my run I contemplated the experience, both the interaction itself and my emotional, embodied response to it. I was especially attuned to hard-to-articulate sensations that, if it weren't for my studies in and around rural nostalgia, I'd likely write off as strange, idiosyncratic flukes rather than an expression of a collective (settler) imaginary and imperialist nostalgia toward the western region and its "wild beasts." As I have examined across my dissertation, there is a particular rhetorical ecosystem produced by narratives of rural nostalgia, and more specifically, by narratives of the American West (or the so-called frontier). And it was this rhetorical ecosystem that I found myself tangled up in on my run that day—feelings of reverence (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki 2006) and a sense of connection to the sacred (Marietta 2012), a sensation of the sublime (Warner 2021) and the therapeutic (Cloud 1998), feelings of connection and disconnection, imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989) and a sense of innocence specific to the settler positionality (Tuck and Yang 2012). It was not until I returned home, becoming curious not only about my own emotional experience but about the bison and what he was doing there along the road, that I did enough Internet research to understand that I had not had any sort of interaction with a wild bison along the last stretch of mythical frontier—rather, I had simply run by a bison that lived in captivity, like the majority of the remaining bison on the North American continent, and who would one day be slaughtered, sold, and consumed. It was, then, a materialization of the complex and inextricable relationality across nature and culture, human and beyond-human, life and death in a capitalist context (Tallbear 2011; Kimmerer 2013). I felt angry and even a bit betrayed as this realization came into focus—my experience was grounded in myth, and worse, was produced by my own internalization of nostalgia for figures of rurality.

Though there is much important debate about the relationship between bison conservation and consumption in the contexts of settler colonialism and capitalism (Barnard 2020; Lueck 2002;

Mamers 2020), my interest, in this chapter, is in the complex rhetorical and emotional tangle in which I found myself that day, and the reality I was eventually forced to confront. I wondered about the possibilities opened up by such confrontation—especially if it were prompted at a larger scale. I began thinking about this confrontation and its potential through the lens of what Stewart describes as a moment of poesis—or composition—in what she refers to as an “unfinished world” (77). That is, a world that continues to come together, and to fall apart. As I began to consider where such moments of confrontation might happen, I recalled images I had seen of what the National Park Service refers to as “wildlife jams” (see Fig. 1 below).



Fig. 1. This image captures what the National Park Service (NPS) refer to as a “wildlife jam” in the Hayden Valley of Yellowstone National Park. Importantly, in 2016, the Executive Committee of the Blackfoot Nation petitioned the park and the Board of Geographic Names (United States Geologic Survey) to change the name of Hayden Valley to Buffalo People’s Valley. This petition has so far been unresolved. (Source: Jacob W. Frank for NPS.)

Continuing to draw methodological guidance from Sedgwick’s reparative reading and weak theorizing, I wondered what “potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending” are made

possible by the kind of composition and confrontation that occurs at the scene of a wildlife jam.¹⁸⁸ From my study thus far, and from my personal embodied experience on the run that day, I felt quite certain that wildlife jams were not only produced by rural nostalgia (and its entanglements with nationalism and settler colonialism), but also that they themselves reproduce feelings, rhetorics, and narratives of rural nostalgia that are, as I've examined across my dissertation, tangled up with the material realities produced by policies related to the economy, land, and resources. This chapter takes what we have learned in my study of popular culture texts to examine the material composition of wildlife jams, searching for possibilities for pedagogy and openings toward re-vision of the deep stories that undergird the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. In terms of the re-vision of deep stories, this chapter is especially attuned to the rhetorical construction of the wilderness as a nostalgic other, and the ways this construction clashes against the political, social, economic, and ecological reality. As an extension of re-vision, this chapter takes up the concept of re-creation (Briggs 348). Like re-vision, re-creation is a critical return to, and perhaps reckoning with, the past in order to re-create present (and thus, future) relationalities in these “disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times” (Haraway 1).¹⁸⁹ By re-creating relationalities, however, I do not mean “to create new” relationalities, but to return to, become aware of, and learn from relationalities that have been disavowed and harmed by the tangle of settler colonialism, nationalism, and rural nostalgia I've examined across this study. Echoing arguments made by Pflugfelder and Kelly in their

¹⁸⁸ In this chapter and across my dissertation I have been especially drawn to Stewart's interpretation of Sedgwick's theoretical framework for reparative reading and weak theory. As Stewart writes, “For me, then, the point of theory now is not to judge the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation ‘right’ but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance” (73).

¹⁸⁹ I first came across the term re-creation in Kate Briggs' novel (about the novel as a form) *The Long Form*. In this text, Briggs seems to acknowledge all acts of creation (in this case, the creation of literature) as acts of re-creation that are “indebted to and [are] drawing...on how things have been done in the past.” Through this lens, the term re-creation exists in relation to my theorizations of adaptation and re-vision from my previous chapter. As a reminder, by re-vision, I draw from Adrienne Rich's proposition of re-vision as a critical feminist rhetorical and compositional method, summarized by “the act of looking back...of entering an old text from a new critical direction...not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us” (18-19).

consideration of arboreal rhetorics and tree-human relations, listening to and learning from Indigenous knowledges urges a reframing of goals often articulated across EuroWestern environmental rhetorics. As they state, “the goal is not to create better relationships, but instead recognize how humans and nonhumans have always been related” (75)—an argument made poignantly by Watts and her study of Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe cosmologies and the concept of Place-Thought, wherein “land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these Thoughts” (21). Settler colonialism, Watts argues, is an attack on Indigenous cosmologies, and as it follows, the awareness of Place-Thought relationalities embedded within them. Despite the ways settler colonialism attempts to erase and marginalize Indigenous stories, knowledges, and the relations they construct (Mukavetz and Powell 200), Holiday and Lowry assure, “humans do not need to reinvent the wheel with respect to models of ideal cohabitation,” as “there is a long history of Indigenous wisdom based upon egalitarianism, respect, interconnectedness, and reciprocity” (175) that we can (and must) learn from and honor, even as this is complex territory in the context of settler society and the colonial epistemology.¹⁹⁰

As my analysis will work to untangle, the wildlife jam as a moment of poesis—of possibility, of composition, of evidence of an unfinished world, of proof of the demand for a re-creation of relationalities across the human and non-human—includes a series of entangled actors: tourists in their vehicles with their various cameras and smartphones and other technology, the crowded roadways and their rhetorical design, the nonhuman “wildlife” and their agented migratory patterns and needs and desires, the weather and its power and agency as it impacts each of these actors in

¹⁹⁰ Holiday and Lowry go on to discuss how, “Indigenous epistemologies based upon values of mutual flourishing and egalitarianism” are often “presented outside the context of indigeneity and thereby appear progressive and new” (175). In this chapter and future iterations of this project, I want to resist this colonial trend toward the “exploiting, romanticizing, and mining of Indigenous knowledge” (Tuck 646). Toward these aims, I think once more of Dr. Bhattacharya’s response (referenced in chapter two), to her white student who asked if she was “allowed” to draw from Patricia Hill Collins’ theorization of Black Feminist Thought: “You are not ‘allowed.’ You must!”

response to past and present relationalities between nature and culture, the human and nonhuman. As I will argue, because the composition of a wildlife jam offers such a sharp and poignant confrontation—such a disturbance to the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia in which Yellowstone exists, and in which tourists turn up expecting—I believe wildlife jams open powerful pedagogical paths toward the re-vision of wilderness nostalgia and the re-creation of human and nonhuman relations, especially when paired with more systemic, institutional re-visionary, re-creational, and decolonial moves (such as the land trust granted to the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe of Death Valley in 2000). As such, this chapter argues for the value in learning from and listening to the instruction offered by wildlife jams.

In this next section, I lay the foundation for this work through a rhetorical reading of Yellowstone National Park, situating the park in the broader rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. As I composed the following section, largely critiquing the National Park Service and the rhetorical and material construction of Yellowstone, I was not without considerations of what the land that is now Yellowstone National Park, in our current settler colonial and capitalist context, might look like if it were not for its designation as government owned and protected.¹⁹¹ With this grappling mind, this chapter learns from the ways Skeen—a former NPS ranger turned rhetoric scholar—wrangles with the complexities inherent to the establishment and existence of national parks. As Skeen writes,

I am not suggesting that institutions like the National Park Service get let off the hook because they are better than the Exxon Valdez. Rather, I want to recognize that the lands under the care of the National Park Service are well-poised to be sites of intervention in

¹⁹¹ Even though, as explored in my previous chapter, moving from an overtly exploitative extraction-based relationship to one that is designated as preservation for recreation is not as benevolent as is often assumed (Sandilands 2003). In fact, as Rutherford writes, “the move from extractive to aesthetic capital remains firmly within the constellation of capitalist enterprise, all the while maintaining its distance from the distasteful business of business” (129).

colonial practices because, in many ways, they are already positioned to critique the norms of settler society, to change settler practices. (44)

Skeen's articulation here feels aligned with my own project in this chapter and across the dissertation, as I take up Yellowstone National Park through the lens of a reparative rhetorical analysis—one that positions the park, and its entanglements with rural nostalgia, as sites of potential confrontation, reflection, and intervention. And though we can and should critique the fraught and often violent relationship between protection and ownership in the context of the United States, I do agree with Skeen's observation that such protection (via ownership), at this moment, will likely help stave off the further development of exploitative and extractive industries, and as such, offers the time and space for the asking and seeking of answers to questions related to land use and relationality across nature and culture, the past and present, constructions of the rural and urban, and space and story.¹⁹² However, as Holiday and Lowry examine, without an expansion of legal "personhood" that is grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and includes nonhuman entities, all of the nonhuman beings who animate the space that is Yellowstone will remain vulnerable to colonialism and capitalism (174).

While this chapter importantly attends to the settler colonial context of the national parks and their human and nonhuman visitors and inhabitants, like settler scholars working across similar terrain—such as Skeen in *Rhetorics of the Wild* and Clary-Lemon and Grant in "Working with Incommensurable Things"—I do not assert this chapter as a form of decolonization, as to do so would be an example of yet another settler scholar reproducing the practice of decolonization as a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012). Rather, I aim for the work of this chapter to be a taking up and

¹⁹² Additionally, and importantly, as DeLuca reminds us, "Environmental politics has always required unexpected alliances and painful compromises. This was true in Muir's day and it is true today. Muir's 'unholy' alliance with Southern Pacific does not stain his myth-it made possible the successes upon which the myth rests" (489).

taking seriously of Yellowstone as a site of intervention—a deeply storied space, yes, but also one that presents possibilities for collective re-vision of colonial narratives and the relationalities they create. In doing this work, I hold myself accountable and responsible for attending to the gap in rhetoric and composition scholarship focused on the NPS as a national, colonial storytelling agency and archive that contributes to national rhetorical efforts (Skeen 13-14). In particular, across this chapter, I enact my responsibility for critiquing the institution and its rhetorical practices, but perhaps more importantly, for staying with the trouble (Haraway 2016) long enough to confront moments of re-visionary and re-creational potential.

Reading Yellowstone National Park as a Rhetorical Landscape

Since their establishment in the 19th century, national parks have been one of the primary ways upper- and middle-class people from urban areas have interacted with what they consider the rural and the wilderness. According to the National Park Service (NPS) Advisory Board, one third of all adults in the United States have visited an NPS site within the past two years (Spurlock 260). But, as I examine in more depth below, it is largely white people, as well as wealthy tourists from across the globe, who visit the parks. In 2016, 345 million visitors made their ways through and to National Park Service sites, and these numbers have only increased, spurred, as I argue, by a resurgence of rural nostalgia in the wake of continued social and political turmoil and polarization, alongside continued rapid technological development and change.¹⁹³ As Ladino argues in *Memorials Matter*,

¹⁹³ According to the Outdoor Industry Association and its trends report, outdoor recreation participation hit a record high nationwide in 2022. And according to Katie Klingsporn reporting for *WyoFile*, “Some 93% of the nearly 300 studies that assessed recreation’s wildlife effects found at least one significant effect, most of which were negative, according to their findings.” The biggest takeaway across this research, though, is a so-called “stewardship gap.” As Klingsporn reports, “Though industry data shows 77% of outdoor enthusiasts make 12 or more outings a year, only 19% commit to a stewardship activity in that same timeframe.” In response, Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Office Manager Patrick Harrington states, “We need to build recreational opportunities that are sustainable, and allow people to engage with a minimal impact and then use that to catalyze these efforts towards conservation” (Klingsporn).

these numbers alone prove that, every day, the National Park Service exercises the massive rhetorical role it has been assigned—that is, “narrating the intense history of the U.S.” and in doing so, “managing the relationship between public memory and national identity” (xii). Ladino’s argument aligns with Skeen’s characterization of the NPS as, first and foremost, a “story-telling agency” and host to an “extensive archive” of land and its memories (14). With the large reach and significant rhetorical power of the NPS in mind, National Parks are vital sites through which to study relationships across urban and rural spaces and cultures, and in doing so, to understand the rhetorical role nostalgia plays in composing these relationships. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to thoroughly examine the broad and complex history of Yellowstone National Park (YNP), the National Park Service (NPS), and related institutions such as the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management, this section includes a brief sketch of the history of Yellowstone before more thoroughly examining the all-tangled-up rhetorics and narratives that undergird the history (and presence) of the park. In other words, I offer a reading of Yellowstone National Park as a rhetorical space, composed (and continually recomposed) through rhetorical (and narrative) action that not only represents, but materializes the entwinement between rural nostalgia, nationalism, settler colonialism, and capitalism. This entwinement, as I’ve shown across my dissertation, is continually reproduced through and across cultural narratives, popular culture texts, public policy, and as I will explore in this chapter, material spaces.

On March 1, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Act, effectively establishing the first national park (i.e., the first “pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people”) in the United States or elsewhere. As determined by the act, Yellowstone stretches across 2.2 million acres and is situated largely in northwestern Wyoming, though it also crosses into land designated as Montana and Idaho. By securing ownership of land designated as Yellowstone, the federal government secured a piece of the soon-to-be mourned, longer-for, and

“closed” frontier. In *Sublime Argument at Grand Canyon*, a rhetorical study of the relationship between national parks and the construction of the sublime, Matthew Warner argues that national parks and monuments are key players in the central struggle of settler colonialism—the struggle over land, resources, recognition, and sovereignty (126). Importantly, Warner reads the creation of the National Park Service as driven by nostalgia entwined with the rhetorical construction of the frontier, as the park service “attempted to erect walls around a piece of Americana that, for the sake of nostalgia, no one wanted to see disappear” (125-6). As explored in the previous two chapters of my study, the roots of frontier nostalgia are very much tangled up with not only the construction of Indigenous peoples as “Indian Others,” but also with Indigenous displacement and genocide filtered through vanishing Indian ideology (Deloria 1998; Tuck and Yang 2012). Through its entanglements with frontier nostalgia, Yellowstone became hitched to what Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki refer to as a “rhetoric of reverence,” part of the broader rhetorical ecosystem produced by narratives of the American West. This rhetoric of reverence, as I examined in my introductory section to this chapter, is characterized by feelings of awe and wonder, often generated by a “distanced observational gaze” that invites a remembering to forget followed by a sense of relief against settler guilt. Further, through narratives regarding the frontier as a sacred space that offers healing (at least to those of a particular race and class—i.e., well-to-do white people), Yellowstone National Park traffics in a combination of therapeutic (Cloud 1998), sacred (Marietta 2022), and sublime rhetoric (Warner 2021). In other words, the rhetorical ecosystem in which the park resides reproduces “the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of previously existing order” (Cloud xiv), alongside appeals to sacred, shared values and the (sublime) sensation that one is having an unquestionable experience of identification and belonging with “pure,” “unspoiled” land. In this way, the rhetorical ecosystem of Yellowstone in particular, and NPS sites more broadly, invites participation in a restorative nostalgia that resists public deliberation and counterargument (Boym

41; Spurlock 263; Warner 20).¹⁹⁴ Because of the deeply internalized and entangled nature of these rhetorics, and because of the way they are designed to create a collective resistance to recognition, reflection, and reckoning, the potential of transferring energy toward re-vision and re-creation at Yellowstone is limited but—importantly—not impossible.

The establishment of Yellowstone, as well as the parks that came after, represents a complex entanglement of motivations, narratives, and realities—from environmental preservation and conservation to economic profit and settler expansion (see Comstock 2020; Cronon 1996; Dorsey and Harlow 2003; Patin 2012; Spence 1999). For many white American tourists, a visit to Yellowstone reinvigorates and affirms the mythology (turned policy) of Manifest Destiny, as the park is designed to generate restorative nostalgia, national pride, and sensations of belonging that shield realities of stolen land, displacement, and genocide (Warner 18).

Mark David Spence's *Dispossessing the Wilderness* offers an in-depth history of the construction of the first national parks, attending closely to the ways the National Park Service contributed to Indigenous displacement as well as deep stories regarding Indigenous communities and cultures, such as those explored in my analysis of *Reservation Dogs* (2021–) and the rhetorical construction of the “Indian Other.”¹⁹⁵ As Spence notes, the establishment of Yellowstone marks the first instance of the removal of the Native population in order to “preserve” nature (55), as Indigenous peoples had

¹⁹⁴ As a reminder, Boym describes restorative nostalgia as the nostalgia that is responsible for “national and nationalistic revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti-modern myth making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories” (41). Further, to distinguish restorative from reflective nostalgia, she writes, “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (41).

¹⁹⁵ The founding of Yellowstone is often linked directly to what is called the Washburn Expedition, which took place in 1870 and involved, as one can imagine, a group of white men claiming that they discovered the land and its unique thermal features (despite evidence that members of the expedition were first told about Yellowstone by Indigenous peoples). This group of prospectors, explorers, scientists, and railway owners who would eventually push for the establishment of the park composed a narrative, in many ways already drafted for them, that Indigenous people did not inhabit or use the lands that would become the park because they were, as the white men claimed, fearful and superstitious of its geysers (Spence).

been living in relation to the land that became Yellowstone for over 12,000 years. In fact, the act broke Indigenous rights established by The Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868, and soon after the establishment of the park, the government engaged both military force and public policy to displace the many different Indigenous tribes—such as the Kiowa, Blackfeet, Cayuse, Coeur d’Alene, Shoshone, and Nez Perce—that lived and interacted with the land, often forcing them to the Wind River Reservation, over 500 hundred miles away. As examined, this forced removal was essential to the construction of narratives of rural nostalgia, as they hinge on mythologies of empty land (Landry).¹⁹⁶ And though the federal government ultimately prevailed in their forced removal efforts, Indigenous practices of survivance from Yellowstone to Yosemite troubled nationalist narratives that claimed the land as an “uninhabited wilderness preserve” (Spence 55-56). One such example of survivance comes from the Timbisha Shoshone Tribe of Death Valley, who resisted removal from Death Valley National Park lands and eventually were granted a land trust by the United States Congress in January 2000 (Skeen 15). As this example illustrates, the National Park Service and its deep stories about Indigenous presence and absence (which shield realities of removal and erasure) are vulnerable to re-vision and re-creation.

While there are many examples of the ways the NPS attempts to wrangle with both its historical amnesia and its history (Ladino 2019, Powell 2015, Skeen 2018), this work is most often facilitated by outside organizations (such as Guardians of Our Ancestors’ Legacy). On the large scale, and sometimes despite intentions, the institution’s role in settler colonialism is left either

¹⁹⁶ Don Shoulderblade, a Cheyenne spiritual leader and spokesperson for Guardians of Our Ancestors’ Legacy, a group working to reclaim and preserve Yellowstone National Park as Indigenous land, writes that many of the 27 tribes with ancestral connections to Yellowstone still consider the area sacred and maintain ties to the region (Landry). And in direct contradiction to settlers’ narratives, Crow and Yakama author Hunter Old Elk writes that “native Americans in Yellowstone considered features such as the geysers and thermal pools sacred” and beneficial “for medicinal purposes to treat ailments such as rheumatism and arthritis” (Landry). Further, as Alys Landry writes for *Indian Country Today*, “Yellowstone was an epicenter of Indigenous oral tradition and cross-country commerce...challenging the notion of a pristine wilderness untouched by human influence” (Landry).

unexamined (Skeen 14) or examined in ways that are more invested in moves to innocence rather than reparation and decolonization (see “Native American Affairs” and “Historic Tribes” for examples). With this in mind, it’s interesting to note NPS employees are trained to be politically neutral—this is, of course, despite the fact that their very existence is inherently political, from their military-inspired uniforms to their responsibility to protect federal land (Ladino et al., 3), and as it follows, federal interests.¹⁹⁷

As the first national park, Yellowstone has long been a site where tensions over land use, especially in terms of conflicts between conservation and consumption, play out on the national stage (Rutherford xi). As the forced removal of Indigenous peoples living and engaging with the land reveals, from its very conception, tensions between protecting and preserving the land and its (nonhuman) inhabitants and presenting the land and its (nonhuman) inhabitants to park visitors have animated political discourse and legislation surrounding the park (Spence 119). As such, the construction of roads, trails, and buildings happened in cooperation with stakeholders across global travel and tourism and, to a lesser degree, environmental preservation (Rutherford 101). Though explorers, journalists, railroad financiers, artists and photographers, and politicians worked to name, categorize, describe, depict, and explain the space, its features, and uses in a way that naturalized the rhetoric of land as a sacred, sublime, and therapeutic visual and symbolic resource (John 144-158), “settlers, most often white and male, have most often interacted with this site as a place of commerce, rather than sublime communion with nature” (Rutherford 101). If anything, we may understand the park’s relationship with sublime, sacred, therapeutic rhetoric as that of a Burkean terministic screen shielding nationalist and economic interests.

¹⁹⁷ The NPS’s banning, and then un-banning, of its employees’ visible celebration of Pride this summer speaks in fascinating ways to these tensions (see “Uniform Policy Q&A” for the official memo from the NPS as well as Wiggins 2024 for an in-depth discussion of the discourse surrounding the ban).

Relatedly, captured in the act that established it, as well as preceding policy around wilderness use in the United States (such as the Wilderness Act of 1964), Yellowstone National Park also makes particular claims about access and equality that are far removed from the realities of park history and presence—as each national park displaced people from their homes and further marginalized already-marginalized communities, from Indigenous communities in parks such as Yosemite and Yellowstone to poor white mountain communities in Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains (Powell 2015). Further, the opportunity to visit national parks has always been limited to those who can afford travel and leisure, even as the westward bound rail system was constructed, in many ways, to provide access to the national parks across the western region (DeLuca 2001), and to further persuade settler that these “natural wonders” were not only accessible but belonged to them and were theirs to venture to and explore (Spurlock 260). The rhetorical framework present in these campaigns demonstrates the way Yellowstone, and the parks more broadly, have been pitched as the unifying symbols of a nation far more different, divided, and inequitable than claimed (Clark, “Remembering Zion” 80). More specifically, Yellowstone is positioned to propose a sense of national unity around the protection of the natural environment, which, as I’ve argued, shields out rhetorical purposes related to the upholding of settler colonialism, nostalgia-driven nationalist narratives, and capitalist gain.

In fact, at the same time that politicians and conservationists alike were claiming that the national parks were for all people, African American people living in slavery had just recently been granted freedom and were now living under the threat of Jim Crow (Ladino, *Memorials Matter* 229-230). Shelton Johnson, a Black ranger at Yosemite National Park and the writer of *Gloryland*, a novel that brings together NPS and frontier history, writes about the complex experiences many Black people have on public land: “African Americans experience insecurity, exclusion, and fear born out of historical precedent, collective memory, and contemporary concerns” while at the same time,

“awe is possible for people of any skin color” (Johnson, quoted in Ladino 230).¹⁹⁸ And yet, the rhetorical construction of the national parks, and wilderness more broadly, brushes off these histories and contemporary complexities to make claims regarding wide access, democracy, and unity.¹⁹⁹ As DeLuca assures though, the national parks are “overwhelmingly an obsession of well-off white people,” and the presence of American people of color remains minimal (491; also see Petersen and Chenault 2023).

In considering exclusion, inequity, and displacement in relation to the national parks, it’s also important to consider the towns and communities adjacent to the parks. In the case of Yellowstone, nearby Jackson Hole, Wyoming is evidence of the entanglement between nature and profit, and as noted in my previous chapter, the wealthy resort town shields visitors and residents from “the more complicated picture of land politics in the West” (Rutherford 110).²⁰⁰ Spending a significant amount of time in the region, beyond the boundaries of Yellowstone, tends to pull back the curtains on its complex social, political, and economic layers—the trouble is, most tourists head home before such curtains are pulled.

¹⁹⁸ As Johnson points to, differently racialized bodies have different relationships to place, land, and nation. And as Radhika Mohanram argues in *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, “The white body has the privilege of seeming to be unmarked by race and thus is seen as at home in any and all spaces, while the blackness of the black body marks it as belonging in some places and not others, rendering it relatively static and immobile” (4).

¹⁹⁹ In *Memorials Matter*, Ladino writes about how, for NPS, “diversity and inclusion is a top priority” (262). Toward this priority, they recently formed the Office of Relevancy, Diversity, and Inclusion. In “A Call to Action: Preparing for a Second Century of Stewardship Engagement” (2012), NPS declared that they would “invite new publics into the parks, from recent immigrants to those serving in our Armed Forces to young people.” And at a 2014 conference called “Co-Creating Narratives in Public Spaces,” scholars across African American studies, sociology, anthropology, and history, alongside NPS educators and curators, convened with the goal to ensure “the narratives at [NPS] sites are informed by up-to-date scholarship that is inclusive and incorporates issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and power.” Panels focused on topics such as “healing in community” and “recasting the nation’s most powerful stories” (262-263). However, as Ladino reports, at this time, “NPS visitor-use data is not showing an increase in visitation among minority groups, and as such, she argues, “The NPS must find ways to center this typically marginalized knowledge, especially at its sites of public memory” (263-4).

²⁰⁰ Further, those who labor in Jackson Hole’s service industry and surrounding wilderness areas cannot afford to live in the town unless they are independently wealthy. As such, service workers often must live at least forty-five minutes away in towns such as Kelly, Idaho. Rutherford also notes that, according to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, only sixty-seven Native people live in Jackson. Meanwhile, twenty thousand Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho live on the Wind River Reservation, 140 miles away (116). Meanwhile, in Jackson, “nature meets comfort, privilege, and luxury to produce a commodified wilderness experience” (Rutherford 110).

In *Governing the Wild*, Rutherford conducts participatory research, taking part in an ecotour of Yellowstone, ultimately designating the park as “a veritable nostalgia machine,” serving as “a monument to nationalism, the frontier, and wilderness” (xx). This sacred monument and the nostalgia it fuels and is fueled by contributes to what Warner refers to as the “tourism industrial complex of the American West”—a material and rhetorical structure that attempts to craft “a cohesive and compelling narrative” in which, as Cram might say, there is no blood in the soil (Warner 4-5). In other words, while the existence of Yellowstone contributes to the rhetorical construction of the United States as both powerful and progressive, its rhetorical ecosystem shields the conquest of millions of acres of land, “the wholesale slaughter of bison, wolves, and bears” (Rutherford x), and as examined, the displacement, marginalization and genocide of the Indigenous peoples who lived on, worked with, and stewarded the land for over 12,000 years before it became Yellowstone National Park.²⁰¹ It’s important to note the direct relationship between this erasure and the nostalgia national parks and memorial sites persuade their visitors to feel—a nostalgia that is, as Ladino describes, “not for the past as it actually happened but rather for a past that might have been, for an ideal version of our country that has not yet existed, but could” (Ladino, et al. 8). In other words, it is a nostalgia that relies on and generates mythology rather than history. And while, for its over-three million visitors each year, Yellowstone may evoke what philosopher Glenn Albrecht has called solastalgia—or homesickness for landscapes untouched by extreme climate change, extraction, pollution, and development (Ladino, et al. 10)—researchers also note that a visit

²⁰¹ In a reflective post written to commemorate the park’s 150-year anniversary, the NPS acknowledges, “In the early 1900s, the government killed nearly all predators in the park, and the bison population was hunted to less than two dozen. Later that century, the fires of 1988 burned more than one-third of the park, and the introduction of nonnative lake trout decimated native Yellowstone cutthroat populations” (“150 Years of Yellowstone”). However, the NPS credits “modern resource management efforts” for ensuring “Yellowstone’s ecosystem is the healthiest it has been in over a century.” The park’s five strategic priorities—1) Focus on the Core (workforce); 2) Strengthen the Yellowstone Ecosystem and Heritage Resources; 3) Deliver a World-Class Visitor Experience; 4) Invest in Infrastructure; and 5) Build Coalitions and Partnerships—speak to the park’s current challenges and the tensions inherent in addressing them.

to Yellowstone can persuade visitors to believe that nature has already been saved, and perhaps even more dangerously, that through their very visit to Yellowstone, they have somehow participated in its saving (despite, of course, the ecological costs of such visits). In other words, as Rutherford argues, a visit to “pristine” Yellowstone renders “modernity’s effect on environmental destruction seem distant and the ability to remedy it through more management seem all too possible” (Rutherford x). This is, as Spurlock articulates, a “safe, neoliberal outlet for green citizenship” where visitors understand themselves as part of a “a present past that requires little or no personal or political investment in social and economic change” (252). In other words, because a visit to Yellowstone is often aligned (ironically) with environmental citizenship, environmental action is reaffirmed as an individual act that works within, rather than troubling, the status quo—such as leisure travel via plane. In evoking a facade of pristine wilderness locked in a state of timelessness—that is, in reproducing a rhetorical construction of wilderness as a nostalgic other—a visit to Yellowstone encourages visitors to shield themselves from making connections across the past and present—or across settler colonialism and the climate crisis, or across the construction of roadways and the migration of bison, for examples. In this way, visitors are meant to leave their time at Yellowstone feeling, themselves, personally transformed and healed by their temporary engagement with the wilderness, rather than with a commitment to collective transforming and healing across the human and nonhuman. In the section below, I situate the rhetorical construction of wilderness as yet another rural nostalgic other (Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus 2018), and alongside it, the construction of tourism and tourist practices—both essential to the designation and (de)stabilization of Yellowstone National Park.

Wilderness as Nostalgic Other and the Rhetorical Role of Tourism

Like the nostalgic others investigated across my dissertation—the small town, the Indian Other, and the frontier—the construction and temporal freezing of the wilderness as a nostalgic other was both a “product and protest against Industrialization” (DeLuca 48). And like all rural nostalgic others I have so far examined, this one—the wilderness—was devised with doses of dualism and irony, as the idea of wilderness (and the longing to preserve it) was largely made possible by Industrialization, as developments such as trains and cameras propelled the practices of tourism and the positionality of the tourist (DeLuca 487). As I’ve examined in regard to rural nostalgia broadly, Europeans and North Americans constructed “the wilderness” at the same time that notions of “the urban” and “the civilized” were constructed. Alongside anti-urban ideology, the “wilderness grew in the popular imagination as a place of refuge and escape, a ground for moral and physical fortitude, and a site for the manifestation of the sublime” (Vannini and Vannini 16). As Vannini and Vannini make clear, notions of the wilderness—rural space—and civilization—urban space—are constructed in opposition to one another. In fact, in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Aldo Leopold famously argues that wilderness is not merely the counterpart to civilization, but that wilderness is at the very foundation of civilization (DeLuca 486). This same argument is captured in another influential text, John Muir’s *Our National Parks* (1901), wherein the message of mountains as home and wilderness as necessity was delivered to (and reserved for) upper- and middle-class white people—as Indigenous people, poor people, people of color, and people with disabilities were largely constructed as uncivilized or even inhuman. Importantly, in 1933, Luther Standing Bear, Oglala author and educator stated, “We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams...as ‘wild.’ Not until the hairy man from the east came...was it wild for us” (xix). Standing Bear’s reflection here emphasizes the way notions of wilderness and the wild, especially as both separate from and for humans, was a white settler construction. Alongside constructions of the

wilderness in opposition to civilization is the dualistic framing of the wilderness as a space where we may encounter evil, and the wilderness as a space where we may encounter the divine, the wilderness as sacred and healing, and the wilderness as dark and dangerous (Cronon 70-73). Much of the framing of the wilderness of dark, dangerous, and evil was hitched to the construction of the Indian Other (Warner 17, Nash 24, Camp 6). Once the wilderness was under the control of settlers (that is, once Indigenous peoples were displaced and removed), both physically and ideologically (such as through vanishing Indian narratives), it could be (and was) constructed as a sacred, healing space.

In the rhetorical construction of the wilderness as a nostalgic other, nonhuman nature is constructed as frozen in time while humans and culture are constructed as dynamic, agented, and ever-changing. As Indigenous writers, storytellers, and scholars have long contended, this division and hierarchization is not only false—rooted in settler mythology that can be traced back to Enlightenment thinking—but it is dangerous and responsible for a myriad of social, political, and ecological implications (Watts 2013). Through the Euro-Western, colonial frame, Watts asserts that humans are pitched as the only being capable of rational thought, and as such, derive their agency from themselves in a way that is independent of land and nature (Watts 25). In *Planting the Anthropocene*, Clary-Lemon points to the ways constructions of humans versus nature continue to animate contemporary environmental rhetoric and, reproducing “modernist notions that place humans in a position of control over their environment and position environments as no more than resources to be protected or exploited by humans” (33). In white settler societies, this has largely resulted in ambivalence and in-action in the face of continued harmful action (Clary-Lemon 9). Importantly, as Gabriella Wilson argues regarding rhetorical entanglements at Shenandoah National Park, “Moving away from the nature/culture dichotomy and towards a recognition of human entanglement with the more-than-human provides generative opportunities to consider ethical entanglement and responsibility,” especially in the face of climate emergency (Wilson 2022).

In all of these ways, a pilgrimage to a national park, and to Yellowstone National Park in particular, is a complex enactment of colonialism, commerce, power, and pleasure that is entangled with nostalgia-fueled narratives about nature and the nation. As such, visiting Yellowstone is also tangled up with structures of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability (Rutherford 93-98). And further, even when considered pure recreation, “Tourism is educational and pedagogical, and experiences are ideologically infused” (Warner 132). Through this lens, tourism presents complex rhetorical possibilities for re-seeing, re-storying, and re-creating. Without the construction of wilderness, and particularly its construction as a frozen-in-time nostalgic other, there would be no wilderness-as-spectacle (Grebowicz 22). In other words, wilderness and tourism were constructed alongside each other. In fact, contemporary tourism practices were generated right alongside the establishment of the national parks, and as it follows, right alongside Indigenous removal and genocide across the North American continent (Camp 2013; Deloria 1998; Jasen 1995).²⁰² With this in mind, tourism is an accepted, banal, and even quotidian settler colonial practice that relies on and reproduces the sort of historical amnesia (“remembering to forget”) and cognitive dissonance required for the stabilization of nostalgic national (imperial and settler colonial) narratives that assert rural land as empty and pure (Warner 29).

Following the logic of imperialist nostalgia, tourism to national parks is driven by the idea that “something has been lost or obscured and can be found” (Rutherford 108). This is interestingly at odds with the actual experience most tourists have during their time in Yellowstone National Park, as most tourists don’t stray far from roads and pathways. While theorists have noted that all tourism is predicated by nostalgia, mourning, and loss, Braun notes that these emotions and their rhetorical power are especially central to the experience of the so-called ecotourist, as ecotours “are

²⁰² Tourism to the national parks also contributed to the rhetorical practice of “playing Indian” examined in my second chapter—at parks such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, representations of Indigenous peoples were controlled by the park service in complex but largely nostalgic performances such as the Indian Field Days.

heavily inflected with mourning, nostalgia, and romanticism” (Rutherford 122-123). For Braun, the modern subject experiences the present as a loss of the past, and as such, finds pleasure in the search for markings of the past, and in particular, markings of pristine origin—enter: the construction of the wilderness and, in particular, Yellowstone National Park. Through the construction of wilderness as a nostalgic other, a visit to Yellowstone is not only a visit to “our” pristine origin. More broadly, for the national park tourist, a visit to the wilderness represents a visit to the (imagined) past, and as such, reaffirms their identity in the present as a modern subject (Braun 112). In these ways, wilderness tourism is far more driven by the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia than it is by environmentalism. Especially as, “the green impulse becomes more deeply intertwined with commodification” (Rutherford 114). All told, current dominant ways of “visiting” wilderness are influenced by the colonial framing of humans over nature, followed by the history of the commodification of nature—a history that points us right back to my opening section and the establishment of Yellowstone—combined with a “moralizing environmentalism” that often acts as a rhetorical shield (Rutherford 93).

While rhetorical study, like mine in the section below, can shed light on what tourists are likely to do at Yellowstone, and depending on their political positionality and social location in reference to constructions of the wilderness and deep stories regarding national parks, what they are likely to feel, it’s also true that tourists are people, and people are unpredictable. As Patin writes, “Tourism does not simply solidify, fix, construct (modernity), and colonize (nonmodernity). Tourism also disrupts, destabilizes, unfixes, and critiques the dominant cultural schema” (285-6). Said differently, “The National Park Service is the agent curating the framing, magnification, focus, and relational distance,” but tourism, though “a key element in sustaining the internal logic of settler colonialism,” can also be a rhetorical intervention, and as such, holds “emancipatory potential” (Warner 36).

This section has worked to examine the tangled up rhetorical constructions of the wilderness, as a nostalgic other, and the tourist, as a rhetorical subject that—by venturing to and through designated wilderness areas, and engaging particular practices internalized through national narratives and the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia writ large—reproduces a collective imaginary of the wilderness frozen in time that is, in reality, not separated from culture and not frozen in time, but continually destroyed and threatened by this same complex tangle of nationalism, settler colonialism, and capitalism—and as I’ve argued, the nostalgia that often works as a shield to it all. This said, I set out in this dissertation, and in this chapter in particular, with the task of moving beyond critique and toward a reparative mode of analysis, a mode that looks for ways we may not only learn from rural nostalgia, but engage it toward reflective, progressive ends. For, as Chelsea Graham writes in her *Frontiers in Communication* article regarding Yellowstone, similarly to becoming trapped in cultural mythology, critique can “foreclose possibilities for kinship and relationality with the land and its myriad human and other-than-human inhabitants” (11). With this in mind, I recall Ladino’s argument that, at their best, “NPS texts convey the sense that history, too, is an ongoing process, and that the natural world is not just an exploited ‘resource’ but also an agent in that history.” (148) And so, while I critique the construction of the wilderness and the rhetorical role tourism plays in the reproduction of this construction, and while I acknowledge the conflicts and confrontations that animate the relationship between visitor and visited, through a reparative lens, I work to attune my analytical lens toward the possibilities for multispecies ongoingness such conflicts and confrontations may open.²⁰³ Following Iovino and Opperman’s “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism,” the rhetorical analysis below, “takes matter as a text; as a site of narrativity” (451). And further, relies on the belief that, “Stories, identities, and even physical matter are always

²⁰³ As Ladino writes, “Confrontation isn’t what we’ve come to expect at an NPS site, and it would be uncomfortable, especially for the most privileged of us. But honest confrontation is essential if we are to move forward as a united country and work with other countries to survive the Anthropocene” (*Memorials Matter* 270).

unstable and unsettled,” (Ladino 148), and that landscapes in particular are, as Doreen Massey argues, “provocations” that “embody the processes and forces” of geology, capitalism, public memory, and collective story that, “temporarily stabilize a particular landscape formation and, at the same time, foreground that landscape formation’s transience and contingency” (Ladino 148). In my analysis section below, I take this transience and contingency in mind, and the potential that comes from it, into account as I analyze wildlife jams as moments of poesis—as critical compositions—wherein confrontations may turn pedagogical, may offer alternative lenses through which we may revision deep stories and re-create more harmonious, harm-reducing relationalities.²⁰⁴ Following, once more, Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus’ rhetoric of nostalgia—a framework for “probing what people are nostalgic for, why, and to which ends” (88-89)—I wonder, in a culture that claims a love and longing toward the wild, how might all this love and longing be harnessed, and how might the wildlife jam—as a moment of composition—open paths toward such harnessing? Or, as Terry Tempest Williams asks in *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America’s National Parks*:

Can we engage in the restoration of a different kind of storytelling, not the stuff of myths, self-serving and corrupted, but stories that foster integrity within a fragmented nation? Can we change America’s narrative of independence to one of interdependence—an interdependence beautifully rendered in the natural histories found in our public lands? (12)

These sorts of reparative questions map out urgent terrain that scholars working across language, rhetoric, writing, and story must step into as the planet continues to warm. We must, as I am trying

²⁰⁴ My use of the term “harm-reducing” here comes from Tuck and Yang’s encouragement, from “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” for settlers “to enter into relation with us and practice settler harm reduction in your research, writing, teaching, and other everyday practices of living and being” by “acknowledging Indigenous worldviews and practices. Settlers can and should responsibly echo, affirm, and practice Indigenous ways of knowing” (Mukavetz and Powell 209-210).

to do here, resist dead-end critiques and instead, look for flashes of potential transition, or potential openings wherein transition may occur.

Wildlife Jams in an Unfinished World



Fig. 2. Another image of a “wildlife jam” in Yellowstone National Park, as a group of bison migrate across a roadway crowded with vehicles, many of which are large trucks, vans, and RVs. We also see what appear to be two park visitors walking across the roadway, likely back to a white truck, which has pulled off the roadway (Source: Condé Nast Traveler)

Since 2008, Yellowstone National Park has hosted over three million tourists each year, with a peak number of visitors (nearly five million) venturing to the park in 2021. Despite the wilderness experience tourists claim to seek, in 2017 the NPS reported that, based on the findings of a recent study, visitors to Yellowstone National Park spend an average of 60 to 80 percent of their time at the park inside vehicles, often due to the kinds of “wildlife jams” shown in figure two, above (Modak). As figures one and two included in this chapter show, wildlife jams are caused by a combination of overcrowded roadways, animal (i.e., “wildlife”) migration, and park visitors’ attempts

to capture (typically via digital photography) the presence of the animals (in these cases, bison), often parking and getting out of their vehicles in order to do so. The wildlife jam as a composition, then, is a synthesis, or even a clash, of human and nonhuman cultures—a contact zone wherein power dynamics are neither stable nor symmetrical (Pratt 7).

Unsurprisingly, the NPS report referenced above shared that, due to the park and its roadways being over-capacity in terms of both visitors and vehicles, especially during the peak summer season, there will soon be “unsustainable degradation to the road system and the natural environment” (Modak).²⁰⁵ Wildlife jams, then, offer an urgent and complex case study of the material implications of rural nostalgia and its rhetorical and narrative force—insofar that national parks themselves, as I’ve found throughout this chapter, are materializations of rural nostalgia and its circulation through national narratives and policies. In conjunction with my earlier chapters focused on the circulation, reproduction, and repurposing of rural nostalgia in popular culture texts, my analysis of material space and material composition in this chapter works to trace the way rural nostalgia travels across imaginative and material dimensions—which we may visualize as, in no particular order, story ↔ space ↔ text. More specifically, I chose Yellowstone National Park, and the park’s frequent wildlife jams in particular, as a case study for this rhetorical tracing because of the striking ways in which the park, and the relationalities composed there, crystallize the enmeshment between the rhetorical circulation of deep stories and the composition material spaces, and further, emphasize the ways nonhuman beings rhetorically challenge the nostalgic construction

²⁰⁵ This prediction came to fruition in the summer of 2021 when over-use of the roadway combined with the climate crisis—which is currently resulting in more rain and less snow across northwestern Wyoming—and resulted in the flooding and washing out of Yellowstone roadways. This led to the closing of the park and evacuation of 10,000 visitors. And the response I noticed on social media, from friends and acquaintances with apparent plans to visit Yellowstone that summer, was another piece of inspiration for this chapter. As SJ Keller writes for National Geographic, “For the millions of people who love national parks and Yellowstone, and for those who live in the region, or had their summer plans dashed, unprecedented events can come with a kind of grief, or even resentment” (Keller). Regarding the flooding, Cathy Whitlock, a paleoclimatologist and lead author of the “Greater Yellowstone Climate Assessment,” stated, “It’s really clear that our infrastructure is not well placed for climate change” (Keller).

and othering of the wilderness—generating opportunities for listening and learning in ways that can destabilize the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia.

As examined above, the typical Yellowstone tourist is white and middle-class with United States citizenship and settler ancestry.²⁰⁶ As such, these visitors venture to the park with deep stories about nature and nation in tow, and further, with (conscious or unconscious) longing to experience the wilderness of Yellowstone as it has been constructed for them via the national imaginary—as a pristine, timeless nostalgic other that generates and affirms sensations of awe and wonder, reverence and patriotism, connection and transcendence, healing and homecoming. Through internalized imperialist nostalgia, they turn up searching for what has been lost and destroyed—more specifically, though, for evidence that what they suspect has been lost and destroyed has, in fact, been safeguarded and preserved—here, at long last and evermore, for them to experience. Because of the broader rhetorical ecosystem in which the national parks are embedded, the tourist’s visit to Yellowstone, as scholars such as Rutherford and Ladino have studied, likely generates sensations of goodwill and benevolence, relief and innocence—evidence that they can step into a temporary and performative relationship with the wilderness, and as it follows via internalized logics, evidence that they are part of the preservation of the wilderness; that by witnessing the majesty of Yellowstone, they had and have a hand in that majesty. In *Memorials Matter*, Ladino writes about the affective distance likely felt by non-Native tourists at NPS sites, as the peaceful and “pristine” landscapes often conceal histories of trauma for marginalized groups. As she writes, “For most non-Native tourists, I suspect, white guilt slips into a self-congratulatory form of patriotism without necessarily feeling compassion for, or taking responsibility for, either past or present Indigenous struggles”

²⁰⁶ Importantly, as Tuck and Yang argue, settler colonialism “is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation” (5), and this reassertion happens through quotidian activities such as tourism to and through Indigenous land. In other words, a settler’s visit to YNP is incommensurate with decolonization, despite the way that it can and does offer settler tourists opportunities for critical reflection, re-vision, and even re-creation.

(Ladino 29). This seems especially likely, as at the foundation of tourism is the (practice and performance) of using power and agency to engage one's privilege toward the seeking of pleasure (Conquergood 2002; Sandilands 2003; Urry 2002; Warner 2021).²⁰⁷

It's also important to note that contemporary tourists are embedded in myriad forms of social and digital communication, typical Yellowstone tourists turn up with the purpose to capture the "wildlife" and "pristine nature" that Yellowstone, through its rhetorical ecosystem, promises. Consciously or unconsciously, they likely turn up with the goal to not only "capture" nature, but to circulate their re-presentation of it, and thus, to assert themselves as rhetors in the broad reproduction of wilderness nostalgia via national park visitation. In other words, national park tourism also relies on visual consumption, an essential part of what Urry labels the "tourist gaze." As Rutherford argues, drawing from Urry's framing of the tourist gaze, tourism—perhaps especially wilderness tourism—relies on the capability of photography to reproduce images of what has been constructed as beautiful, unique, significant, valuable, and worth seeing (Rutherford 121-22). In the context of National Park tourism, the continual reproduction of particular images from particular lookouts works rhetorically to frame the parks in a way that stabilizes romantic, nostalgic narratives about what the parks are, and in turn, who "we" are as Americans. Further, wilderness photography reinforces separation and hierarchization of humans from nature, offering a sense of power-over the environment and its inhabitants, and through the lens of wilderness as nostalgic other, the sense that one can not only have evidence of the timelessness of rural space, but that one can, in fact, take part in such temporal freezing. In other words, as Rutherford writes, "the viewing and capturing of landscapes and animals through the lens allows for...anxiety to be relieved and control over an ever-

²⁰⁷ Importantly, if one is struggling to fully understand the level of privilege inherent to tourism, we might consider the simple yet stark fact that tourism requires not only a home to leave, but one to return to.

changing nature to be reasserted; the photograph fixes in time a fleeting nature under threat” (Rutherford 122-123).

Relatedly, Ladino makes the point that, today, most park visitors are “technological tourists” equipped with a variety of devices and digital connections. Visits to national parks almost undoubtedly begin online with “third-nature” representations and digital texts ranging from official narratives and images on the NPS website to friends’ Instagram posts to YouTube. “All this preparation predisposes us to encounter the site in a particular way—the way laid out for us by these texts,” Ladino writes (*Memorials Matter* xv). Similarly, extending Urry’s notion of the tourist gaze to our contemporary digital times, Ekdale and Tuwei posit that tourism practices today can be understood through the lens of the ironic encounter, wherein, “The irony comes from the erasure of the voice, reality, and lived experience of those who live in the destination being toured” (quoted in Warner 35). This is, of course, especially true for the kind of photography Yellowstone tourists are, as Rutherford experienced on her ecotour, most hungry for: images capturing the mythical wild beasts of the west—from bison and moose to wolves and bears.²⁰⁸ In other words, as Sontag aptly wrote, “When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic, we take pictures” (15). Though there is much complexity and difference across photography and hunting, especially when considering hunting practices across Native and non-Native cultures (Watson and Huntington 2008), it is important to file both photography and hunting, when practiced by those informed by settler logics, as moves toward bringing nature—categorized as that which is other-than-human—“under the (perceived) dominion of humans” (Rutherford 123). In this way, wilderness nostalgia is tangled up, at its roots, with longings to be not just *in* but *in control of* nature—to capture and conquer—an essential logic of settler colonialism and, as it follows, U.S. national identity and policy.

²⁰⁸ Ironically, as Rutherford argues, “The urge to encounter ‘wild nature’ perversely makes it less and less likely that such nature can ever be found” (123).

And so, despite what are likely very real longings to “disconnect” and convene with nature in a way that is harmonious and benevolent, the typical Yellowstone tourist is more primed to reproduce harmful relations with nonhuman nature, as the nostalgia they have internalized predisposes them toward such relations and the actions produced out of them.

Relatedly, despite their longings and motivations to be in and with (a mythologized version) of nature, and despite the fact that tourism is meant to be a temporary break from one’s day-to-day rituals and routines, Yellowstone visitors are likely unable to fully shake the high-speed hustle of the American (capitalist) psyche. In other words, this typical visitor to Yellowstone is likely trying to get where they are going, from one point of the park to another, as fast as possible. And then—just like that—they are sitting in a traffic jam both like and unlike the traffic jams they confront in their ordinary lives. This time, rather than rush hour, a herd of bison are migrating across the roadway. On another day it may be a different group of animals, such as bear, moose, or elk. The bison (also referred to as buffalo), though, may generate a particularly strong emotional embodied response, as the bison has been constructed as an essential symbol of the frontier (Popper and Popper 2006)—a construction that, following the broader logic of rural nostalgia, is bolstered by imperialist nostalgia (i.e., settler longing for that which our culture and its stories and practices have destroyed or nearly destroyed).

In other words, the tourist may experience the bison’s migration as an answer to many of their longings for the sacred, sublime, and therapeutic—much in the way that I did in the encounter I described at the beginning of this chapter. However, unlike much of the visual rhetoric designed and presented by the National Park Service, the composition that comes together at the site of a wildlife jam is one that destabilizes rhetorics of pristine, preserved, timeless wilderness and its storied separation from humans and culture. In *Observation Points*, Thomas Patin investigates the visual poetics of national parks, ultimately aligning the rhetorical strategies employed at national

parks to those employed at museums, arguing that far beyond preservation, national parks display, exhibit, and present in ways that regulate bodies, direct vision, and as a result, produce specific conceptions of (and make particular claims about) nature, culture, and the nation. As Cindy Spurlock writes about national parks broadly, these spaces engage visual rhetoric to position visitors as collective witnesses to an “authentic” and “shared” past, resulting in powerful performance of the nation that circulates through popular culture and political life (248-258). While places are rhetorical and built environments shape our social and political lives (Endres and Senda-Cook 2001; Aoki et al. 2005; Warner 2021), national parks are especially persuasive and resistant to critical engagement because of the ways they are constructed, viewed, experienced as “natural” and “untouched.”²⁰⁹ However, as wildlife jams, and any image a tourist captures of them makes clear, the land designated as Yellowstone, and the beings contained therein, are dynamic, agented, thinking parts of the cultural, political, technological present (Haraway 2016; Watson and Huntington 2008; Watts 2013). They are not, as the rhetorical ecosystem surrounding “the rural” and “the wilderness” would have us believe, nostalgic others—frozen in a romanticized past. Through this lens, the bison and their migration across the road challenges the ways the human versus nature dichotomy removes agency and power from those beings aligned with nature (Tallbear 2011).

In this way, the wildlife jam challenges what Code frames as “spectator consciousness,” which stems from the colonial view that humans are outside and above nonhuman nature, and as such, can “manipulate, predict, and control it to serve” our needs and desires (32). For, the tourist certainly desires to capture an image of the “wild” bison—but the crowded roadway certainly

²⁰⁹ In short, we have a rhetorically-designed experience at national parks because we believe we are having an experience free of rhetorical design. The rhetorical ecosystem in which Yellowstone National Park resides—that combination of reverent, sacred, sublime, and therapeutic rhetoric—significantly impacts the ways visitors’ experience the park. But, because deep stories around what national parks are is so deeply embedded in our national consciousness, many visitors feel the experiences they have at national parks are uniquely their own, divorced from culture and politics (Clark, *Rhetorical Landscapes* 148). All told, at national parks, the connection between nature and nationalism is deeply felt but rhetorically invisibilized, and as such, difficult to pin down, reckon with, and re-vision.

disrupts the wilderness nostalgia aesthetic and its positioning of humans as separate from nonhumans, and nature as separate from culture. Instead, as they sit in their vehicle, the tourist is likely confronted with the fact of their entanglement in and with the lives of the bison, and with the entire Yellowstone ecosystem (Cordova 2007, Deloria 1998; Lyons 2010). As such, the visual rhetoric of the wildlife jam, a rhetoric the bison is an agent in composing, asks tourists to disrupt their learned sense that national parks, and rural space more broadly, is land untouched by human influence.²¹⁰

This request to re-vision the relationship across nature and culture and the ways it “positions humans as either consumers or saviors to nature” (Clary-Lemon 9) is a call for opening space to imagine, as Jennifer Clary-Lemon writes in *Planting the Anthropocene*, “what it might look like to argue nature’s other as ourselves, to grieve the un-grievable, to imagine trees and other bodies as beings beyond resource capital, and to imagine ourselves as part of how the forest thinks” (106). Similarly, Stacy Alaimo’s *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* takes on the important work of re-visioning nature-culture dualisms that propose culture dynamic and nature as static. Alaimo draws from feminist theory to present an alternative relationality across human and nonhuman nature, where the boundaries are permeable but not collapsed. Through Alaimo’s theory, humans and nonhuman nature—such as the tourists in their vehicles and the bison migrating across the roadway—are active, entangled, and necessarily responsive to one another. In this way, Alaimo’s argument aligns with Donna Haraway’s claims that nature is a co-construction among humans and nonhumans, and as such, is a generative (and rhetorical) resource. I argue that the composition of the wildlife jam, through its presentation of a myriad of messy intra-actions and entangled

²¹⁰ This is, after all, a settler story—as Skeen argues, the conception that wild places are protected by removing human influence, or that this removal is even possible, “is rooted in a story that begins with a healthy, well-balanced environment that slowly degrades as the human ability to affect our environment increases—an inverse relationship that inevitably leads to destruction” (Skeen 54). But as Indigenous relationships and interactions with place and space prove, humans can live in healthful communion with nature, as we are not separate from nature (Kimmerer 2013).

relationalities (Barad 2007), asks tourists to confront this permeable, generative co-construction and the way it re-visions collective narratives. In other words, from this confrontation, actors in the wildlife jam are offered an opening through which to resist dominant human versus nature narratives that fuel the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia as they re-vision the world as “an assemblage of unruly combinations of both human and nonhuman, nature and culture” (Rutherford 137). While I don’t necessarily argue that the tourist will come to articulate these unruly assemblages and their challenge to dominant framings, what I propose is that the wildlife jam, as a rhetorical composition, offers a counterargument with such vitality and strength that it may just spur a combination of emotion, curiosity, and contemplation that pokes holes in old premises, especially for a tourist that may be turning up with the kind of critical literacy that primes them toward such re-visionary work. As Ladino argues, from fear, shame, anxiety, anger, regret—emotions aligned with reflective nostalgia and solastalgia—to wonder, awe, and pride—such as those aligned with imperialist and restorative nostalgia, prompt contemplation and the search for answers or explanations, even as we cannot pinpoint or articulate exactly what we are feeling or thinking or why (249). And, even though the typical visitors to National Park sites have been, likely their entire lives, listening to nostalgic stories that construct the wilderness as frozen and nonhuman nature as passive and powerless, it’s also true that Yellowstone tourists likely turn up with love and longing for the rural space and wild land, and as such, are perhaps the ideal audience for re-visioning these deep stories and re-creating alternative relationships with the land and its inhabitants (Wilson 2022). Primed, as they may be, with sensations of solastalgia alongside the more deeply internalized forms of restorative, imperialist nostalgia. In other words, perhaps Yellowstone visitors are an ideal audience for taking up the sort of “homework” I’ve attempted to take up across my study—the sort of “homework” Gayatri Spivak defines as “examining how [one’s own epistemological and

ontological assumptions] have been naturalized in and through geopolitical and institutional power relations/practices” (quoted in Sundberg 64).

With their agented rhetorical action in mind, the bison are an essential element of the rhetorical composition of wildlife jams—essential parts of the confrontation that urges reflection on the part of the tourist, as they are asked to face the way tangled up stories about nature and nation, civilization and wilderness are premised on mythology. In alignment with Boym’s framing of reflective nostalgia, I use Toni Morrison’s concept of re-memory here to emphasize the ways tourists may be prompted to feel the “presence of the past in a place of trauma” (Ladino 108), as they are confronted with the ways collective conception of the bison as mythical, timeless beings erases histories of settler violence that conservation efforts can only begin to reckon with. And though this chapter does not fully account for the complex political and cultural history, and present practices and policies, around the lives of beings such as bison and wolves across the western region, it is interesting to consider the ways the wilderness imaginary clashes against the realities under which these beings live. As Rutherford points out, the “wildlife” seen inside Yellowstone “straddle the boundary between wild and tame, captive and free” especially as they are “subject to management strategies similar to those one finds in zoos” (133). In this way, the longing to witness, encounter, and capture (through one’s smartphone) so-called wild animals is “fictive endeavor where nature remade and regulated is imagined as pristine, wild, and free” (Rutherford 133).

And yet, despite the ways in which the bison and other beings living in Yellowstone National Park are controlled and managed by the park service, the composition of the wildlife jam, and the bisons’ rhetorical role within that composition, makes clear that they—along with all of the nonhuman nature included in the park—maintain various forms and expressions of sovereignty. These expressions contribute to what Kimmerer considers the fourth form of language, or the “unspoken body language...of material locations, of places” (quoted in Pflugfelder and Kelly 86).

Yellowstone tourists cannot fully comprehend this fourth form of language, including the bison's role within it, as they move sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly across the crowded roadway. What the wildlife jams propose then, through a reparative lens, is that we are in relation with, and therefore are responsible to one another, despite our misunderstandings and inability to communicate clearly and directly (Pflugfelder and Kelly 87). With this in mind, Pflugfelder and Kelly call for a kind of "listening otherwise," wherein humans remain in the position of not-knowing, challenging the rules of Euro-Western communication, "where human creatures do not have to listen to species that communicate differently or otherwise" (69). As the wildlife jam, and the "wildlife" in particular assert, the longings and desires of tourists are often incommensurate with not only the longings and desires, but also the realities, of the nonhuman society (Kimmerer 73) living on and with the lands designated as Yellowstone. In this way, compositions such as wildlife jams, landslides, fires, and flooding—all of which are increasingly common happenings at and around the park—call on tourists to unsettle their expectations and to, instead, listen to what the land and its inhabitants are saying. This can lead to what Pflugfelder and Kelly refer to as relational openness—which can be difficult and painful, but ultimately transformative and re-visionary, as we may learn to "ethically respond to our relations" (81).

In addition to the bison and the tourist, the often-crowded roadways to and through Yellowstone National Park comprise another essential actor in the composition of the wildlife jam. As Warner argues, these roads are a critical part of tourists' rhetorical experience at Yellowstone, as they frame what they will and likely will not see (126). And according to Aoki, Dickinson, and Ott, "directed movement" is a "major rhetorical/material mode" that can "literally shape visitors' practices of looking" at the larger landscape and environment and, thus, privilege certain subject positions (Aoki et al. 249; Dickinson, et al. "Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting" 30). As Peter Peters points out in "Roadside Wilderness," his rhetorical study of national park design through the

concept of “passages,” in contradiction to the narrative of pristine wilderness that Yellowstone embodies, transportation via railway and roadway have long been essential parts of the park’s existence (60). In fact, if it were not for the push from railroad tycoons and their westward aspirations, it is unlikely that congress would have been supportive of the establishment of the parks—a part of NPS history that underlines the relationships across nature and culture. Later, when The Federal Highway Act passed in 1921, alongside the gasoline tax in 1919, the state and federal governments began building and maintaining roads that would make the western parks more accessible to travelers from the middle and eastern parts of the country. Today, as mapped by The National Parks Highways Association, the National Parks are connected by six thousand miles of state and local roads (Peters 61). In this way, the roadways to and through the parks are an important element in any telling of the National Park System story.

Automobile access to the parks clearly increases visitation, but Peters also considers how the parks themselves have been designed with automobile travel and touring in mind. While lookout points and park buildings, such as museums, were once constructed in a “rustic style” that was meant to blend in with the surrounding landscape, this style was abandoned with Mission 66, a National Park Service program adopted in 1956, that employed a modernist design to help visitors find their ways through the parks, largely via automobile travel (Patin xvii). This required the building of more infrastructure, such as visitor centers, but more broadly, “a restyling of representations and the iconography of park nature,” creating what Patin describes as new “intermediary landscapes.” (xvii). As Peters explains, the Mission 66 program was grounded in “the idea that the impact of large numbers of visitors could be regulated by making certain areas accessible through good roads, paths, and other facilities.” And further, “Building good facilities would not harm nature, but, on the contrary, protect it” (66). Unsurprisingly though, environmental advocates were critical of the program for the way it threatened the preservation of nature, arguing

that the parks were being damaged through a process of “urbanization” that prioritized its urban visitors over the rural land. For example, a *National Parks Magazine* article argued that “engineering has become more important than preservation,” and the National Parks were beginning to look more like “state highway systems and visitor centers that looked like medium-sized airport terminals” (Peters 66). The design of Yellowstone roadways, though, are still partially aligned with the earlier principles of park road construction, which were influenced by nineteenth century garden designer and horticulturalist Andrew Jackson Downing and his philosophies regarding circular, looped passages through nature areas. Yellowstone’s Grand Loop, for example, aims to create a natural flow by enabling the circular movement of vehicles through the parks (Peters 62). Today, many urban and suburban areas feature similar roadway designs, such as roundabouts, which enable circular traffic flows. In this way, Yellowstone visitors are likely familiar with looped roadways, and for that reason, would not associate them with “natural environments.” And of course, it’s important to note that even attempts to construct park structures and roads in ways that align with, highlight, or best display the natural features and environment of Yellowstone are disruptive to the ecosystem and those who live within and travel through it (Propen 2024).

Further, despite such circular traffic designs, Yellowstone tourists, especially those that choose to venture to the park during the summer, are likely to experience crowded roadways, traffic jams, and construction—not dissimilar to the experiences they likely have in their day-to-day lives—that threaten to pull at the threads of collective narratives regarding the park as proof of pristine, preserved nature. The experience of sitting inside an idling vehicle with the air conditioning blasting, or the summer heat rolling in, offers visitors a direct confrontation with (and counterargument to) narratives that propose the wilderness as pure and untouched, and Yellowstone as proof that the nation has protected and prioritized this—that is, “our”—timeless and sacred national wonder. Though I am not arguing that the roadways have ruined the land that is designated

as Yellowstone, I am positioning them as a critical part of the composition of wildlife jams and their re-visionary, re-creational potential—especially as, while sitting in a wildlife jam, it is nearly impossible to capture, much less ignore, the “natural” landscape and “wildlife” without also capturing the road and its many cars, trucks, buses, vans, and RVs pumping exhaust fumes into the air. Because of the way the wildlife jam composes the entanglements across nature and culture, the wildlife jam demands a curiosity about what we may describe as a wild, strange, and yet utterly quotidian composition—a herd of bison (i.e. that which is categorized as “wild” and separate from “civilization”) taking part, that is becoming part, of a traffic jam (i.e. that which is understood as part of “culture” and as such, is separate from “nature” (Rivers 423; Graham 4). In this way, the crowded roads are powerful parts of the rhetorical, confrontational experience of a wildlife jam and its potential to prompt a reassessment and re-vision of our public memory and collective imaginary of wilderness as a nostalgic other (Schmitt 29).

Any potential opened up by the wildlife jam as a site of poesis hinges on critical reflection regarding our role in the power dynamics that have long shaped space, place, and land (Hogg 121-122). It requires, as Kimmerer posits, an awake-ness to critical questions. “If we are fully awake,” she writes, “a moral question arises as we extinguish the other lives around us on behalf of our own. Whether we are digging wild leeks or going to the mall, how do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives that we take?” (177). We must, as Grunewald describes, take up Freire and Macedo’s pedagogical urge to “read the world” (35), challenging one another to “read the texts of our own lives and to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved” (9). If we read the material composition of wildlife jams as a text, we may open ourselves to the thought or sense or feeling that the ways Yellowstone, and land designated as wilderness more broadly, is constructed as a nostalgic other, as frozen in time and unchanging, is far more myth than reality. We may feel, instead, that the land designated as Yellowstone is “a permeable landscape

shaped by repetitive human, as well as animal, migrations” (Comstock). It is marked, yes, by the past, but not frozen in it, and certainly, is not free from the pressings of the present. We may long for this not to be the case—for an unwind button that, even if it did exist, could not take us back to the past that has been sold to us. We may learn something, though, from, as Boym describes through the lens of reflective nostalgia, staying with this longing long enough to allow it to trouble the narratives many of us carry dear, about wild land and rural space, about our place in it. What I’m arguing, then, is that out from the confrontation of the wildlife jam may come a spurring or priming toward a collective tourist body more engaged in reflective rather than restorative nostalgia—such as what Williams describes as eco-tourism, which involves a commitment to challenging colonial ways of being and thinking about the roles of visitor and the visited in the context of the wilderness. “Rather than idolize wilderness as a nonhuman landscape, where a person can be nothing more than ‘a visitor who does not remain,’ national parks might provide new lessons about the degree to which cultural values and actions have always shaped the ‘natural world,’” Spence writes, drawing from fragments of the 1964 Wilderness Act (139).

Scholarship at the intersection of national parks and rhetorical study often focuses on the influence of particular individuals, such as John Muir, or corporations and institutions, such as the Northern Pacific Railroad and the National Park Service itself, in constructing—and potentially deconstructing—the rhetorical ecosystem in which the National Parks reside (Graham 2021; DeLuca 2001; Clark 2004). I understand this chapter as in conversation with this important work, though I consider the smaller-scale, closer-range composition of the wildlife jam. Like Ladino in *Memorials Matter*, I see confrontation at NPS sites as generative and disruptive—prompts for re-vision, re-memory, and re-creation—and believe that such opportunities for confrontation may not only stem from the NPS itself, but from the human–nonhuman compositions that throw themselves together outside of the institution’s rhetorical control. As we know, the idea that “people just need

more information and evidence to believe in climate change so that they will start to do what they can to stave off planetary ruin” is flawed and false (Kelly). Instead, scholarship across emotion studies and sociology, such as Kari Norgaard’s *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (2011), and social psychology, such as Per Espen Stoknes’ *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think about Global Warming* (2015) suggests that we need more stories not more data (Kelly). I think what this research reveals is, among other things, that what is needed is rhetorical evidence of our intimacy and already-here, always-been-here relationality. I propose, then, the wildlife jam as a kind of story that confronts the typical Yellowstone tourist with a re-vision of the stories they have likely turned up looking to experience, and further, a proposal for a re-creation of ways of being, thinking, and feeling in relationship to the land and its inhabitants (ourselves included). At their best, I believe these openings for re-vision and re-creation can support larger-scale, Indigenous-led transformations in the ways ecosystems are used, managed, and protected (Holiday and Lowry 186). They may also prime tourists toward the kind of shifts Michelle Comstock urges in “Choreographing Climate Migration in the Wilderness/Rural Corridor.” Comstock studies a 2016 multimedia exhibit called *Invisible Boundaries*, arguing that it produces a wider, more ecological perspective on the park and its surrounding rural areas. As Comstock writes, “Shorter winters and longer springs have prompted animals to migrate further north and spend longer swaths of time on the region’s high plateaus.” In response, biologist Arthur Middleton (who tracked these shifting migrations), photographer Joe Riis, and illustrator James Prosek created the exhibit to “convince park visitors that Yellowstone’s boundaries and conservation efforts should be determined by the changing climate and the shifting elk and pronghorn migration, not vice versa” (Comstock). This re-creation of the tourists’ relationship to Yellowstone would necessitate, in part, planning their visits at different times of the year. As Comstock argues, “shortening the time span for summer visits or moving visits to later in the fall would negatively impact the local economy in the short term, but

would preserve regional migration pathways (including human movements) in the long term” (Comstock). Comstock’s analysis aligns with Kimmerer’s poignant call to listen to the land, as it “knows what to do when we do not” (333). This listening will not require that we rid ourselves of rural nostalgia, but that we use it to open ourselves to the kinds of critical reflection and reckoning that will urge us to, collectively, join movements toward the re-vision of deep stories and the re-creation of more equitable and sustainable relationalities across the human and nonhuman, the wild and civilized, urban and rural.²¹¹ This is, as I’ve noted across my dissertation, an analysis and argument that hinges on critical investments in reflective nostalgia and hope—a combination that relies on the reparative belief that the future may be different from the present, and as it follows, the painful and relieving belief that the past “could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (Sedgwick 146).

Learning from Wildlife Jams

In Ladino’s study of the power of the rhetoric and affect generated at NPS sites, she writes, “We must confront the conflicts embedded in the foundations of even relatively popular agencies like the NPS, including the logic of ‘violence and dispossession’ that enabled the parks to form and...still shapes our experiences of them today” (268). Taking up this call, this chapter has offered a rhetorical reading of Yellowstone National Park, contextualized within the National Park System, and more broadly, in land politics within a settler colonial nation. In doing so, I’ve pulled up and examined the ways the roots of Yellowstone are entangled with dominant narratives of nation, nature, citizenship, and importantly for the connection it offers across my study, the rhetorical construction of wilderness (in opposition to civilization) as a nostalgic other that—like constructions

²¹¹ As Skeen writes, “In order to disrupt colonial relationships between settlers, the land, and Indigenous peoples, we, settlers and settler descendants, have to build new relationships. We can build these relationships through and with land—the land will teach us how” (94).

of the small town, the Indian Other, and the frontier—is an essential part of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and its circulation through separate but entwined narratives and archetypes. In the analysis portion of this chapter, I've employed Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' rhetoric of nostalgia, Sedgwick's reparative reading, and theories across environmental rhetoric, intersectional rhetorical materialisms, and Indigenous knowledges to situate Yellowstone's "wildlife jams" as rhetorical compositions that, in their destabilization of dominant narratives, challenge restorative nostalgia, and in doing so, urge toward individual and collective re-memory and re-vision, and from there, the potential re-creation of relationalities across space and story, human and nonhuman nature, and rural and urban space. Importantly, my analysis of the wildlife jam as a moment of poesis situates tourists as rhetorical actors within the composition that, in the words of Kathleen Stewart, throws itself together along Yellowstone roadways. Just as importantly though, my analysis attends to the rhetorical actors, and their vital roles, within the composition—from the bison and the weather to the roadways and the various technologies tourists turn up with—in hopes of capturing "wilderness" and "wildlife" that confirms, rather than disturbs, the nostalgia-fueled narratives they have, consciously or unconsciously, internalized and then externalized through rhetorical action—such as venturing to and through Yellowstone National Park. I position the National Park Service, and Yellowstone and its "wildlife jams" in particular, as vital compositions to listen to and learn from. I also position Yellowstone National Park and the National Park System more broadly as critical spaces for the study and harnessing of rural nostalgia toward transformative and progressive ends, as the National Park Service is a powerful storytelling agency that reaches millions of people each year (roughly 300 million across their 417 park and historical sites), including people across rural and urban communities, and across the polarized political spectrum. As Ladino writes, "The NPS is well positioned to help craft an alternative future in this scary new epoch," (261). Moreover, as Ladino articulates, "in a nation that seems anything but united, the NPS seems

poised to reframe its sites and their stories, many of which are steeped in whiteness and a history of expulsion, violence, and more banal discriminatory practices so that they are welcoming to all visitors” (261). This is especially important because, while the United States was the first to establish a national park system, this practice has and continues to spread to other countries—often through financial aid provided by the United States. Following patterns established by the United States, national parks in Uganda and Vietnam, for example, have displaced poor rural people in the name of biodiversity conservation and mitigating climate change (Petursson and Vedeld 2017; Bruun 2023). Bruun labels this practice, and its context in Vietnam, as “authoritarian environmentalism” (Bruun 152). As Bruun finds, “a small group of people with high incomes has a disproportionately high impact on the forest” (164). This statement is striking for the ways it rings true, and presents dangerous consequences, in the United States and elsewhere. In other words, it is critical that we listen to and learn from the ways marginalized, nostalgically-othered actors speak back to “authoritarian environmentalism.”

In addition to the opportunities presented by the rhetorical power of the broader NPS, it’s important to emphasize how most Yellowstone tourists—though operating within and, in many ways, reproducing structures such as settler colonialism, capitalism, and the commodification of nature, and while contributing to the striking ecological costs of wilderness tourism and recreation—turn up with a love and longing for rural space. Though we may critique this (likely settler) love and longing until the cows come home, we also may, through the lens of reparative reading and weak theorizing, search for the potential shifts—re-visions, re-memories, and re-creations—it opens and urges. As I do in this chapter and across my dissertation, Skeen writes that, “Settlers, certainly, can and should learn a lot from Indigenous peoples, scholars, and stewards about how to re-compose their relationship with land” (93) without appropriating Indigenous practices and knowledges (i.e., without “playing Indian,” as Deloria might say). Toward this end Ladino argues that the NPS “must

find nonappropriative ways to invite and foreground the knowledge of people of color...to effectively connect past to present, avoid erasing contemporary violence, and enable a broader range of affective responses, beyond obligatory patriotism” (264). Alongside institutional and organizational change, and collaboration with organizations taking up this rhetorical and material project (such as Alt-NPS and the Greater Yellowstone Coalition), and most importantly, with Indigenous communities leading the way (Estes 400), I situate “wildlife jams” as not a replacement for this work, but as a supportive pedagogy that urges national park visitors toward practices such as contemplation, reflection, and “listening otherwise” to the ways nonhuman actors speak back to nostalgic and settler colonial logic. Practices of contemplation, reflection, and listening—and the kinds of re-memory and re-vision they may lead to—are vital to any preservation and conservation efforts, as Kimmerer asserts “restoring land without restoring relationships is an empty exercise” (338).

In this chapter I have worked to construct an analytical bridge across my dissertation chapters, working to uncover the ways deep stories travel across the textual and the material. In these ways, this chapter works alongside my others to offer rhetoric and composition scholars and instructors analytical models for not only analyzing rural nostalgia and its implications, but for attuning to rhetorical compositions that offer paths toward critical reflection and re-vision, re-creation and re-action. In my next and final chapter, I consider and reflect on key findings, contributions, implications, and limitations from across this study.

CONCLUSION

A few years ago, back when I was still in the very early stages of the dissertation process, I drove the seven hours from my apartment in Syracuse to our family farm in Preston County, West Virginia.²¹² It was early-spring—the air crisp but the sun warm, everything green and blooming and buzzing. “You know, that’s something I never did,” my grandfather said to me as I sat down beside him on the paint-splattered plastic chairs facing the field where, every summer, my dad and his brothers and some of my cousins make hay. “What’s that?” I asked, leaning toward him, raising my voice over the sound of some tractor somewhere. “Leave home,” he said, his eyes fixed on the hills. He went on to tell me stories about the men from cities he had come across throughout his life—how they’d almost always reveal, sometimes implicitly and sometimes more directly, their internalized narratives about his intelligence and education. These narratives circulated as assumptions about what they thought they knew about people who, like my grandpa, not only called the Appalachian Mountains their home, but hardly ever left them. He met my eyes and grinned with a touch of mischief as he relayed their punchlines about rednecks and hillbillies, white trash and hicks, backward and out of touch.

A voracious reader of the world, my grandpa’s grin acknowledged the distances between their punchlines and the reality of who rural folks are, what they believe and do and value, and the places they call home. But, of course, there are real differences across rural, suburban, and urban communities. And of course, the contemporary political polarization between rural and metropolitan

²¹² Especially because of this project’s interest in policies and practices of land occupation, use, and ownership, it is important to note that the family farm spans 150 acres. My great-grandparents passed the land down to their eldest son (to the exclusion of their younger son and two daughters), my grandpa, with the stipulation that when he passes, ownership of the farm will be split between my dad and his two brothers (my dad’s sister will inherit the few acres closer to town where my grandparents raised their family after moving off the farm). Though my grandpa is unsure exactly how our ancestors came to own the land that was eventually passed to him, it is likely that they were living on the land (i.e., squatting) from the early-1800s and were eventually granted deeds through policies such as the Homestead Act.

districts is real, even if most of us don't understand the political history of many rural communities, not to mention how that history has manifested into our present-day divides (Savat). In alignment with Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' research on the internalization of nostalgic othering that results in communities of nostalgia across rural West Virginia, much of my family up home votes Republican, praises Trump for what he did to "get the men back to work," and to put it plainly, would not think this dissertation is very kind to the country in which they are (and I should be) proud to live. Even so, because my father moved away first, and I have continued on with the moving, further and further away, I often feel a longing to return to the home that was never mine to claim, the rural Appalachian heritage I will never fully understand or embody, the land I have never worked. I feel a sense of disconnection and loss from my family and their home; I fantasize about what it would mean to return. Though, aside from the occasional phone call and visit, and from "following" and "liking" the evidence of my cousins' rural lives on Instagram, I make no moves toward doing so. While the writing and research included in my dissertation veers away from overtly personal inquiry, it is all these personal—and still, of course, political—complexities into which I felt myself researching and writing into, through, and in some ways, out of.

Through this project, I set out to better understand the collective perception of rural people, the tangled-up roots of this collective perception (or imaginary), and the ways it impacts the intense social and political divides across rural and urban communities. Quickly noticing the high frequency of nostalgia surrounding all things rural, I hoped to understand what all the rural nostalgia I was feeling and observing has to do with the collective rural imaginary. And I was driven to explore how the tools and habits of mind I have developed as a scholar of cultural rhetoric and composition, with a focus in queer and feminist rhetorical study, would help me work my way into and through these tricky terrains.

Alongside all of these drives and desires, and rooted in what I understood to be true about rural nostalgia (i.e., that it was very much here, and likely here to stay), I wanted this dissertation to be a space where I learned from queer, feminist, and Indigenous habits of thinking, being, and doing to come to a method(ology) that would enable me to engage in critical practices of hope, imagination, and contemplation (to evoke Royster and Kirsch 2012 and Glenn 2018), as well as (trans)rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe 2005, Jackson and DeLaune 2018), and close description, reparative reading, and weak theorizing (Tuck 2020, Sedgwick 2002, Stewart 2008)—all to, metaphorically speaking, make hay out of the rural nostalgia that is everywhere (to once more evoke *Demon Copperhead's* astute observation). And lastly, as the project developed, I became more and more invested in making a pedagogical offering—that is, pinpointing how the texts, stories, and spaces I analyzed across my chapters could be read, analyzed, and learned from as rhetorical and narrative models for destabilizing nostalgic narratives and mythologies that do more harm than good. In the remaining pages of this reflective conclusion, I consider how my dissertation works towards the personal, political, and pedagogical urges and urgencies outlined above, and in doing so, I map what I understand to be the key contributions, implications, and limitations of this project as it presently stands. From these considerations, I offer reflections on the paths I've cleared for future study.

The Work I've Done and The Work Still to Come

As the stories go, if the sun was up, my great-grandmother was out of bed—you would never, my grandparents have always told my cousins and I, find Grandma Annie “laying up in the bed.” On the farm, there was always work to do, and then more of it. While I cannot fully understand what this must have been like, and certainly do not mean to draw a parallel between the labor of farm work and the labor of dissertation writing, what I do mean to say is that, through the dissertation

process, I have come to understand and feel, more deeply than before, the sense that there is always more work to be done. And yet, I imagine that even as my great-grandmother went to bed every night thinking of the work that needed to be done come sunrise, perhaps she allowed herself some reflection, some taking stock, of what she had so far accomplished. This is the sort of thing I aim to do in the remainder of this conclusion chapter—as I continue to fight against, until the very end, a pesky combination of perfectionism and imposter syndrome that is grounded in many of the very same narratives I've examined throughout these pages.

Across this dissertation, I have extended and complicated the current literature on rural nostalgia—especially our understanding of why there is so much of it, where and how it circulates, and what we can do with it. By centering both the rural and nostalgia, this project fills gaps pointed to by scholars working across rural studies, rhetoric and writing studies, and nostalgia. Especially as this dissertation is, to my knowledge, the first book-length study that focuses on a rhetorical study of the roots of rural nostalgia alongside an in-depth rhetorical analysis of how, why, and to what ends it is continually reproduced and circulated. I also think that my positioning of rural nostalgia as a rhetorical ecosystem—a complex and intersecting constellation of texts, genres, stories, structures, policies, and practices that comprise the regenerative rhetorical, narrative, and material force of rural nostalgia—makes a significant contribution to future studies invested in understanding and tracing the rhetorical power and prowess of nostalgia. I also hope that my engagement with frameworks such as rhetoric and narrative, deep stories and mythology, re-vision and re-creation are an offering to scholars similarly concerned with the multiple and interrelated formations and implications across language and action, the personal and collective, the individual and relational.

While I set out to write a dissertation about rural nostalgia, I did not expect it to become, in large part, about settler colonialism and nationalism. In other words, I did not understand how tangled up all these stories and structures were and are. The rural imaginary is in many ways the

national imaginary, and the national imaginary is rooted in settler colonial logics and practices. Similarly, I did not expect the concept of nostalgic others to play such a central role throughout my study, but as I found, every narrative growing out of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia traffics in rhetorical constructions that have undergone the process of nostalgic othering. These nostalgic others, as I found, are like characters in our national imaginary and its narratives, narratives that are always entangled with the logics and practices of settler colonialism, and as it follows, structures such as whiteness and masculinity and civilization. This is to say, my extension of Kurlinkus' and Kurlinkus' conception of nostalgic othering, and my tracing of the ways these others are hitched to nationalist and settler colonial narratives—origin stories about who “we” are and why—makes a significant contribution to scholarship across rural, rhetoric, and nostalgia studies and beyond, especially as I believe the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering is present beyond the rural and is responsible for much division and harm. For instance, if we return to Mignolo's arguments regarding the entanglements between the “rhetoric of modernity” and “the logic of coloniality,” and the ways dominant groups celebrate their own “progress” while problematizing a “lack of progress” in marginalized groups (vixiii), it becomes clear that processes of nostalgic othering, driven by the rhetoric of modernity, impact a range of heterogenous and intersecting marginalized communities, such as poor and working class immigrants, people of color, and people living in and from the Global South. Though this project focuses on the nostalgic others of rural nostalgia, it provides a possible model for future studies of nostalgic othering beyond the rural. As each chapter considers, the nostalgic others of rural nostalgia are romanticized, essentialized, fetishized, commodified, appropriated, and extracted from. Further, as they circulate across our imaginative and material dimensions, they impact our cultural, social, political lives and contribute to divides across rural and urban communities.

My reparative rhetorical analyses of *Schitt's Creek* (2015–2020), *Reservation Dogs* (2021–), and *The Power of the Dog* (2021) offer close-range studies of the ways popular culture texts rhetorically reproduce and re-vision deep stories about rural communities, cultures, and spaces. Each analysis takes up Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus' rhetoric of nostalgia in combination with Sedgwick's reparative reading to illuminate the particular rhetorical tactics through which the texts work *with* and *against* nostalgic conceptions of rurality. In addition to this work, each chapter offers a careful and in-depth pulling up of roots—an examination of the particular construction or constructions of rurality from which the texts I am examining draw. Toward these efforts, I synthesize across a broad range of scholarship to situate the construction, such as the small town or the frontier, in the broader rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. And from there, I offer an in-depth understanding of how that rhetorical construction is continually taken up and circulated as a nostalgic other—frozen in an imagined, mythologized past that serves collective understandings (and structures) of the present. This enables my reader to understand how the texts I am analyzing use particular rhetorical tactics to stabilize, destabilize, and sometimes re-write nostalgic narratives and constructions of the rural.

In my first chapter, for example, I investigate the rhetorical and narrative methods through which *Schitt's Creek* (2015-2020) destabilizes the dualism that has long traveled in and alongside imaginaries of small-town life as frozen in an American past: the small town as a safe haven and saving grace, and the small town as a trap to escape. Importantly, this chapter finds white supremacist ideology and anti-urban biases hitched to perception of small, rural communities. Then, my second chapter pulls up and examines the all-tangled-up roots of rural nostalgia and settler colonialism and importantly, situates the “Indian Other” as a figure of rural nostalgia, contributing to movements across rural studies to extend and complicate the notion that rurality is always and only associated with white cultures and communities. Chapter three, then, examines the region known as the American West as a mythic space, home to the vast and varied land nostalgically

othered as “the frontier.” This chapter makes significant contributions to the literature on the rhetorics of frontier mythology and frontier masculinity. Lastly, my fourth chapter examines the related construction of the wilderness as a nostalgic other that—like constructions of the small town, the Indian Other, and the frontier—is an essential part of the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and its circulation through separate but entwined narratives and archetypes.

Beyond those studied across my project, there are many more nostalgic others traveling in and through the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. For example, I would have liked to offer a more in-depth analysis of how nostalgic others more directly related to the agrarian imagination (such as “the farm wife” or “trad wife”) circulate through our pop culture texts, policies, and material realities. And while I consider the relationship across rural nostalgia and gender in chapters one and three, I believe there is more work to do in illuminating the relationship between processes of nostalgic othering and gender and sexual identities and politics. This said, with generosity, I understand my in-depth and careful engagement with nostalgic others, and my modeling for how to rhetorically trace them across the imaginative and the material, as an important contribution for possible future studies focused in and beyond the rural imaginary.

I also understand that there is more critical rhetorical work to be done in understanding the relationship across nostalgic othering, communities of nostalgia (or communities that have internalized themselves as nostalgic others and often act out of this internalization), and the rural and urban divides that we are sure to see more and more evidence for as another election cycle approaches. While chapters one and two speak to this relationship, I look forward to continuing to research and write about this critical terrain in future versions of this work. In other words, while I believe this study makes significant contributions to understanding the ways the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia undergirds historical and contemporary divides across rural and urban communities, I also understand there is much more work to be done in investigating these

complexities—especially as rural nostalgia, like mythic rhetoric more generally, can “transcend diverse political ideologies” (Burkholder 293). While chapter four in particular gestures toward these insights, I want to better uncover and make a case for the ways rural nostalgia may be harnessed toward increased awareness of connection, interdependence, and mutual identification across the right and left, and the rural and urban (Donehower, Hogg, and Schell 5-9). Social science texts such as *The Rural Voter: The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America* (2023) by Nicholas F. Jacobs and Daniel M. Shea will be helpful toward these inquiries, as they offer quantitative and qualitative data that explains the unprecedented political shift in rural voters, identifying the ways contemporary rural voters feel threatened, disenfranchised, and left behind. As a result, rural voters largely disconnect from considerations of policy, voting instead from a sense of identity that is place-based and nationalistic in nature (Keys). As Jacobs and Shea find, “With the exception of gun policy, the vast majority of rural residents hold mainstream values and positions aligned with the rest of the country” (Keys). In considering paths cleared for future study, this important finding stood out to me for the ways rhetorical analysis can help us understand how narratives related to gun ownership and use are tangled up with and fueled by rural nostalgia. And as Jacobs and Shea importantly point to, re-visioning narratives and re-creating relationalities regarding firearm practices and policies will likely be essential to turning the national tides toward connection and progress. Though considerations of guns and rural culture are present across this project, this is certainly an area of research that can be further developed.

Beyond pulling up the roots of particular nostalgic others, I trace their circulation and reproduction through the popular culture artifacts and material spaces central to my research. From there, I am able to rhetorically analyze how the texts employ various rhetorical and narrative tactics to challenge the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering, and more expansively, re-vision the deep stories that travel in and through the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. Most importantly, I use

my rhetorical analysis as a way to identify and closely describe models that scholars, instructors, and cultural workers can learn from, engage with, and teach. For example, in chapter one, *Schitt's Creek* imagines the small, rural town as unfixed and emergent—a space of possibility and porosity—rather than frozen in a rhetorical trap of nostalgic otherness. Read through a reparative lens, the series offers alternative stories that challenge the rhetorical construction of the small town as *either* safe haven *or* trap. Specifically, though the construction of Schitt's Creek as a queer utopia recirculates narratives related to the small town as *both* a safe haven and saving grace, it rearticulates and extends nostalgic small-town narratives to include queer-identifying people. And through my analysis of Stevie's character, I offer a way of understanding how the rhetorical process of nostalgic othering is directly connected to the binary construction of leaving *versus* staying in (and beyond) the context of rural communities. Chapter two, then, identifies and analyzes the ways *Reservation Dogs* engages complex and multilayered rhetorical tactics to assert rhetorical sovereignty for Indigenous representation in popular culture through a tactical resistance and refusal of nostalgic narratives and nostalgic othering. From humor and joy, to counter-nostalgia and past–present relationality, to haunting and nostalgia-refusing visual rhetorics, I identify, describe, and analyze the ways *Reservation Dogs* serves as a pedagogical model for survivance (Powell 2002) and the reclamation and assertion of rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons 2000). Importantly, my analysis illuminates how the series also models the complex process through which the deployment of one rhetorical tactic, such as humor, can affirm the lived experiences and narratives of one audience group (such as Indigenous peoples) while another audience group (such as settlers) is challenged in ways both gentle and sharp, explicit and implicit. This chapter also situates *Reservation Dogs* as an autoethnographic text, offering it as a pedagogical model for autoethnographic expression, and contributing to conversations related to rhetorical sovereignty and autoethnographic writing and performance.

As these examples show, my dissertation offers popular culture texts as pedagogical tools that have much to teach us about our potential role in the future of rural nostalgia—how we can harness it toward transformative, progressive, connective ends. Following the lead of many scholars concerned with nostalgia for the rural, my dissertation certainly positions rural nostalgia as a violent inheritance (Cram 2022), but most importantly, I don't stop there. Rather, as I consider above, each chapter is committed to asking, as Cram calls for: What can be done with this violent inheritance? Across the dissertation, I make a case for the ways mainstream popular culture texts draw from, rely on, and reproduce the deeply-storied divides between rural and urban communities and cultures. In other words, because of its rootedness in our national imaginary and psychology, rural nostalgia sells. But, as I've argued, if popular culture, and television series and films in particular, have the rhetorical power and potential to reproduce deep stories, they also hold the potential to re-vision deeply-embedded narratives, and to offer alternative stories that may open paths toward alternative actions and relationalities. This is critical because, as Christina Cedillo writes in her contribution to *Decolonial Conversations in Posthuman and New Material Rhetorics* (2022), “how we perceive and act affects everyone and everything because we are all materially and ethically conjoined” (98).

In addition to situating popular culture as generative, critical terrain for scholars across rhetoric and writing studies, and adding to conversations and knowledge regarding the pedagogical potential of popular culture, my dissertation also contributes to genre studies and our understandings of the rhetorical circulation of particular genres. For example, my third chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the Western genre's role in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, synthesizing across disciplines to identify the ways it is responsible for continually reproducing and restoring a rhetorical construction of the frontier as a nostalgic other, and in doing so, trapping the western region of the United States in a mythologized version of the past that acts as a shield to its violent history. Extending from this genre analysis, and with an awareness of the

difficulty of destabilizing a genre as powerful and resilient as the Western, this chapter's analysis of *The Power of the Dog* (2021) and its blend of anti- and counter-nostalgic rhetorical tactics situates adaptation as a critical tool in movements to destabilize the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia. Through this contribution, I argue that it is important that we take up adaptations as pedagogical. This is because, as my analysis shows, adaptations often deploy particular rhetorical tactics to offer their audiences alternative narratives. In turn, we can learn from these tactics and the alternative narratives they produce and circulate.

Though I originally planned to include a much broader range of texts in my study, when I began the observation and analysis for my first chapter, I found myself gravitating towards what I frame in my introduction, and again in chapter two, as close description. Drawing from Eve Tuck's work in "I Do Not Want To Haunt You But I Will: Indigenous Feminist Theorizing on Reluctant Theories of Change," I position close description as "an approach of staying with something on its own terms, attending to its animating logics, conditions of meanings, and staying in the domain of description" as a way of resisting the drive to settle into quick categorization. Importantly for what I set out to do in my project, Tuck also notes that close description allows her to illuminate possible pedagogical implications. In other words, my in-depth observation and close description made possible the kind of reparative, rhetorical, pedagogical study I hoped to accomplish. And yet, I also understand that a study that included a wider range of texts, possibly across genres and temporal contexts, would offer a more expansive understanding, and more thorough tracing, of how the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia is reproduced and re-visioned, stabilized and destabilized; and further, how it maps onto social, political, and material structures and realities. I reckon with this by considering that perhaps future iterations of this project, either taken up by myself or others, can offer more expansive analyses of texts working in and through the rhetorical ecosystem of rural

nostalgia—continuing to pull it up at its roots and examine its different but interrelated limbs, branches, leaves, and buds.

When I completed a draft of my third chapter, I knew that my dissertation could likely be considered complete as is, without an additional body chapter. In fact, when I set out to write my fourth chapter, I imagined that it would be a conclusion chapter that simply had a bit more meat and potatoes than a typical conclusion—including a brief analysis of Yellowstone National Park as a way to offer a sense of how rural nostalgia circulates from the textual to the material, becoming crystallized in national park history, policy, and tourism. However, as I continued reading relevant literature related to national park narratives and rhetorics, the chapter took on a different kind of energy. When I began thinking and wondering more deeply about images of “wildlife jams” as their own kind of compositions, I understood the ways that this chapter, though making an intellectual leap, was also a kind of missing piece. It is my sense that this is the chapter of my dissertation that is the furthest from its final form, but also that it gestures toward, and perhaps even clears, paths for future iterations of this project—as I continue to consider the complexities and potentialities across processes of and invitations to re-memory, re-vision, and the re-creation of relationalities, not in spite of or despite rural nostalgia, but because of it and my belief that it can be harnessed toward these ends. Further, I think this chapter gestures toward how much more work can be done in connecting rural space constructed as wilderness to small, rural communities and the ways they are perceived. Moreover, while this chapter attends to the ways nonhuman nature speaks back to the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia, my engagement with perspectives across multispecies, posthumanism, Indigenous knowledges, and intersectional rhetorical materiality in this chapter can be further developed. Relatedly, I imagine future iterations of this project will feature a deeper engagement with considerations of the ways the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia is entangled with climate realities and environmental rhetorics; I want to work harder to connect those strands.

In these ways, I understand the many limits of this chapter to be markers of its future paths and potential.

As a final point of discussion, I believe this dissertation, or better yet, future iterations of it, stands the chance to make a methodological contribution to and beyond the discipline. In addition to my engagement with the reparative rhetorical analysis, I also model ways of shifting methods and methodologies as each chapter navigates not only different genres and texts, but also my different positionality in reference to those texts and the bodies of knowledge I draw from to make sense of them. For example, chapter two—in which I offer an analysis of the complex and generative ways *Reservation Dogs* challenges, and ultimately refuses, the nostalgic othering of Indigenous peoples and cultures—required shifts in my research methods, methodology, and the analytical process. In this way, I follow the encouragement of settler scholars Katja Thieme and Shurli Makmillan, as they argue, “Methods need to be flexible resources mobilized in the interest of advancing ethical knowledge” (486). Listening to and learning from a range of diverse Indigenous scholars, and settler scholars working with Indigenous texts and knowledges, this chapter models an attempt to shift and blend method(ologie)s in a way that urges accountability and responsibility, as I engage with the cultural knowledge shared in *Reservation Dogs*, and shared by the Indigenous scholars I bring together across the dissertation. Useful toward these ends and my research and writing more broadly, I hold closely Minh-ha’s suggestion to “speak nearby”—rather than speaking over—as a way to open rather than close space, and as such, inviting those in closer proximity to my chosen texts and subject matters “to come in and fill that space as they wish” (quoted in Park Hong 103). With this said, across my dissertation, I wanted to be careful to resist the kinds of “settler moves to innocence” Tuck and Yang identify as “attempt[s] to relieve the settler feelings of guilt or responsibility” (10). As such, this work is not meant to resolve myself of guilt or responsibility, or to

be a replacement for decolonial action. In the words of settler scholars Clary-Lemon and Grant, “We know that there is much more work to be done” (11-12).

I would not have taken up this project, and seen it through, if I did not believe there was something we could do about all this rural nostalgia. And importantly, if I did not believe that whatever we do with it is important—that it has the power to change not only how we perceive each other and our reality, but how we are divided from each other. As we come up on another presidential election in which the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia is being waged toward the intensification of nostalgic othering and the generation of communities of nostalgia that will surely bear out in continued rural versus urban polarization (and as it follows, more articles and news commentary and media that offers reductive and ultimately harmful explanations for the nature of these divides); and as we continue to collectively romanticize, commodify, long for, and temporarily love the wild all the while continuing to witness and participate in its destruction, unable or unwilling to listen to the ways in which the spaces and beings constructed as wild are not only speaking back, but offering their instruction (Kimmerer 9); it is my hope and my goal that this project and future versions to come of it will offer an intervention into these all-tangled-up rhetorical processes. Though we, collectively, have much work left to do to harness the “utopian force” of rural nostalgia (Ladino 2012), the texts I analyze across this project, and the myriad of voices and diverse perspectives I have gathered here, offer paths and pedagogies for re-visioning the deep, divisive, damaging stories rooted in the rhetorical ecosystem of rural nostalgia and its entanglements with nationalist and settler colonial narratives, logics, and practices.

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VITA

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EDUCATION

**PhD Candidate, Composition and Cultural Rhetoric,
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GPA 4.0 cumulative

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Dissertation *Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia: A Rhetorical Study of Nature and Nation, Space and Story*

Graduation August 2024

Director Dr. Eileen Schell

Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing, Nonfiction

University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY

Graduation Date May 2017

GPA 4.0 cumulative

Thesis *The Distance Between Bodies*; published as *The Running Body* by Autumn House Press in 2022

Director Dr. Beth Loffreda

Bachelor of Science in Journalism

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E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University, Athens, OH

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GPA 3.89 cumulative

Academic Honors Academic All-American, Mid-American Conference Scholar Athlete

Athletics NCAA Division One Varsity Athlete in Cross-Country and Track and Field

RESEARCH AWARDS

- 2024 Graduate Dean's Award for Excellence in Research and Creative Work (\$500), awarded by The Graduate School at Syracuse University, March 2024.
- 2023 Research Excellence Doctoral Funding (REDF) fellowship (\$23,000), awarded by The Graduate School at Syracuse University for the 2022-2023 academic year.

TEACHING AWARDS

- 2022 Winner of Syracuse University Graduate School's Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award for "teaching assistants who have made distinguished contributions to Syracuse University by demonstrating excellence in significant instructional capacities."
- 2022 Recipient of a Certificate in University Teaching from Syracuse University, which "demonstrates readiness to assume faculty responsibilities in higher education" and promotes Graduate Teaching Assistants to Graduate Teaching Associates.
- 2017 Winner of the University of Wyoming's John P. Ellbogen Outstanding Graduate Assistant Teaching Award (\$4,000) for "exceptional contributions to undergraduate education through teaching."

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"An Invitation to *Bale*: An Annotated Bibliography of Storywork and Narrative Resources." Panel presentation with Nancy Small, April Conway, and Katie Powell, accepted to the *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, April 2024.

“Reckoning with Rhetorical Constructions of Rural Womanhood and Restoring Cross-Cultural Community in *Schitt’s Creek*.” *Feminisms and Rhetorics*, September 2023.

“To Leave or Not to Leave: The Nostalgic Figure of the Small Town, as Imagined by *Schitt’s Creek*.” *Reimagining Rural: Rural Studies Student Conference at Pennsylvania State University*, October 2022.

“‘The Manuscript Should Bear No Identification of the Author’: Examining Submission Practices as Rhetorics of Invitation.” Co-Presenter with Zakery Muñoz, *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, March 2022.

“Women’s Protest in Nepal: Learning from the Construction of Feminist Coalition Across Communication Contexts.” Co-Presenter with Pritisha Shrestha, *SigDoc*, October 2021.

“Composing White Delusion and Naming White Distancing Practices in Rhetoric and Composition.” Research Network Forum, *Rhetoric Society of America*, May 2020. Canceled due to the pandemic.

SELECT PUBLICATIONS

Bale: An Annotated Bibliography of Storywork and Narrative Resources. Collaborative project with Nancy Small (University of Wyoming), April Conway (University of Michigan), and Katie Powell (University of Cincinnati). *Writing Across the Curriculum*, 2024.

The Running Body: A Memoir. Autumn House Press, 2022.

INVITED TALKS

“Pulling Up the Tangled Roots of Rural Nostalgia.” Graduate Dean’s Award Symposium, Syracuse, New York. March 2024.

“Online Information Session for Syracuse University’s PhD Program in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric.” Syracuse, New York, November 2023. Virtual.

“The Running Body: Reading and Conversation.” *Two Dollar Radio*. Columbus, Ohio, December 2022.

“Fall Release Reading with Autumn House Press.” *White Whale Bookstore*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 2022. Virtual.

“Nonfiction Reading Series Book Launch for *The Running Body*.” *The Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition at Syracuse University*. Syracuse, New York, October 2022. Virtual.

“From Draft to Done, then From Manuscript to Publication.” *Griffin Writing Workshop*. Bozeman, Montana, April 2022. Virtual.

“Writing the Body.” *Syracuse Veteran’s Writing Group*. Syracuse, New York, February 2022. Virtual.

“Nonfiction Reading Series.” *The Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition at Syracuse University*. Syracuse, New York, November 2021. Virtual.

“Reading and Note-Taking Practices at Different Stages of the PhD.” *Composition and Cultural Rhetoric 601: Introduction to the Field*. Syracuse, New York, September 2021.

TEACHING APPOINTMENTS

Adjunct Instructor, Composition Program, Department of English, Utah State University, 2024-

Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, Syracuse University, 2021-2022

Assistant Director of Teaching Assistant Education, Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, Syracuse University, 2020-2021

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, Syracuse University, 2019-2021

Adjunct Instructor, Department of English, Arapahoe Community College, 2018-2019

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Department of English, University of Wyoming, 2015-2017

CONSULTING APPOINTMENTS

Graduate Editing Center Consultant, Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, Syracuse University, 2023-2024

Writing Center Consultant, Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, Syracuse University, 2021

COURSES TAUGHT

Utah State University

- English 1010: Introduction to Writing: Academic Prose

Syracuse University

- WRT 205: Critical Research and Writing,
- WRT 105: Practices of Academic Writing
- WRT 114: Introduction to Creative Nonfiction, Writing Culture
- WRT 601: Composition and Rhetoric Pedagogy at Syracuse (Co-Taught)

Arapahoe Community College

- English 121: College Composition
- College Composition and Reading 094

University of Wyoming

- Creative Writing 1040: Introduction to Creative Writing (Co-Taught)

- English 1010: College Composition

SELECT SERVICE

- 2023-2024 Member of Lower Division Committee, Dept. of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, *Syracuse University*
- 2021-2022 Member of Lower Division Committee, Dept. of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, *Syracuse University*
- 2021 Participant in WRT 205 Assessment and Learning Outcome Workshops, Dept. of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, *Syracuse University*
- 2021 Judge for The Margaret Himley Award for Critical Encounters, *Intertext*
- 2020-2021 Assistant Director of Teaching Assistant Education, Dept. of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition, Syracuse University

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- Syracuse University's Future Professoriate Program
- Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition

COMMUNITY WRITING PARTICIPATION

- Syracuse Veteran's Writing Group, 2022