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Place in Literature

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During my senior year of high school, I followed the marching band’s tradition of dressing up for the Friday night game on Halloween weekend and helping the band give a surprise performance of Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” My costume became one of the highlights of the night as young children ran from me in terror, a copious amount of photos were taken with me, and even the visiting team’s cheerleaders walked a wide radius around me to avoid getting close. I dressed in a pure white morph suit, to have a faceless visage, and a dark, black suit. That night I started to learn the power embodied by my generation’s boogeyman: Slender Man. The power I found in it was all in a sense of fun and comradery; however, May 31st, 2014 and the events that occurred on this date revealed that this figure embodied an entirely different sense of power. On this date, Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser, both age 12, took their friend Payton Leutner into woods near Waukesha, Wisconsin and stabbed her 19 times in an effort to appease the boogeyman of the millennial generation. One significant thing this tragedy revealed was a large schism between generations of the young and old. The young quickly understood what was meant by Slender Man, as the older appeared confused. Major news networks had to labor to make the general public comprehend what exactly this cyberspace boogeyman was. This divide and disconnect that the older, primarily parental generation had from their children perhaps lies within
understanding the myth of Slender Man and his relationship with place, both within the sense of the place he embodies, and the storytelling techniques cyberspace provides opposed to those of earlier boogeyman conventions. An expert on the Slender man mythos and professor of Mass Media at University of Georgia Shira Chess explains this new wave of urban legend creation in her book Folklore, Horror Stories, and The Slender Man: The Development of an Internet Mythology: “The Slender Man is a unique collective creation that applies the affordances of the digital age to age-old storytelling process. By doing so, it illuminates cultural anxieties both ancient and contemporary, engages audience—who in turn become creators—and helps develop new media literacies through the creative process.” (19) Chess continues, “Digital platforms allow for open access, memetic distribution, the ability to easily modify or remix, and open participation. Combined with a folk-influenced storytelling process, this yields shared ownership, variability of form, and the constant and consistent invitation for audiences to become storytellers themselves.” (20) Taking aspects from Chess’ definition of digital folklore development and aspects from traditional folklore development, one can begin to see parallels but also important differences that derive from moving boogeyman figures from specific, isolated regions to global archetypes to unchecked access through the internet.

Unlike many boogeyman figures, Slender man has a concise point of creation. Eric Knudsen, username Victor Surge, posted two images in a Photoshop competition on the website Something Awful on June 10th, 2009. Knudsen created realistic photos of a slender, faceless, towering figure among groups of children — one appears in a group hike of sorts and the other group appears at a small playground — and provided captions to hone in on the faux yet authentic atmosphere that surrounds his creation.

The caption on the first photo reads, “We didn’t want to go, we didn’t want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time…” - 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.” (Surge) The second photo of the playground group has the caption:

One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as “The Slender Man”. Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence. - 1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986. (Surge)

Knudsen’s work to make an unverifiable, believable yet faux creation for this competition gained traction throughout the Something Awful forums. The thread quickly exploded to other users creating their own photos and stories surrounding the figure thus creating one of the internet’s most popular creepypastas. A creepypasta may be defined as a story that users find interesting and of enough good quality to post it on other sites. The term derives from the term “copypasta;” which derives from the words “copy”
and “paste,” and it follows the same method of interaction. As this copy and pasting interaction occurs users may tweak the stories and or add their own elements and plot points. This crowd-creation allowed Slender Man and his mythos to expand organically into more popular, social media sites such as 4Chan, Tumblr, and YouTube. YouTube provided Slender Man a global platform as the video sharing platform attracts many non-English speaking cultures and the individuals involved, as well as their cultures, were able to contribute to Slender Man content creation as well. YouTube became an increasingly popular method for the spread of Slender Man content with users such as Marble Hornets creating faux “entries” as a journalist investing the legend of Slender Man. Marble Hornets’ videos had collected a total of 94,864,126 views as of March 20th, 2018. Another large burst into mainstream culture occurred through the development and viral response to Mark J. Hadley’s and Parsec Productions indie video game Slender: The Eight Pages on June 26, 2012. The games minimalist approach to horror and utilization of the Slender Man figure as the game’s antagonist often gave way to entertaining reactions of its players—typically extreme displays of fear and shock such as screaming, panicking, breaking the computer’s keyboard or mouse, or running away from the computer. The trend to record ones friends and their reactions to Slender lead to a viral sensation of watching players become increasingly stressed and terrified as they progressed through the game, typically in a dark room with noise-cancelling headphones. The free game became popular leading to a positively received sequel and larger release of Slender: The Arrival on March 26, 2013. The stabbings on May 31st, 2014 not only caused the Slender Man figure to explode into mainstream further, but it also caused more content creation around the figure to continue; some of this content inspired by the incident in Wisconsin. The momentum of this figure continues with Sony Pictures slated to release a wide-release blockbuster horror movie based on Slender Man on August 24th, 2018. One can assume that this film will erupt with even more content on the internet revolving around Slender Man.

Before delving into the relationships and connection this digital-age boogeyman shares with others of earlier literary tradition a working definition of what a boogeyman figure is should be established. The most significant aspect resides in perhaps the most obvious, that the figure should embody some type of threat; however, this threat is not limited to children, but they often find themselves as the primary target. Folklore scholar Marina Warner, who explores boogeymen figures ranging from the medieval to the Enlightenment period in her book No Go The Bogeyman: Scaring Lulling, and Making Mock, states this as the most prominent element in boogeyman figures. She states this after explaining Goethe’s poem “The Erlking,” which features a phantom constantly pursuing a child, whose parents do not listen
to his pleas, and the Erlking ultimately captures him: “It personifies death as a danger above all to the young, who are credited with a more intense perception of the other world in the first place; this intimacy with the supernatural makes them vulnerable to its charms and desires. Fear is the child’s bedfellow” (Warner 24). Along with the global cultural phenomenon of children being more inclined to paranormal experiences, Warner’s approach establishes the boogeyman as a threat primarily to them, but not exclusively.

The next significant element is that many boogeyman figures hold some form of mythic power or a mythic appearance, typical in a grotesque, physically repulsive or overwhelming, manner. Warner also comments on this: “Spirit assassins come in all shapes and sizes, as goblins, as little people and even as belles dames sans merci. The unfamiliar in every aspect molds the phantom, an so, like witches, bogeys are crooked or molely or warty, or they limp or suffer from other unusual physical traits—fairies are often marked out, in the British tradition, by their red hair” (Warner 25). Warner points out a significant schism in boogeyman figures in this statement, though she does not explore this phenomenon directly. The use of red hair suggests the fears and anxiety British culture held toward Celtic culture.

Some boogeyman figures appear to be generated entirely out of myth-telling, such as Raw Head and Bloody Bones or Slender Man. Others though are generated out of actual occurrences and then find themselves in the realm of myth, such as how Gilles de Rais became the source of the figure Bluebeard or John Wayne Gacy forever created a sinister connotation around clowns. The final aspect that will be considered for this paper is the way boogeyman figures are transported. These figures tend to stem from an organic storytelling environment, as Chess pointed to in her approach to Slender Man: their features may change from story to story but most of the details remain the same.

An excellent example of a boogeyman figure that displays the migration into a globally accessible figure exists in the figure of Spring-Heeled Jack. Though not known as much as other boogeyman figures, Spring-Heeled Jack’s influence is vast. Spring-Heeled Jack is a British Victorian legend that first occurs around 1837. In short, he is an entity with claw-like hands, red eyes, and the capability to make tremendous leaps, which were often used to escape after attacks on unsuspecting victims. Interestingly, Spring-Heeled Jack did not begin this way. The earliest reports tend to come from rural areas in which the figure was often presented as a phantom animal of some kind, often a bear. Folklorist Karl Bell points this out in an early chapter in his book *The Legend of Spring Heeled-Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Culture*. Bell states that the earliest known account occurs in the town of Barnes around September 1837: “At the time Barnes was still a village on the south-west fringe of London, and it was in this predominantly rural environment that rumours
began to circulate of a ghost ‘in the shape of a large white bull’ which had ‘attacked several persons…..’” (Bell 19-20). Bell traces the changes that occur to the descriptions of the figure from phantom creature to a ghostly humanoid figure: “Drawing closer to the capital, the ‘ghost’ changed from animal form to an ‘unearthly visitant’ at Richmond, and when he moved on to the ‘quiet and retired village of Ham and Petersham’ he adopted ‘the image of an imp of the “Evil One.”’ (20) Bell’s brief historiography of the figure’s migration continues with Spring-Heeled Jack’s transformation in an, “‘unearthly warrior clad in armour of polished brass, with spring shoes and large claw gloves.’” (20) The legend gained momentum as accounts of encounters with him increased, as did pranks involving aspects of the legend, and he became the topic of various penny-dreadfuls. The most popular depictions of Spring-Heeled Jack tend to range between a humanoid beast or a man in black clothing, either way both tend to have the influence of the devil, as shown in Figure 3.

![Image of Spring-Heeled Jack]

Fig. 3 McGurk, Caitlin. “Spring Heeled Jack No. 9 & 10.” The Ohio State University University Libraries, Ohio State University, 3 May 2013.

Spring-Heeled Jack achieved immense fame in his time though. He was even mentioned by the Lord Mayor of London, Sir John Cowen, in 1838. One can observe parallels between the relationship between the television media and Slender Man during the Waukesha stabbings and the relationship between Cowen, the London Times, and Spring-Heeled Jack during this series of reports. Bell states:

Though the Morning Chronicle had previously made mention of the ‘Steel Jack’ character who would evolve into Spring-Heeled
Jack, it was arguably the combined authority and respectability of the Lord Mayor and *The Times* that moved him into a different sphere of publicity. Through Cowen granting the matter his attention and *The Times* making it known to the readers of the relatively expensive metropolitan press, the ‘ghost’ was introduced to social circles far above that of London’s neighborhood gossips. (22)

One may question why such changes occur with a figure such as Spring-Heeled Jack as the legend increases in popularity. Bell provides an observation about why this figure transforms from a bestial figure such as a bull or bear and into an anthropomorphic human figure: “Spring-Heeled Jack’s transformation from phantasmal bull, to white bear, to anthropomorphic demon was also engendered by his transition from the rural to urban environment. Whilst rural ghosts could be bestial or human in appearance, urban ghosts were nearly always anthropomorphic.” (55) Bell points to cultural expectations as the pressure to transform Spring-Heeled Jack for the figure to persist: “Spring-heeled Jack’s metamorphosis arose from these pre-existing cultural expectations about ghosts which prevented him from retaining a bestial form if he were to remain credible as he entered the London suburbs.” (55) This migration that encounters cultural expectations that Bell observes can apply to most boogeyman figures, at least the ones that persist for extended periods of time.

Bell acknowledges early in his book that the figure of Jack the Ripper (as well as the figure of Sweeney Todd) tends to usurp the influence of Spring-Heeled Jack as a Victorian, British boogeyman; however, the crimes of Jack the Ripper and the mystery that surrounds them perhaps allowed Spring-Heeled Jack to evolve into an entirely new boogeyman. Occurring between roughly the years 1888-1891, Jack the Ripper’s crimes gain massive public attention while the phenomenon of Spring-Heeled Jack continued. The most enduring features of Spring-Heeled Jack could apply to the elements of Jack the Ripper that caused the killing spree to reach infamous status: claws, often described as metal, and the ability to make great leaps to avoid capture for his crimes. Clearly, Jack the Ripper fits the latter element as the killer was never captured, and scholars on the topic still debate the identity of the killer today. As for the claws, Jack the Ripper has almost become synonymous with a knife in hand, or some tool of mutilation. A depiction of Jack the Ripper appeared in an 1888 issue of *Punch* as a knife-wielding phantom stalking the streets of Whitechapel (see Figure 4). Illustrations such as this point to Spring-Heeled Jack’s influence over the myth of Jack the Ripper as the crimes play out. To construct Jack the Ripper as a humanoid phantom, just as Spring-Heeled Jack is, and with a knife almost always gripped in his hands calls upon the conventions previously found in the
figure of Spring-Heeled Jack and cause Jack the Ripper to evoke a similar presence and power. Though Jack the Ripper usurps Spring-Heeled Jack as the cultural icon of Victorian British terror, cultural discourse shows that the mythic aspect of Jack the Ripper was being constructed from elements of Spring-Heeled Jack; despite that Jack the Ripper was real and Spring-Heeled Jack is not. Reports of Spring-Heeled Jack continued into the Second World War, and even seeped into American culture. Bell reports:

This period was also marked by Spring-Heeled Jack’s emigration from Britain as he transformed into a migratory legend that was disseminated and appropriated into different cultures around the world. … it is obviously more credible to assume that this was an adapted folkloric motif rather than an individual Victorian monster making its lonely way around the globe. The most faithful foreign homage to the Victorian original came with the ‘Black Flash’ appearances in Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts between 1938-1945. (Bell 46)

The influence of Spring-Heeled Jack unto Jack the Ripper allows unsolved crimes to take mythic form as shown through the occurrence of the ‘Black
Flash,’ which was a report of a humanoid phantom that spat fire at bystanders before he leaped away, Bell points to here. However, as time and technology progress, the boogeyman no longer seems to appear in specific locations such as London suburbs or Whitechapel. As shown through Bell’s reports, a figure like Spring-Heeled Jack appears in Massachusetts almost half a century later from the initial spree of reports. Going into the 1950s, the elements these two figures bring to the boogeyman may take the form of a globally accessible boogeyman figure through the figure of The Hook.

The Hook is often now perceived as a classic boogeyman figure. In his book *Film, Folklore, and Urban Legends*, folklorist Mikel J. Koven points to The Hook as one of the most influential figures on modern horror storytelling, specifically in film. In short, The Hook is a crazed killer with a hook for a hand and he typically attacks young couples parked at a Lover’s Lane. Mikel points to documentarian Mark Kermode to explain the phenomenon of The Hook as, “a morality archetype for the entire slasher phenomenon: the young couple are threatened specifically because they have strayed from the moral path…. ” (Koven 113) The Hook may find itself taking many different forms as it travels across various regions and cultures. Such as the Cropsey legend that typically occurs in New York State. Documentarian Joshua Zeaman explores the Cropsey legend in relation to his personal history with it growing up on Staten Island in his renowned documentary *Cropsey:*

Growing up on Staten Island, Barb and I had often heard the legend of Cropsey. For the kids in our neighborhood, Cropsey was an escaped mental patient who lived in the tunnels beneath the old Willowbrook mental institution, who would come out late at night, snatch children off the streets. Although we didn’t know each other as children, Barb and I had both shared versions of the Cropsey legend, as it filtered through our separate neighborhoods, and seeped into our collective fears. Sometimes Cropsey had a hook for a hand, other times he wielded a bloody axe, but it didn’t matter, Cropsey was out there lurking in the shadows, waiting to get us. (Zeaman 2009)

Zeaman also interviewed folklorist Bill Ellis who describes the Cropsey figure as, “the generic term for a maniac in Boy Scout camps up and down the Hudson River region of New York state. So it would have made perfect sense for a story about a maniac who was hiding out in the woods and who abducted and killed little children to be called Cropsey.” (Zeaman 2009) Zeaman explores The Hook figure directly in his documentary *Killer Legends*, in which he proposes that the Texarkana Moonlight Murders—which inspire the film *The Town That Dreaded Sundown*—spawned The Hook, or
The Hookman. It should be noted that Zeaman explores Midwestern and other states to understand this figure, specifically the southwestern state of Texas from these two loosely regionalized locations, Eastern United States and Midwest and Southwest United States, one can observe how The Hook holds a presence as large as Spring-Heeled Jack or the myth of Jack the Ripper. This perhaps stems from the influence that both these figures hold over The Hook legend. As both Spring-Heeled Jack and Jack the Ripper were depicted as one with their metal appendages, metal claws and a knife, The Hook is literally inseparable from its. The Hook also holds the mythic, phantom-like ability to disappear from his attacks like that of the aforementioned figures. However, as technology and communications progress urban legends and the boogeyman figures involved in them begin to blur lines between one another, creating new conglomerations of boogeyman figures.

The 1992 film Candyman displays such a conglomeration. Bernard Rose's film follows a folklorist, Helen (Virginia Madsen), as she travels in Chicago's Cabrini–Green Homes to record and investigate the urban legend of Candyman. During her investigations she interviews various people about the influence and reports of the legend, primarily impoverished African-American people ranging from young children to a young mother. The legend in the film is that Candyman fell in love and fathered a child with a white woman in 1890. He was then lynched shortly after via his painting hand chopped off and replaced with a hook, smeared with honey to have hungry bees sting him to death, and burned on a public pyre to have his ashes spread where Cabrini-Green is built. Helen decides to construct her thesis around how the extremely impoverished residents of Cabrini-Green utilize this legend as a coping mechanism. As the film progresses, Helen becomes deeply involved with the Candyman legend and discovers it as reality as she becomes confronted by Candyman himself (Tony Todd) and seduced by his claims that she is the reincarnation of his former lover. Eventually, she finds death in her investigation through a recreation of the public burning of Candyman from the children of Cabrini-Green, and she becomes a part of the legend she investigated; which is shown through her figure being added to a graffiti mural dedicated to Candyman.

The film features a combination of The Hook and the popular ritual of Bloody-Mary to construct the antagonist of the film. Koven provides a case study with Candyman in his book: “There is also implicit recognition of the fictive form of this narration (a fiction film) but equally a recognition that the stories upon which certain films are based come from genuine urban legends.” (139) Koven addresses that Candyman skews these genuine urban legends together and that, much like Slender Man, this ambiguity and large-scale accessibility to the Candyman legend begins to blur the lines between reality and fiction: “Toward the end of 1994, a
few years after the film was released in cinemas and a few months after the film’s appearance on home video, a discussion of Candyman-type legends appeared on the Internet’s Folklore discussion List (folklore@listserv.tamu.edu). … Although the name ‘Candyman’ given to the monster in both the film and the short story is unique within this fictional narrative, Candyman has his analogue in the oft-collected ‘Mary Worth’ narrative (also known as ‘Mary Whales,’ ‘Blood Mary,’ or even the ‘Virgin Mary’).” (142) Koven’s findings suggest a quick attachment to the bogeyman figures Candyman embodies, The Hook and Bloody Mary. Not only is this due to the film’s conjoining of two already seemingly placeless bogeyman figures, but how the film deals with place itself. The film opens with some teenagers falling victim to Candyman when they perform the ritual home alone in what appears to be middle-class suburbia. Yet a majority of the film takes place in the urban, impoverished projects of Cabrini-Green. The ones primarily interested in the Candyman legend, Helen and her colleagues, appear to live in high-class society as well. Not only does the film comment indirectly on The Hook and Bloody-Mary’s omnipresence capability with physically place, but allows draws attention to these figures capability to move through socioeconomic and cultural boundaries.

The figure of Slender Man holds this capability to be omnipresent and fluid through various locations attached to different socioeconomic classes and cultures as well. The various bogeyman figures mentioned throughout this paper often find themselves linked with specific places, both temporally and physical. Spring-Heeled Jack exist in a primarily Victorian period London-based mythos. However, as the world globalizes and the ability to be linked to locales far from the region one resides becomes easier, the necessity of a physical location for a bogeyman figure to be rooted in becomes obsolete. Through technological advances such as radio, television, film, and the internet; The Hook and Bloody-Mary are able to spread at speeds and at a range unavailable at the times of Spring-Heeled Jack and the myths of Jack the Ripper. Slender Man’s construction as a bogeyman for the internet allows him to spread at a rate not yet seen for other bogeyman figures. Scholar Tina Marie Boyer points to this development and the chaotic undertones it holds: “If we then think of something as chaotic and limitless as the Internet, it is easy to see, how out of the gray swirling clouds of creativity, the shreds and bits of other stories and monsters are shaped and reshaped in an endless cycle of cultural ideation.” (243) Boyer continues: “David Gilmore mentions Claude Levi-Strauss’s term *bricolage* as ‘inventive scavenging’ for his idea of monster construction, which he states ‘encourages creativity, synthesis, and art as well as analysis.’ (8) The Internet is a borderless entity, an all-consuming, ever-recycling, reproducing unit that births and devours its creations with equal zeal. One of these
is Slender Man.” (243) This chaotic and unchecked environment spawns Slender Man as the environment and technology of the time spawned their respected bogeyman figures. The creation of The Hook and Bloody Mary allude to a bogeyman eventually being constructed in an environment that has no boundaries. That bogeyman is Slender Man.

This unchecked, limitless environment and method of storytelling provide a small fraction of the causation of the Waukesha stabbings. The aforementioned collection of bogeymen figures went from embodying cultural fears and tension about crime to becoming moral archetypes and symbols of warning or control. Slender Man works to do away with the idea that the bogeyman embodies a specific notion, fear, or function. Boyer states what are common themes in Slender Man content across the internet: “Slender Man’s physiognomy and uncanny behavior aside, the narratives that were inspired by his existence shared similar themes, predominantly amnesia, paranoia, insomnia, lack of control, and inability to make sense of the world.” (256) Clearly, Slender Man takes the form of something sinister to the many young people that consume and create content around him. He becomes the fear that alienation and social isolation will allow for them to slip through the cracks, to be forgotten. Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser clearly approached Slender Man in a manner such as this. However, the environment that Boyer describes allows Slender Man to go beyond that of nefarious connotations. In her documentary Beware the Slenderman, Irene Taylor Brodsky points to the sensation of Slender Man becoming a guardian angel figure of sorts. At times, he is depicted as gentle, misunderstood, and even playful in a puppy-dog manner. Socially outcast children at times use Slender Man as a sense of refuge and acceptance that awaits them outside the boundaries of normal society and reality (see Figure 5).

Fig. 5 Kb jones-d6sc8o5.jpg. “Slender Man.” Creepypasta Italy, Fandom, 5 May 2015, it.creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/File:Slender_man_by_k_b jones-d6sc8o5.jpg.
Once again, the place that Slender Man embodies, the internet a seemingly borderless landscape, allows him to take this form opposed to bogeymen before him. These two opposite approaches to construct Slender Man juxtaposed expose that the landscape Slender Man stems from, the Internet, can potentially give way to fear, violence, fun, solace, real, believable, fake, and everything between when left without boundaries. This lack of boundaries may contribute to the violent turmoil and confusion that the Waukesha stabbings revealed.

Though the migration pattern discussed earlier does not give way to Slender Man, it perhaps reveals that Slender Man is not in need of a migration pattern. Unlike the other figures mentioned, Slender Man has a concise point of creation and clear influences. In an interview with Know Your Meme, Victor Surge recalled the influences he had in creating the internet’s bogeyman:

I was mostly influenced by H.P Lovecraft, Stephen King (specifically his short stories), the surreal imaginings of William S. Burroughs, and couple games of the survival horror genre; Silent Hill and Resident Evil. I feel the most direct influences were Zack Parsons’s “That Insidious Beast”, the Stephen King short story “The Mist”, the SA (Something Awful) tale regarding “The Rake”, reports of so-called shadow people, Mothman, and the Mad Gasser of Mattoon. I used these to formulate a something whose motivations can barely be comprehended and causes general unease and terror in a general population. (Tomberry)

Slender Man may not lend way to another bogeyman figure as Spring-Heeled Jack did because the place in which Slender Man stems from allows him to organically shift into a different type of bogeyman figure: from embodying mental disorders to social anxiety to a dark-protector. Surge’s eclectic collection of influences point again to Slender Man not embodying a specific fear or incident as we have seen with previous bogeymen. Slender Man does not fit into the same morality archetype that one witnesses in The Hook or Cropsey, but instead Slender Man becomes the embodiment of fear itself. The landscape of the Internet provides the one consuming or creating Slender Man content to perceive Slender Man as any fear they hold, rather than The Hook specifically pointing to the fear of sexual immorality. This ability to ignore boundaries during the creation of Slender Man content—content that often aims to appear realistic and believable—also allows the most intense fears one has to manifest and run rampant.

The Slender Man myth’s ability to allow fear to run rampant, without boundaries causes an eruption of paranoia and fear to become unhinged,
unlike how the confinement of bogeymen to specific locations or locales allow one to escape or even ignore them and the underlying influences of them. The Internet becomes somewhat inescapable in modern society, causing Slender Man—along with the fears he embodies—to be rather inescapable. The combination of this myth's ability to run rampant without limitations and become difficult to escape or ignore holds potential to give way to violence, as is the case with the Waukesha stabbings. Though a recent phenomenon, Slender Man may continue to persist as The Hook and Bloody Mary have. Even the myth of Jack the Ripper still exists in various forms of cultural discourse presently, but it remains too soon to tell if Slender Man will endure and remain a staple of Internet culture. Perhaps developments on Anissa Weier's—the young girl that eventually was diagnosed with schizophrenia—understanding of Slender Man reveal a heavy potential for Slender Man to endure, and which once again reveal that Slender Man exists in a placeless landscape: that since an early age, Slender Man was always there.

WORKS CITED
Laughing to Keep from Crying: Black Humor in Kiese Laymon’s Long Division

Bethany Roper

When I was younger, I remember going to a family reunion. After everyone was finished eating, the adults would gather around the table telling stories of the past as the food settled in their stomach. I was in that in-between age where I was too old to play outside with all my cousins but too young to feel like I deserved a spot at the grown-ups table. However, old enough or not I sat in my chair amongst relatives twenty years beyond my age and listened. I listened to them tell stories of their many adventures such as when they first met their husband/wife, buying their first car, and how much cheaper/better everything was “back in the day.” As memories would pass through their minds, they would belly laugh so hard tears trickled down the side of their face. I laughed beside them but the jokes never brought me the amusement it brought them. As much I wanted to feel like an insider sitting at the grown-ups table, with every chuckle I felt more like an outsider.

As fun as it was listening to their thorough stories of the past, I did learn one valuable lesson at this family reunion: humor does not translate well. A quote from Gerald Early in his article entitled “Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition” gives an even further explanation for this statement:

“Every group has its humor and understanding that humor determines whether you are an insider or an outsider. In America, there are a lot of different groups with inside humor. Can you understand how another group laughs at itself? And Why?” (30).

One’s perception of what is funny can be affected by a number of conditions such as time, place, age, class, and race. This gives reason as to why
one ultimately feels like either an outsider or insider when it comes to a joke or comical antic. Humor is the insider’s marker and what binds a group together and gives them their own specific identity. One group in particular that uses humor to strengthen its communicative bonds are African Americans. African Americans are constantly told to disregard their past to look towards a brighter future, yet so much of their individuality is tethered to their past or their ancestors’ past experiences. In order to cope with their past while still having a positive outlook on life, African Americans use humor in a number of ways. Some of these various forms include satire, parody, tragicomedy, and burlesque. Humor rose out of a harsh often dangerous racial climate, and even today it is used as a creative defense to living a life of hardship.

In the form of African American literature, humor was not always been a component. It was not until about the twentieth century did African American authors feel comfortable writing antics into their texts. Dexter Gordon describes why an African American chose to disregard humor in his/her writing as: “Racist assumptions regarding the purportedly innate relationship between blackness and buffoonery made it necessary for African American writers to avoid or disguise their use of humor” (270). African Americans were already being gimmicked in their everyday life placing humor throughout their pages would only give whites more reason to do so. However once early 20th century authors such as Ralph Ellison paved the way for humor, other authors such as Kiese Laymon could modernize the approach. In Kiese Laymon’s debut novel *Long Division*, Laymon creates hilarious coming-of-age African American characters living in the white state of Mississippi. City and the other characters in this novel use humor in the forms of three different theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. With humor playing such a vital role in each characters life despite its harsh repercussions, readers can see how necessary this invisible shield is to one’s resistance and survival. This psychological weapon gives each character the ability to cope with the discrimination of the African American experience in present and past eras.

Although being his first ever novel, Kiese Laymon does an exceptional job at creating coming-of-age characters in post-Katrina Mississippi that are both comical and wise. Originally published in 2013, *Long Division* contains two interwoven stories. The first story takes place in 2013 where fourteen year old City Coldson becomes an overnight YouTube sensation after an onstage meltdown during a nationally televised grammar competition. After his onstage explosion, City is forced to go stay with his grandmother in the small coastal community of Melahatchie, where a young girl named Baize Shepard has recently went missing. Before leaving his hometown, City is given a book without an author entitled “Long Division.” While
reading this book, City learns that its protagonist is also a teenager named City Coldson- but the setting of this book is 1985. 1985 City along with his crush Shalaya Crump, discover a way to travel into the future, and steal a laptop and cell phone from a teenager named Baize Shepard. City and Shalaya ultimately take these objects with them all the way back to 1964, to help another young time traveler protect his family from the Ku Klux Klan. The two stories eventually converge as the novel progresses and the reader discovers the true reasoning behind Baize's disappearance.

*Long Division* gives a modern look at social issues from the past that are still haunting America to this day. This novel looks at the American trope that often turns into the American myth of reinvention. While one cannot deny the appeal of a true reinvention narrative, the romance of transformation unmoored from the past is both unrealistic and misleading. This brings forward the underlying assumption that the African American past is baggage to be disregarded and discarded. Kiese Laymon's novel does a balancing act by equally integrating change while still being deeply rooted in the past. By allowing his African American teenage characters to time travel from early 21st century to mid-20th century right in the heart of the Civil Rights Movement, these characters are able to realize how much of the African American past is still a part of their lives today. Despite the progress of race relations, a large part of the African American experience is still attached to centuries of slavery and Jim Crow discrimination. Kiese Laymon laces this message throughout his pages with humor that is ultimately masking layers of pain. The more hilarity there is throughout the pages shows how much pain there is lying underneath. This type of humor that Laymon is encapsulating throughout *Long Division* is known as black humor. Black humor or gallows humor in its original term has been traced all the way to 1848 and refers to the cynical humor that derives from stressful or traumatic situations. In a more detailed explanation, Dexter Gordon defines black humor as: “a literary mode containing stylistic, structural, and thematic elements that may elicit laughter and tears simultaneously from the reader by presenting events or situations that are at once humorous, absurd, and horrible” (256). Black humor is a sort of weapon against pain, it is the laughter in the face of prejudicial customs directed towards African Americans. African Americans such as the teenagers Kiese Laymon presents in his novel do not even know they are using this comedy as a coping mechanism, it just simply comes to play during their lives of adversity.

Humor is an avenue that allows one to release their internal stresses and frustrations. This comedic relief helps by replacing distressing emotions with pleasurable feelings. Black humor is often viewed as an expression of hope that has the power to soothe one's suffering. Nicole Force describes this form of hope further by stating: “When the minority has few tools to combat
an oppressive majority, black humor can be used as a sort of secret, subversive weapon. The danger that ridicule poses to those in power is captured by the Italian phrase Una risata vi seppelliria which translates to it will be laughter that buries you” (77). In a primarily white state like Mississippi, African Americans are the minority and from the ingrained racism of the past African Americans constantly feel like they must be defensive in their actions. However like the quote describes by always acting defensively, African Americans are using humor like a comfort blanket to hide them from their painful past. Laymon showcases this combatant humor through his protagonist and all his other characters in the form of three different theories. The three central theories of humor that Laymon encompasses throughout his novel are: superiority theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory. Force describes each theory as:

“The superiority theory provides an artificial empowering, resulting from feelings of superiority. The Incongruity theory deals with frustration or injustice through resorting the divergent logic and contradiction. The relief theory is the removal of social restraints through the expression of things that are not defined. These psychological outcomes could directly or indirectly, contribute to the lower tension and anxiety as well as allowing for more positive moods and states of mind.” (85).

By analyzing how each theory of humor is used in the novel, readers can really get a sense of how humor is a coping mechanism. Without this sort of creative outlet, City and his friends would not be able to manage seeing the sort of discrimination that occurred in their ancestors past. Even though City is only fourteen in the 21st century and was never involved in Civil Rights or the Jim Crow era, by creating this time travel concept Laymon is allowing his characters’ racial past and feeling of otherness to literally confront them head on. The only way City and his friends know to combat these feelings is to use humor as a psychological weapon.

Whenever an African American is using humor as a way to insult or negatively bring down another person’s self-esteem in order to raise their own ego, it creates this falsified feeling of superiority or entitlement. While this may seem like fun and games, with each insult this jokester is building a wall to shield from their own insecurities. This type of humor is so well known in the African American community that it has coined the name of “playing the dozens.” This sort of verbal combat is used to teach participants how to maintain control in adverse situations. Although not known for sure, the origin of this type of humor may lead back to the days of slavery before 1865. Researchers such as Nicole Shields speculate that field slaves played
the game instead of physically assaulting the higher-status house slaves. Field slaves would often be whipped or deprived of food if they harmed any of the house servants, who were generally light-skinned due to being the offspring of a white parent. Field slaves would insult the house servants’ parents. If the insults did their purpose, the bash became even cruder from the other slave. This name “dozens” may have derived from the notion that the opponent’s mother was supposed to be one of the dozens of slave women available to sexually satisfy the master. From slavery onward this ability to handle a repetitive bashing and still comeback with a more lewd insult is still seen in African American communities today. However this “dozens” game is hardly ever seen between the races, “The problem in America with group humor is not that outsiders won’t get the joke you make about your own group but they will get the joke at your expense” (Early 30). While it may be funny when African Americans insult one another in a joking fashion and laugh amongst themselves, it could easily become violent if a white person brings up the wrong subject. This sort of humor is the ideal example of superiority theory as no matter who wins in this game, they are only wearing a falsified crown of empowerment.

Kiese Laymon creates a modern, educated version of this ghetto humor game in the beginning of his novel between the two central characters City Coldson and Lavander Peeler. City and his peer Lavander Peeler are preparing for a national competition of “Can you use that word in a sentence?” a contest that tests students’ ability to use an unusual word in a “correct, appropriate, and dynamic” (Laymon 6) sentence. The novel starts with City and Lavander throwing crude jokes back and forth to another in the way teenagers often do. Laymon incredibly captures the vulgarity that teenagers bash one another with when adults are not around. Lavander flexes to City his sentence making ability as:

“African Americans are generally a lot more ignorant than white Americans, and if you’re an African American boy and you beat not only an African American girls but white American boys and white American girls, who are all things considered, less ignorant than you by nature- in something like making sentences, in a white state like Mississippi- you are, all things considered, a special African American boy destined for riches, unless you’re a homosexual African American boy with mommy issues who I shall beat like a knock-kneed slave tonight at the Nationals.” (Laymon 14).

Laymon is introducing a different approach to playing this game by using it in the form of dynamic sentences. He does this to not only prove how educated these two African American classmates are, but to ultimately show
how one’s culture can play a role in a person’s life. Dexter Gordon notes how African American humor has developed from its harsh racial past, “The soul of African Americans is revealed in humor, which is racial because it is “impregnated with [their] convictions, customs and associations” (257). Both City and Lavander live in the urban city of Jackson, Mississippi and do not come from a poverty-stricken area, yet they both play this game that was raised in the streets of the ghetto. Laymon is presenting how parts of a culture evolve into different forms and into different areas of living.

Even though Lavander is attempting to insult City with his sentence making ability, by deeply analyzing the particular words he uses one can see the underlying buffer that he is hiding behind with his humor. First, one needs to focus on his multiple use of his race- African American. Throughout his lengthy sentence, Lavander says African Americans six times. This frequent use shows how much his race affects him as a person. He not only uses it as an identifier but feels like because of his race he has to be smarter than the white students in order to be treated as an equal. This goes back to the racially charged motto of “you have to be twice as good to get half as much.” Just by the fact that City and Lavander are African American gives them a disadvantage to the white students competing against them as so many people expect them to fail. For Lavander, the goal of this competition is not just some trophy it is to be seen by those in power. By being a self-proclaimed “exceptional African American” (Laymon 3) who dreams of being worthy to marry Malia Obama, Lavander clearly has high standards for himself and does not want to be suppressed by his race. Lavander is using this sort of wounding humor in a way that is meant to insult City, while it is truly just his attempt to provide: “...a balm a release for anger and aggression, and a way of coping with the too often painful consequences of racism” (Early 34).

If one analyzes further into the sentence after Lavander describes himself and resorts to insulting City, one may notice the underlying emotions that Lavander encapsulates beyond his hard core exterior. Name calling another teenage boy to be homosexual or gay is not a rare occurrence in modern times. This is a common insult that may shield from some underlying sexual emotions. The queerness element between City and Lavander is more than an afterthought in this novel. While City claims to like girls, he often admits some attraction to Lavander. Even though this novel is not in the perspective of Lavander, by him calling out City as a homosexual may show that this sexual attraction is equal. This brings an even more complex vision of the south as it is hard enough maturing to an adult as an African American much less as a homosexual African American. This classification just adds another layer of complexity and pain to Laymon’s characters- City and Lavander. Clifton Fadiman creates an interesting meta-
phor for this theory of humor by noting, “It bears somewhat the relation to traditional humor that necrophilia bears to standard sexual intercourse. It is the “diversion” of an intellectual community, which, having lost its nourishing roots, must feed on its own flesh.” (Fadiman 22). As Lavander continues his list of insults that seem to be directed toward City, he is only insulting himself or as Fadiman describes “feeding on his own flesh.” City’s mother is not mentioned much throughout the novel except for when she is shipping him off to stay with his grandmother after his onstage meltdown, however it is clear that their relationship is distant and reserved. City remarks quite early on in the novel during their personal game of dozens that Lavander’s mother is deceased. By Lavander insulting City’s relationship with his mother, it is only opening the door for City to then bash Lavander’s mother. It is not clear the exact reason for her death, but it is known that it occurred during Lavander’s young age. Since his mother died while Lavander was just a child, he probably did not deal with this hardship as he should have. He most likely suppressed these feelings only for them to come up in humorous social interactions that ultimately have deeper meaning. Lastly, it is incredibly important to note the use of the word “slave” in Lavander’s sentence. Whenever a slave was known to be knock-kneed in an advertisement for slavery, the price was typically lower. In this case, Lavander is not only insulting City but himself by bringing up their slave heritage. Deeply analyzing Lavander’s complex sentence toward City reveals his painful internalized feelings regarding race, familial issues, and sexuality.

Later on in the novel as 1985 City and Shalaya time travel into the depths of the Civil Rights movement, City makes an intellectual remark about the suppressed fear that comes from a facade of superiority. After being captured by members of the Ku Klux Klan, City makes a metaphor for the emotions that these racially hateful beings are bottling-up inside:

“I figured it was like football. As soon as you put on your helmet and shoulder pads and your jersey, you were like everyone else on your team. The game was filled with seconds where it was up to you to make a play. Not your teammate. You. I knew that each of the Klansmen was feeling fear and trying to figure out a way to seem less afraid than he was to the other teammates on his Klan squad.” (Laymon 152).

Even though City is only fourteen in this novel, these remarks about fear residing in every person even members of the KKK is wise beyond his years. While this is not the most comedic moment and is actually one of the more tension-filled moments, it is still mixed with contemporary slang.
such as City calling the Ku Klux Klan a squad instead of an organized group. Even though the KKK is known for upfront racism, Laymon uses the sheet they hide behind as a piece of symbolism. Like how Lavander uses bashes to shield from his own personal insecurities, City notes that these members are only using the sheet as a way to hide from their own internal fear. While the true intentions of these Klansmen is unclear to the reader, by City mentioning their fear it immediately lowers their supremacy. Ultimately the Klu Klux Klan are not these diabolical beings but simply scared, middle-aged white men in sheets. City’s ability to see beyond the outside exterior of these men shows the extreme depth of his own morals.

The second theory of humor that is seen throughout the pages of Laymon’s novel is known as the Incongruity theory or the antics that are evoked through frustration or injustice. City’s meltdown at the national “Can you use that word in a sentence” competition is the ideal example for this theory as the humor that is induced is not intentional and comes from his feelings of injustice in what should have been a just situation. After being given the word “niggardly” to use in a dynamic sentence, City automatically runs back into his dressing room to grab his wave brush. City’s wave brush is constantly in his hand and he uses it in the way a toddler would a security blanket. With this wave brush in hand, City feels comforted enough to stand up to the judges and everyone watching on their television sets at home: “I looked out into the white lights hoping someone would demand they give me another word- not because I didn’t know how to use it, but because it just didn’t seem right that any kid like me should have to use a word like that, not in front of all these white folks” (Laymon 29). City immediately feels like an outcast by his race when given this specific word, even if he is using this word in the wrong connotation. The word “niggardly” actually means not generous or stingy, however City associated it with the discriminatory, similarly sounding word: nigger. This helplessness that City is feeling in 2013 brings his racial past into present day just like his ancestors would have felt during slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights era.

This point in the novel arrives well before the time-travel concept comes into play, but City is still metaphorically traveled into the past when he feels prejudiced on this nationally televised stage. According to Gerald Early and his insight on the development of this type of humor, “Black humor began as wrestled freedom, the freedom to laugh at which was unjust and cruel in order to create a distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community” (Early 34). Like most concepts with African Americans this black humor grew through the desire for freedom, the hilarity that City spews in his meltdown is caused by his desire for freedom to get off the stage. This uncomfortableness that he is feeling is only growing
with each humorous statement. While the audience and readers may be laughing at this moment, the emotion that City is feeling is anything but amusing.

As City’s meltdown becomes more chaotic and the situation takes over his entire demeanor more hilarity is ensued. He throws his wave brush at the camera and directs his attention towards his competitor, Lavander Peeler: “Look at Lavander Peeler over there crying. I hate that dude. No, I mean I really hate. I be sitting at home sometimes praying someone will sew his butt hole tight so he could almost die from being so backed up. I’m serious look at him over there with tears in his eyes looking crazy as hell on TV. It don’t make no sense” (Laymon 31). Through my argument, I conject that this quote does a significant job of integrating two humor theories: superiority and incongruity. In the superiority theory, humor arises when one is given a false sense of entitlement such as in the game “playing the dozens” and in the incongruity theory, humor is used as a coping mechanism when one is in a situation of injustice beyond their control. City feels completely out of control in this particular situation and from it goes back to this teenage instinctual notion of signifying another one of his peers. By doing so, City is not only picking his shredded pride off the ground by insulting Lavander but is sending the attention toward his classmate. Even though it seems like this moment is entirely about City, in reality City is speaking for all the discriminated African Americans like his grandmother, mother, and Lavander Peeler. Lavander is crying because he is clearly uncomfortable and does not like that he was not even given a real chance to participate in this competition.

Ultimately City and Lavander just want to be good examples for their neighborhood, but the matters working against them are not allowing them to do so. City reflects on his hatred for Lavander in this time of crisis, because he is ultimately unable to confront the real reason for his distress—racism. Even though this competition claims to make up for the culturally biased nature of spelling bees, it is doing the exact opposite in its actions. It is interesting to note that this competition decided to hold its national competition in a white supremacist state. City and Lavander are the only African American contestants throughout the entire competition. They are already seen as outcasts and by giving City a word with a racist innuendo, it shows the producers true intention. Even though the audience is constantly chuckling at City’s words and actions, the laughter is not one of joy it is one of uneasiness. Shields goes into this speculation for laughing as “Generally speaking people laugh at things that are incongruous, at situations that fail to meet their basic expectations – those expectations that they articulate and those that are unspoken” (421). Even though the audience and the viewers watching on YouTube may be laughing, it is important to note that City
and all the African Americans are not. The word “niggardly” has no defining connection to “nigger,” yet it is the meaning that he puts behind this word that gives him so much distress. City’s humorous insult to Lavander gives him a slight relief, if only temporary.

Although the humor in this moment is intended to adjust the meaning of this catastrophic event, it does not do so for City. City feels othered in this situation and his emotions are intended to lighten the mood. However it clearly does not work as City says, “They do us like this in our own state. Ain’t nothing white folks can do to make you feel like me and Lavander Peeler do right now. They’re scared of us becoming Obama.” (Laymon 31). City’s racial past is haunting him on and stage and he is using his outburst as a form of self-protection and self-hatred. In this moment, he is not a proud African American as he is not feeling like he is representing his race well. City wants well-educated African Americans like himself to be leaders, but he feels like he could have handled the situation better. City’s humiliation is clear because on the way home he prays his family did not watch the live viewing. Not only is City ashamed to let his friends, family, and race down, but he especially does not want to let his home state of Mississippi down. Mississippi is known for being educationally lower in educational standards, yet City wants to prove that a young African American male in Mississippi can win a grammar competition. City even admits this rarity by noting that this would be the first time a boy with waves in his hair won anything besides a music or athletic competition. There are many reasons why humor may be evoked in a tense situation like the one described in Long Division and Clifton Fadiman describes these reasons as “…a weapon to beat someone over the head with, or to defend our point of view, or to produce an effect in an audience that will lead to some kind of action or arouse of emotions” (22). With the humor that City evokes during his outburst, City is incorporating every one of these steps. He is absolutely beating this concept of racially charged discrimination over the audience’s head by his repetition and defensive actions. Stating phrases like “They don’t want us to be Obama” proves his point of view of that this word choice was given intentionally to an African American. Lastly, it definitely arouses attention as Africans Americans and whites alike both know the chubby black boy from Mississippi- City Coldson.

During slavery and the many subsequent decades of Jim Crow segregation, African Americans had to develop a face identity that on the one hand masked their inner aggression by catering to white beliefs on the inferiority of blacks, but on the other hand was a more assertive humor that was traditionally reserved for in-group interactions. This concept goes back to the notion of insider and outsider humor. Non-African American groups rarely understood this humor as it was typically directed towards them.
The humor that is evoked in this situation relates to my third theory—relief theory. Relief theory is the removal of social restraints of things that are not clearly defined. African Americans present this humor with a meek, grinning, and overall submissive image, while at the same time conveying to their fellow African Americans their feelings of hostility and disrespect. An ideal example from the text is when City and his grandmother go to the mall for a “Wigs4Blax” sale. A white woman promotes the sale as City and his grandmother browse through the store. The woman attempts to get City’s grandmother to purchase a Jheri curl wig but pronounces it as “Gary” curl wig. Clearly both City and his grandmother know that this is the wrong pronunciation, but his grandmother does not correct her. Instead, City’s grandmother plays along by also calling the wig a “Garry” curl. Like other African Americans, in this situation City’s grandmother establishes a dual personality. This translated into two different types of humor—private and public. City describes his grandmother’s dual personality as they are driving home from the mall as,

“Grandma got busy with her sentences. With Grandma’s at-home sentences it was like there was no screen between her and her mind and your ears. You got all of her, all of her voice. I realized then, though, that Grandma’s at-home sentences were complete opposite of her at-the-mall-sentences” (Laymon 67).

City’s grandmother, like many other African Americans, feels like she has to create a false persona when speaking with white adults. Even though this woman clearly knows little about the African American culture, City’s grandmother does not correct her because it has been ingrained in her mind to be submissive towards whites. However, she expresses her true identity when talking in the car or at home with what City calls her at-home sentences or her in-the-car sentences. The humor that is induced from this dual personality allows her the opportunity to escape mentally from the cruelty of the African American experience. While relief theory not only allows these African Americans to escape mentally, it gives them a sense of power and control over whites who clearly find them to be inferior.

City’s grandmother is one of the most interesting characters in the novel as she often gives her sage advice, that has been acquired from her prejudicial past, to her young grandson growing up as an African American in modern times. Even though City listens his grandmother and attempts to take her advice, it does not always translate well. City does not truly understand the concept of a dual personality as he lives through his one true identity. After the event in the mall and a later occurring event where Coach tries not to get City to buy a watermelon in front of white people, City gives his own
advice to the adults in his life: “Yall are too old to care about them so much. They can only do as much harm as you let them and yall oldheads are letting them do too much.” (Laymon 46). City grew up in a different generation than his grandmother and this becomes obvious by how easily he believes African Americans can dismiss their submissive habits. By growing up in the Civil Rights era, City’s knows about the pain that comes from being a minority. City’s grandmother and the other African Americans are able to get a chuckle from presenting these dual personalities as it was something they were forced to do growing up in this time period. Gerald Early mentions this type of humor as “Black audiences and black people in general have always found popular stereotypes of themselves to be quite funny, in a certain context” (30). Some of the stereotypes that are found humorous throughout the novel include eating watermelon, Lavander Peeler’s “fade doesn’t fade right” (Laymon 3) and the made up names of the kids in Melahatchie such as MyMy and Gunn. The exaggeration of stereotypes is humorous among the African American community as long as this humor only expands to African Americans and not whites. Something that is clearly humorous and understood by blacks may not necessarily have the same humorous appeal for whites. By African Americans mocking stereotypes that they are often ridiculed for, not only inspires laughter and entertainment, but also creates a buffer between African Americans and their suppressor.

The cover of Long Division features a rusted, broken chain, this image along with the setting primarily being in rural Mississippi easily reminds the audience of the tradition of slavery in the south and the oppressive racial climate that occurred afterwards. This image brings the past into the present before the reader even opens the novel. The rest of the text entails awkward, humorous ways in which African American teenagers deal with significant issues such as sexuality, race, and forming one’s true identity. As City and the other characters in this novel mature into adulthood, they must learn to strengthen themselves to the frequent insults and dismissals that come their way in one of the most white supremacist states. While City may only be a teen in in the 21st century, he is still well aware of his racial past: “It’s really hard to have the saddest story in the history of a state like Mississippi, where there are even more sad stories than hungry mosquitos and sticker bushes” (Laymon 9). As much as pain is intertwined throughout this novel, so is humor. Humor is used as a coping mechanism to deal with the ache that comes from being an African American in the South. Laymon allows City and his other characters to use their comedic antics to grow, prosper, and reach their full potential in an area that previously only meant repression and heartache. According to Trudier Harris, for African Americans humor made the south: “…not only endurable but transcend-able, for humor reduced the South to a laughably manageable
level of insanity” (458). Since *Long Division* was written by an African American Mississippi resident, the African American experience feels truly authentic. Even with all its connotation of racial violence and repression, the south still remains an active force in African American creative works. The humor feels real with an honest voice, and this might not have been the case if this novel was not written in a state with such an ugly past and present.

The African American literary genre allows readers the opportunity to fully understand and absorb the value, history, and richness of living as a minority in an oppressive society. Black humor only adds a layer of complexity to the already complex lives of African Americans. The basis for black humor lies in irony, contradiction, and distortion which can be analyzed in the three theories of superiority, incongruity, and relief. By analyzing Kiese Laymon’s sharp comicalness in *Long Division* with these three theories, one can truly understand the depth of living as an African American in the state of Mississippi. African Americans laughed to keep from crying in a region that was agony just as much as it was home.

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If there is a shared specter among regionalist texts, it may well be the city. The city pervades discussions of regionalist literature as a representative of all the modernization, urbanization, and now globalization that has occurred over the past century. It is a figure of anxiety, if not contempt, for regionalist writers looking to put forward an image of a spatially, and culturally, sectional United States against the repeated images of urban and suburban living that populate non-regionalist literature. The words of Mary Ellen Chase in her 1968 introduction to Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs summarize this antagonistic relationship, lauding the writer’s preservation of her region while framing modern mass culture as the looming threat: “[Jewett is] preserving . . . those crisp, idiomatic terms of speech which are, alas! threatened with disappearance as television dims our differences and as easy transit from one place to another foretells a dismal conformity” (xxvii). For regionalist writers, modernization in the form of the urban and mass media pose the possibility of an uprooting that is not only spatial, but mental as well. The rural comes to embody the definite and static, while the urban embodies the indefinite, liminal, and fluctuating. However, one wonders if such antagonism towards the urban is not antiquated and perhaps even ironic considering a city is distinct in character, culture, and history, much like the rural towns that give the writings of Jewett and other regionalists such qualities distinct from other American literature. The urban is not leaving, nor are mass media forms such as film and television, and the world is already in the state of easy transit—whether it be spatial, temporal, or mental—that Chase anticipated, so perhaps it is now necessary that contemporary urban spaces and the ease of movement, homogeny, and “placelessness” they perpetuate be reconsidered with the equal depth given to traditional regionalist texts.
This essay will propose Gus Van Sant’s Portland, Oregon based independent films as a starting point of reexamining the city by analyzing the blend of rural and urban, alongside other regionalist fixations, presented in *Mala Noche* (1985), *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), and *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) to rethink regionalism in the postmodern and global context. Van Sant is a fitting director to this approach in that his filmmaking pursues an authenticity that regionalists prioritize, as critic Donald Lyons foregrounds: “Van Sant’s people . . . know not shame; they are calmly and unapologetically, if sometimes painfully, themselves” (6). However, Amy Taubin notes that Van Sant’s films are frequently “attracted to the liminal, to barely perceptible thresholds between identification and desire” (qtd. in Lang 338). This tension between the definite and the liminal gives way to rethinking the tensions often seen as inherent to regionalist literature. It should be noted though that the films to be discussed have one caveat. The three films follow outsiders of conventional urban life, each attempting to achieve intimacy and community as they cross the boundaries that define urban/rural, cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan, local/global. Although using a mass media form and placing the texts within urban spaces, Van Sant’s focus on marginalized figures within peripheral sections of Portland reveals a sense of being that borders the two spaces and identities, moving freely between them. Subsequently, the sense of these outsiders occupying any definite sense of space, time, or community blurs as the films progressively occupy more spaces and the filming techniques become more experimental, embracing spatial and temporal liminality commonly marked as placelessness. Through their blending of urban and rural aesthetics articulated through unorthodox filmic technique, Van Sant’s films deconstruct the central dichotomies of regionalism and mark the progression of the literary form as the embrace of spatial and temporal liminality experienced in cities like Portland—those on the fringe of the countryside and the metropolis. However, despite these films’ emphasis on movement and ambiguity, there remains a reverence to place’s power in the shaping of relationships, community, and memory that is communicated throughout. Rather than point to urbanism solely as a harbinger of “placelessness,” these films posit that intimacy are still possible even in the urban, globalized contexts they live in—and even central to one’s sense of place, regardless of location and culture. Additionally, a new relationship regionalist thought can have with urban spaces emerges, one that is less the antagonistic writing back to the city of prior regionalist literature. Prior to analyzing the films, though, some time will be devoted to clarifying both independent filmmaking’s propensity towards regionalist thinking, as well as the significance of Portland as a setting in approaching Van Sant’s deconstruction of regionalist dichotomies.

Although the focus of this essay is Van Sant’s work, it is worth noting that independent filmmaking in general has a tendency towards exploring the
regional. Especially in the time Van Sant is working—in the mid-eighties to early nineties, prior to the commodification of “indie films” by larger studies in the 1990’s and early 2000’s—independent filmmaking evokes many of the same interests and goals of regionalist fiction. Independent film, like regionalist writing, is reactionary towards the mainstream entertainment monolith of Hollywood, often working outside of the system and making a work that will largely appeal to the director’s vision than that of a studio, and appeal to the tastes of fringe or marginalized communities than to those of mainstream audiences. Annette Indorf’s observations of independent filmmaking in documentaries from the seventies and eighties such as Ira Wohl’s *Best Boy* (1979) and John Hanson and Rob Nilson’s *Northern Lights* (1978) as a countering of the centralized Hollywood style clarify this reactionary tendency:

> Countering big stars with fresh faces, big deals with intimate canvases, and big studios with regional authenticity, these filmmakers treat inherently American concerns with a primarily European style. In their choice of form and working methods, and in their urgency to record subjects rarely seen in commercial films, these politically sensitive and geographically rooted directors resist Hollywood’s priorities and potential absorption. (29)

Although her essay focuses on how independent directors adopted the form and style of European films, the same interests she foregrounds align with those of regionalist writers: recording marginalized subjects, using atypical style, emphasizing the intimate, and rooting the story in the character of a place. Van Sant’s own films embody these focuses well in their style. For instance, the opening credits of *Mala Noche* impose clips of non-actors who are native to the particular area of Portland and are shot in a semi-documentarian manner that blends fiction and nonfiction. The figures of marginalized society are brought into frame and the center of their stories is the pursuit of community outside normal definitions. To build on Insdorff’s observations, Emmanuel Levy articulates it well that independent film is a “cinema of outsiders” whose “artistic drive . . . continues to be born out of a creative need to explore new themes, new forms, and new styles as well as a need to render unfamiliar or ‘hidden’ experiences previously ignored” (53). Van Sant and independent directors, like many regionalists, pursue a foregrounding of the subaltern that is American regions. However, while many find the regional in the rural, Van Sant finds it in the urban, and in the outsiders to both worlds that he follows. As will be shown later, Van Sant’s characters move between the two in a way that makes the divisions which regionalism normally upholds almost non-existent, and that is in large part due to the films’ Portland setting.
Due to the significantly smaller budgets of independent films, the practice of shooting on location where one lives or was born can be seen as circumstantial; nevertheless, it makes a difference for the liminal sense of place found in Van Sant’s films, as will be seen in an elaboration of the unique character of Portland, Oregon. In “Urbanism and Environment in Portland’s Sense of Place,” Carl Abbott points to two symbols that epitomize the city’s dual, if at times paradoxical, identity: the blue heron which adorns city documents, and the copper statue entitled *Portlandia*. At first, the two seem to point to a disparate identity, with the blue heron pointing to the city’s rural and environmental sense of place, while the statue—placed on a postmodern office building—evokes the urban and commercial. However, Abbott emphasizes that the city-planning of Portland bridges the two identities: “Environmentalism as an urban planning goal draws explicitly on the thought of . . . cities and towns interlacing with the natural and cultivated environments in a democratic regionalism” (121). This goal has shaped many aspects of Portland’s identity. The emphasis on “interlacing” with rather than absorbing rural sections of the cities, points to Portland as less a singular entity and more a collection of sections, each with its own unique character. This preservation of the rural also evokes a preservation of the past, even while the rest of the city lives in the present or looks to the future. This compromise to the central tensions found in the rural-urban dichotomy of regionalist literature is an inherent quality of Portland that is visible in Van Sant’s films. However, the films add another layer through their placement in Portland’s margins and their outsiders to both worlds, making the paradox of being simultaneously placed yet placeless a constant presence. Starting with *Mala Noche*, Van Sant blurs the spatial and cultural barriers between the rural and urban from these outsider perspectives and begins to bring out the liminal place they occupy as a sort of region in a postmodern, globalized world.

Although criticism surrounding *Mala Noche* has focused more on the film’s queer themes, the film also engages the unique regionalism Portland embodies and the search for place. Shot in black and white, the adaptation of Portland writer Walt Curtis’ autobiographical novel follows the protagonist’s (Tim Streeter) longings for companionship and affection from two Mexican migrants that frequent the liquor store he works in, Johnny Alonzo (Doug Cooeyate) and Roberto “Pepper” (Ray Monge). Much of the action is set on the downtrodden streets and disheveled interiors of what Walt calls “Skid Row,” Northwest 6th Street according to an interview with Van Sant recorded, and mostly at night with interspersed moments in the countryside: “I was trying to preserve whatever was there and shoot on the real street that the story was written, which was Northwest 6th Street” (Van Sant, “Interview” 4:19). Despite the peculiarity of their meeting and
Walt’s problematic fetishization of them, the three have a contact that borders on a sense community that traces throughout the film. The fissures that occur between the three men carry a significant weight because of this: Johnny disappears for much of the film; Pepper is shot by police; and Johnny blames Walt for Pepper’s death when he returns, abandoning him. Ultimately, all that Walt has left is the dingy streets and its transients. Some early markers of Van Sant’s experimentation with filmic elements and regional fixations include editing and cinematographic techniques which further this deconstruction of regionalist dichotomies by evoking a sense of temporal and spatial liminality, as though the characters are without a place in society. Alongside its documenting of a community of outsiders, the film evokes Portland’s duality through its balancing of the urban and the rural in its filmic techniques, and even points to global presences within the local community of outsiders, emphasizing an ambivalence to the divisions that regionalism tends to prioritize.

The film’s disregard for the divisions regionalism establishes between urban, rural, and global is apparent in the opening credits and the introduction of Walt and Johnny. The first shot of *Mala Noche* seems to tempt a viewer to read it as regionalist. Folksy, twanging guitar plays alongside a fiddle with a landscape of a plain and some mountains when the sound of a train enters. The film then cuts to images of a countryside passing by at breakneck pace and to three riders in a boxcar, two of whom are Johnny and Pepper. There are cuts between the countryside and the men keeping themselves busy either reading comic books, keeping warm, or for Johnny, gazing at the scenery until the credits begin. Beneath the handwritten credits, footage of people on the streets where the film takes place is interposed in the upper-right corner, along with a shot of a beer bottle rolling into the gutter. When it ends, the intertitle “Portland, Oregon,” places the viewer and is followed by Walt’s narration of how he wants to “drink” Johnny, who enters the liquor store while he is working (00:14-1:24). These early moments place the three concepts in dialogue, foregrounding their interconnectedness in a city like Portland, and most clearly between the urban and the rural. Viewers will note the blue-collar appearance of the people, most of whom are middle-age or elderly and white (see fig. 1). It certainly fits the guitar plucking score and a sense of regionalism, but the sights of sidewalks and buildings betray the setting as away from the countryside, and the intertitle at the end confirms the urban setting.

What is found in the opening, and throughout the film, is a cultural and spatial blending that blurs the divisions of urban and rural. Charles Reagan Wilson’s observations of postmodern culture propose this blending as a way of examining regionalism in the contemporary, postmodern world: “Postmodernism, in one sense, represents a sense limitless cultural
possibility . . . New regional social types recently have emerged, suggesting that something of this postmodernist performance can draw on regional tradition” (152). The filmic blend of rural and urban in the opening and throughout Mala Noche not only points to the city as the grounds of this “limitless cultural possibility,” but furthers it as a deconstruction of the cultural and spatial boundaries between the two. For instance, in a scene where Walt and Pepper are talking on a street, the two stand out against passersby dressed in raincoats and toting umbrellas; they appear too disheveled to fit a cosmopolitan definition of urban, but their clothes are more circumstantial fashion than a declaration of rural pride (47:32-48:11). Walt, Johnny, and Pepper, as well as many of the people seen in the film, less identify a new regional type as Wilson would propose, and instead defy type altogether, being neither agrarian nor cosmopolitan, just rather shapeless outsiders (see fig. 2). The proximity of rural spaces likewise shows the spatial divisions of rural and urban giving way to a new spatial duality for regionalism. Three scenes move the film to the countryside with sharp cuts, marking an immediacy of travel to the rural spaces that would be lost with fades. The character of Portland, its space and its individuals, is neither urban or rural but rather both, embodying a cultural and spatial duality that blurs the definitions traditional regionalism prioritizes.

Mala Noche not only foregrounds the waning division of rural and urban, but also that of local and global through Johnny and Pepper’s migration to Portland. In one scene, after inviting Johnny and Pepper to eat at a friend’s apartment, Walt pulls out a map and asks the two where they have travelled from. They reply in Spanish and trace a line from Mexico to Portland, then give an anecdote of a friend’s unlucky experience, moving the film back to the boxcar from the opening in which Johnny, Pepper, and their friend are jumped by three men but escape with only minor injury (9:00-12:25). Not only is the language intact—conveyed through subtitles and Walt’s fumbling translation—but after the flashback the scene enters a montage of the four dancing together as a Mexican folksong plays. It is a moment of the local opening itself to the global, offering a space to the migrant outsider. However, the handling of local-global tension cannot be parsed as simply as the local passively opening itself to the foreign, as it appears in this scene. Like Walt, Johnny and Pepper are outsiders confined to the section that the city relegates as the slums; however, unlike Walt, the two’s own outsider status as illegal immigrants puts them in perpetual jeopardy from law. Yet, rather than make this immigrant the focus, the film puts greater attention on Walt’s contact with Johnny and Pepper. When the three are driving in the countryside, Pepper is carrying a radio that is playing a Mexican song. The same song plays again moments after Walt has finished grieving. He cheerfully walks down a sidewalk, as though the song is the essence of his
In some sense people need not physically immigrate in order to experience the conditions of immigration, because they are in contact with those who have immigrated and are living in a world where movement has become so much a part of normal life that those unable to move are nevertheless formed by this experience. (89)

In the film, the shared experience is contact, or perhaps better said, a cultural exchange. Although Walt is still stuck in his section of Portland, his contact with Johnny and Pepper—especially in sharing Pepper’s tragic death—allows him to experience the global within the local through the event of immigration.

As seen in the earlier analysis of its opening, the visuals of Mala Noche blur the rural and urban and turn the camera on outsiders of either identity. The film’s treatment of time takes on the same blend through its editing techniques which waver between the slow tempo of the country and the speed of the city. After their dinner, circumstances lead to Pepper spending the night in Walt’s apartment, during which the two have clumsy—mostly silent—sex (14:47-19:16). Offscreen, nondiegetic sounds set the rhythm of the scene. Bells toll and are soon replaced with the rapidity of a train’s whistle, bell, and pistons as Walt’s moves to where Pepper is lying. Mark Storey notes that within regionalist texts of the nineteenth century, trains represented a sense of temporality in opposition of most regionalist text’s rural settings, one that is urban-centric and dependent on industrial mechanics instead of natural intuition that could come from agrarian life: “The time-consciousness organized and ordered by the train comes...
into direct confrontation with a time-consciousness that adheres to more organic or traditional patterns” (207). The train within most conventional regionalist texts represents a hurriedness at odds with the tempo found in the country. With this frame of reference, the bells within the scene can be taken as the rural aesthetic, while the train represents the urban. However, perhaps due to film’s production in 1985, the hurried aesthetic of the train is slowed down not only through its mirroring of the train in the opening, associating the object with rural life, but also through pairing with limited cuts in the beginning of the scene. Nevertheless, as Walt and Pepper begin to have sex, both the audible motion of the train and the rhythm of cuts increase with Pepper’s own rhythm, forcing Walt to say “Más lento . . . Slow down” and the action to stop along with the train. The temporal character of the train is thus split, occupying both slowness and speed. This blend of rural and urban senses of time leads into an aesthetic of Van Sant’s which occurs for the first time following Walt and Pepper’s night, time-lapse photography of landscapes, an aesthetic that traces through the two later films.

While much of the editing contributes to this rural-urban duality compartmentalized in the film’s setting, its cinematography subtly points to an emerging spatial liminality, or placelessness. The lighting and utilization of negative space in the frame frequently places the actors in an abyss of black (see fig. 3-4). This most obviously makes the scene more dramatic or emphasizes the actor’s performance. However, it also makes the space around them indefinite, blurring the sense of being in a specific space where the action is taking place besides the encompassing city of Portland. This sense of indefiniteness, of spatial liminality, may not be apparent in the opening sequence, where cuts and other editing techniques clarify where Johnny and Walt are but during the scenes at night or in the dark. For instance, the sex scene between Walt and Pepper is edited with some frames being completely black. Another example is when Pepper is shot by the police. Not only are there no establishing shots used, but the sparse lighting and
prevalent close-ups make the characters seem like they are wandering in darkness rather than any specific place (1:00:11-1:03:34). This sense of wandering in a familiar yet undefined space begins to emphasize that the undefined space Van Sant’s outsiders occupy as regional and away from the cosmopolitanism the urban typically represents. However, the technique foregrounds the paradox of being placed yet placeless.

By being in an undefined space, the outsiders of *Mala Noche* subsequently fall under the encompassing banner of a city, “Portland, Oregon,” seen in the opening sequence and the cosmopolitan norms within it. Yet, they are neither indicative of the city’s rural and agrarian blue heron, nor its pristine and copper clad *Portlandia*. It is in this distinction of “Skid Row” that allows a unique and bonded community, or region, to emerge in all its idiosyncrasies, many of which can easily be read as tragic; the sights of people carrying their home on their back or entering Walt’s store for a bottle of Night Train—a cheap fortified wine—are peppered throughout the film. Johnny and Pepper’s narrative of migration contributes to the larger, communal narrative of the area as formed—in character—by the placeless. In the last moments of the film, Walt sees Johnny on a street corner while driving and beckons him to come to the store some time (1:12:40-1:14:00). Johnny does not respond and Walt drives away, leaving ambiguous conclusions to the viewer. Either Johnny has found a sense of place in “Skid Row” or is rather left more placeless due to his abandonment of Walt. Whichever the case, it is clear that Van Sant sees place—or the regional—as located in the connections made between individuals, making his films reverent to the sensibilities of regionalist literature which will be discussed later. The first film of a varied and prolific career, *Mala Noche* sets in motion a rethinking of dichotomies central to regionalism—rural/urban, cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan, and local/global—that continues, albeit to a lesser extent, in the travels of the drug-addicts of his second feature: *Drugstore Cowboy*.

The reason I preface the analysis of Van Sant’s second film in such a way is that unlike *Mala Noche* prior and *My Own Private Idaho* afterwards, *Drugstore Cowboy* has a significantly lesser engagement with the local/global dichotomies than these two films. Instead, the film engages the cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan dichotomies. For clarity, cosmopolitanism will be used in reference to aesthetics of what Barbara Ladd calls “literatures of the ‘centre’” (28). This refers to, especially in the case of film, works with mainstream sensibilities and set in spaces characterized as centers of contemporary American culture: namely cities and suburbs. Van Sant’s 1989 film handles the latter as it re-contextualizes suburban living in its band of pharmacy robbing drug addicts. Set again in Portland, this time in 1971, the film follows Bob (Matt Dillon) as he reminisces of the times with his wife Diane (Kelly Lynch), and their sidekicks Rick (James Le Gros) and Rick’s girlfriend, Nadine (Heather
Graham), from the stretcher of an ambulance. After a successful score, the band is followed by strokes of bad luck starting with the police forcing them out of the neighborhood, first to an apartment complex and then to a countryside motel, where the paradoxical sense of being placeless again comes to the foreground. As the string of bad luck continues with Nadine’s death, a failed robbery, and a close call with the police, Bob decides to go clean on his own but is shot by a young dealer. The film ends in the ambulance and the uncertainty of whether Bob will survive and lead a normal life inside the structures he has resisted. Through this recontextualization of cosmopolitan aesthetics, Van Sant’s film fractures the cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan dichotomy and its filmic techniques again points to the liminal place outsiders occupy to urban and rural sensibilities.

The distinctions between cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan blur after the opening sequence of the film. Following a successful robbery, the gang returns to their home in a suburban part of Portland and later hide their loot in a hole beside the house. As Bob and Diane get settled for the night—with Diane trying to seduce Bob, whose mind is on the next big score—the police burst through the door and raid the house. The detective who leads them, Gentry (James Remar), already has a record with Bob but is surprised to find out the thief golfs when an officer finds a case of Ben Hogan (a golfer who had retired in 1971) clubs. The two enter a conversation about handicaps and preferred courses which ends with Gentry telling the officer to only break two more clubs before they leave. Rick and Nadine are brought out and asked to reveal the stash or the raid continues, but the two keep their mouths shut. The film then cuts to black, fading in to the next morning with the house in shambles and the gang without the clothes on their backs (18:00-22:35). Perhaps here more than in the rest of the film, the gang resembles an American family, albeit a dysfunctional one. Bob’s affinity for golf—he declares that he lowered his handicap to eight—and playing it as a plea for Gentry to “have a heart” evokes a cartoonish middle-class connotation with the sport, as though the sport creates a higher connection and understanding between middle-class men. Diane’s hair and makeup are no different from a housewife’s. Gentry even addresses Rick and Nadine as “kiddies” when the two are sat down and asked where the drugs are hidden, noticeably taking a gentler tone with them. However what casts them out of this light is their addiction and robbing which code them as criminally living outside of legitimate jobs, whether they be blue or white collar. The scene then reveals a blending central to the film. In being addicts and robbers, the gang lives outside of the system, yet occupies its space, taking on its structures as well as its images. Van Sant thus fractures, or blends, the cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan dichotomy by displacing cosmopolitan aesthetics upon outsiders to either definition.
This indeterminacy of cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan extends into Bob and his gang’s travels by framing them as either the excursions of tourists or as displacements to again evoke the liminality outsiders occupy. After the raid, Bob has the gang move to a white apartment complex for the elderly. Nevertheless, Gentry tracks them down and begins staking out the complex. However, Bob hatches a plan to trick a neighbor into thinking Gentry is a peeper and gets one of Gentry’s men shot. With the heat on again, a montage of driving on highways and country roads, “crossroading” as Bob calls it, begins. Luggage is packed with narcotics and travel essentials before being loaded onto long-distance buses to rendezvous with the gang at depots. The montage ends with the gang in small town, living out of a motel (30:40-45:00). The motive of their movement is rife with tension. At one level, they are moving in order to get away from Gentry and the authorities, yet Bob’s words as the montage begins point to a different motive: “It was time to change the scenery.” This phrase itself points to a more leisurely attitude ascribed to tourism. Nevertheless, Bob is quick to note the work involved in avoiding the police, and one of the first scenes in the small town involves Bob, Rick, and Nadine robbing a closed pharmacy at night. In her observations of what “tourist” film may be, Jane Mills notes that tourism evokes only leisure, but the “return ticket” signified by the traveler’s leaving and then returning (148-149). With the gang still working, the sense of them as tourists diminishes. Not only that, but a small town in the country is just as dangerous as the suburbs or the city in that it holds cops. At one point, a sheriff’s convention congregates upon the motel the gang is staying at, forcing Bob to smuggle Nadine’s body out in a garment bag before burying it in an undefined forest and returning to the city alone (1:02:03-1:05:30). Although there is a return, the movement is still directed by outside forces representing the center, marking it more as a displacement. Nevertheless, Bob keeps a snide, tourist attitude of a cosmopolite by saying to Diane that they will miss their flight as he passes a sheriff. In having a thieving addict masquerade as a tourist, Van Sant again makes it indeterminant which category within regionalist thought figures like Bob occupy. On one hand, he holds on to certain cosmopolitan attitudes; yet, on the other hand, his constant need to move away from the law indicates that he is far removed from mainstream society. The outsider is again a liminal figure in regard to regionalist definitions.

Although much less experimental than its predecessor or successor, the film nevertheless plays with some editing technique in its transitions to move past the sense of liminality, framing it as a placelessness that is as much mental it is spatial and temporal. Similar to many shots in Mala Noche, the film composes Bob in close-up within negative space, but this time with images interposed over the shot. The images range from drug paraphernalia
to nonsensical miniatures of trees and cows. Additionally, the sound within the scene will be diminished and non-diegetic sound, sometimes voiceover, will replace it. In some cases, as in the scene immediately after the opening robbery, this can be framed as escape through drugs (6:52-8:20). The shot begins in the interior of the car, then cuts to Bob's view outside the window, showing a suburb roll by that seems separate from where and when Bob is. When the film cuts back, Bob is in a space of white with needles, spoons, clouds and other items floating by as he describes the carefree experience of being high in voiceover. Within this moment, place vanishes—or blurs—mentally through drugs. However, when the technique occurs again during Bob's brush with the law, its significance dramatically changes (1:00:30–1:01:52). As Bob walks back to the motel room, the film fades to a close-up (see fig. 5-8). The space is now black and the images placed over the close-up foreground Bob's sense of impending doom: handcuffs, a gavel, and prison bars fade into the frame. Bob does not narrate, instead disembodied voices hiss “Lock him up” or “Guilty” until Diane's voice is heard and the film cuts back to them both in the motel room. The same technique is deployed, but it now emphasizes how a sense of place vanishes mentally for outsiders, in this case due to pressures from the center. All that Bob, and outsiders like him, can occupy is the liminal sense of placelessness, either that or conform and go clean.

However, Bob's decision to go clean does not end the film's blurring of cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan. The return of Gentry, this time sympathetic to his former target, almost legitimizes Bob's place as another part of America's working class. Nevertheless, Bob's entrance into the methadone program is marked with an evocation of the marginalized local community of Portland's underbelly, much like that of “Skid Row” in Mala Noche. The
The viewer sees Bob's crummy apartment, hears addicts talk about how to stay clean, and sees Bob work his blue-collar job of drilling holes in machine parts. In fact, Van Sant seems to blur the lines further in the character of an elderly priest named Father Tom (William S. Burroughs), Bob's former mentor who still uses while in the program and to whom Bob gives some drugs Diane offers upon a visit. In contrast to the conclusion of *Mala Noche*, there is no clear sense of abandonment; whereas Johnny seems to refuse Walt's offer, Diane gently turns down Bob's outreach to join the methadone program. After Bob is shot, the film returns to the ambulance from the opening and he narrates over home-movie styled footage of the gang that extends into the credits (1:36:39). Van Sant thus continues to turn to viewer's attention to locating place within connections and figures that blur the definitions within regionalist literature rather than abide by them. This perhaps reaches its peak in the final, and most recognized, of these three films: *My Own Private Idaho*.

Where the prior two films were solely Portlandian, Van Sant expands his scope in *My Own Private Idaho*. In addition to the director's place of inspiration, the film takes the viewer to Seattle, Idaho, and Rome, all the while remaining within the margins with the outsiders. It is apt to say that in *My Own Private Idaho*, the viewer now follows the character of the rootless hustler, embodied in Johnny and Pepper, from *Mala Noche* in its protagonists, Mike Waters (River Phoenix) and Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves). Mike is a drifting narcoleptic hustler whose sense of place is as blurry as his memory. In contrast, Mike is the wealthy son of Portland's mayor who hustles more out of rebellion than out of circumstance, and whose sense of place is so solid that it fuels the tragedy of Mike's unrequited love for him and Scott's abandonment of the outsiders he lived with. After spending time in the Pacific Northwest, Mike sets himself on a quest to return home to Idaho and see his mother. Scott joins the effort as a last taste of freedom before settling into his role as an heir. Throughout the film, encounters with spaces and characters representing both rural and urban, cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan, and local and global make the film's engagement with regionalist dichotomies apparent throughout. At the same time, Mike's ever-present narcolepsy foregrounds a tension of attaining a sense of place and being placeless. Like *Mala Noche* and *Drugstore Cowboy* before it, *My Own Private Idaho* holds the regionalist dichotomies in tandem with each other, rather than in conflict, in order to present an alternative regionalism, an alternative sense of place that dissolves those said boundaries. However, in doing so with Mike's narrative of spatial and temporal wandering/drifting, accentuated with further experimental technique, and its ambiguous ending, the regionalism presented is one purely of rootlessness and liminality.
proposing that one’s home is in the connections, rather than the spaces, one lives in and like those connections one’s sense of place can be fluctuating. The interchange of settings and aesthetics throughout the film heightens the sense of regionalist dichotomies blurring that Van Sant’s prior two films started. Although the outsiders in *Mala Noche* and *Drugstore Cowboy* moved between the city and the countryside, the films themselves remain confined to the Portland areas the film’s subjects lived in. Within this film, there is a comparatively more rootless sense of place and a further blurring of aesthetics. The film itself is structured around chapters, each one titled after its setting and creating a cyclical form: Idaho, Seattle, Portland, Idaho, Roma, Portland, Idaho. Two motifs of regionalist are especially evoked through the film’s structure, one being the returning to one’s place of origin and the other being cyclical time. Sense of time through cycles is markedly rural-agrarian practice, as Storey observes in reading Hamlin Garland’s “Return of the Private,” noting in particular how the author has rural cyclical time in tension with urban, non-cyclical time in the form of railroads: “An underlying narrative that seems to valorize the temporal patterns of rural life is briefly compromised by the exact piece of time-keeping at the station” (210). Van Sant adapts this cyclical time and applies it spatial patterns of leaving and returning to one’s home that characterizes some regionalist texts in Mike’s repeated returns and departures to Idaho—a setting that will later be analyzed as the stage of the film’s spatial liminality.

Alongside the sense of movement between the city and countryside is an equal movement in and out of the lives of the people that populate these spaces and range in embodying facets of the cosmopolitan and the global that further Van Sant’s regionalism past a blurring of dichotomies and into an altogether ignorance of them. For instance, the events of the Seattle chapter are marked by encounters with “johns,” one of whom is markedly cosmopolitan. Mike is standing on a city sidewalk at night with other hustlers when a car pulls in front of him and a woman in a fancy white coat gestures him to get in; Mike’s remark that she’s “living in a new car ad” points to her upper-class cosmopolite status. When the film moves into the woman’s home, Mike’s remark becomes a blunt confirmation: “This is a nice home. Do you live here? . . . I don’t blame you”. Her house is not only full of fine furnishings, but also two other hustlers that Mike already knows, one of whom being Scott (10:38-13:54). In comparison to the prior two films, there is a noticeable proximity between the outsider and their counterparts—between the placeless and the place-having—seen not only in the exchange between Mike and the patron, but also in Scott playing the role of hustler while being the son of a mayor. There is also a play on cosmopolitanism’s associations with cold emptiness. Besides a stained-glass image of a mother and child, a Madonna perhaps, there is no sign of fam-
ily in the home, and even the hustler joining Mike and Scott is reading an issue of *Cosmopolitan*, as if to mockingly point to this. The only character left to the house is its ornateness and skeletal qualities which mark it as a such, like a backyard Mike notices, likewise to its owner being characterized primarily through her wealth. Donald Lyons notes that Van Sant’s depiction of cosmopolitan figures often reduces them into “robotic caricature,” especially in reference to Scott’s father (8). However, although the woman is the quintessential cosmopolite, the film reverses the sense of her and her home as completely cold and empty. The bathroom Mike wanders into is painted pink, and he looks at the trinkets on a shelf and the backyard with curiosity that points to them holding a greater meaning. The home, or rather a normalized cosmopolitan image of a home, is an anomaly, yet something real to him. There is also a great significance of the two symbols: the home and the woman. For Mike, the home and the woman paired evoke his memory of his own mother, which is rendered through home movies in the film, as well as his own sense placelessness which is so intense it—along with the image of his mother in the woman he is about to have sex with—triggers a narcoleptic episode as the woman initiates the transaction. There is a minute tragedy in the woman’s placelessness, that her home is not a living and lived in place, which is mirrored in Mike’s tragic longing for the place and person of his origin. Directly through its attention to place, the proximity Van Sant creates between these markedly different individual’s background and situation marks a movement from the prior film’s blurring and towards a more pronounced disregard of regionalist dichotomies.

Yet, the disregard of regionalist divisions seen through points to Scott, a figure who comes to represent a potential for a postmodern and global regionalism, yet all the while abides to rigid defined divisions which ultimately make the film more regionalist. Lyons’s observation of Van Sant’s cosmopolites is much more applicable to Scott, who looks more at home in the woman’s house than Mike or the other hustler. For him, being a hustler—a figure marginalized and outside the mainstream—is something he can put on. Yet, there is more meaning to it than rebellion. In the chapter, “Portland,” the film shifts to outsiders again when Mike and Scott join squatters living in an abandoned hotel with a man named Bob Pigeon (William Richert), the leader of this group and Scott’s mentor/lover. The son of the mayor and heir to a political family slumming with homeless squatters takes on a new significance in this light. Charles Reagan Wilson’s proposition of postmodern regionalism notes that it will not only involve subjects, whether they be artists or politicians, reinterpreting traditional American regions but also reinterpreting local identities: “In the process of this reinterpretation, traditional regional identities are not rejected but reconfigured” (154). In thinking of outsiders as a quasi-region, Scott’s association opens
the possibility of this postmodern regionalism. Throughout the film, Bob is anticipating the moment when Scott will gain his inheritance that he hopes will ultimately reconfigure the status of his enclave of outsiders in some way. Unfortunately, Scott is rigidly cosmopolitan, a fact made plain not only in him abandoning Bob—essentially killing him—and turning down Mike’s admission of love but also in his associations with the global world through film’s journey to Rome. Although helping Mike find his mother, the trip ends up serving Scott more. He finds a woman named Carmella (Chiara Caselli) at the farm where Mike’s mother was staying. The two begin a romance which ends with Scott leaving Mike behind in Rome with a ticket to Portland before leaving for his marriage (1:22:30-1:24:07). There is an inequality and disparity that teems throughout the chapter, which Sarika Chandra points to as inherent to the growth of world travel and globalism: “While people move across the world . . . this movement itself reflects growing social inequality. For the global upper-class mobility means holiday or business travel without the need to change national affiliation” (88). Carmella’s marriage to Scott takes on the form of dislocation. Scott ultimately rejects the regional identity of “hustler” he put on and becomes the prototypical cosmopolite, appearing in fine suits with his spouse in tow and a stoic expression that, as Lyons points out, is robotic caricature. Nevertheless, despite Scott’s rigidly cosmopolitan persona, the film points to a possible postmodern regionalism that could be reified if one moves away from abiding to dichotomies inherent to traditional regionalism.

If Scott is the film’s figure of the traditional rigid sense of place, then Mike is its figure of the rootless sense of place that is spatially and temporally liminal, finding place instead in communal connections. Mike’s ties to Idaho and his narcolepsy create this paradoxical sense of stasis and drift that pervades much of the film which is accentuated by the cinematography and editing techniques used. The opening sequence offers a moment to examine this interplay technique and text closely. After the intertitle, “Idaho,” the film cuts to a two-lane road in the middle of nowhere. Mike enters the frame and aimlessly tinkers with a pocket-watch before delivering a soliloquy about his connection to the road while pacing over the dividing line:

I always know where I am by the way the road looks. Like I just know I’ve been here before. I just know that I’ve been stuck here like this one fucking time before, you know that? Yeah. There’s not another road anywhere that looks like this road. I mean exactly like this road. It’s one kind of place. One of a kind. Like someone’s face. Like a fucked-up face. (00:34-2:40)
The road as a place directly points to the paradox of being placed while being placeless. Roads are transitory spaces that connect locations, yet they are places that can be distinct in character and where one returns to, or is stuck, for a drifter like Mike (see fig. 9-10). A high camera angle emphasizes how expansive, and desolate, this “place” is. Viewers can see dry grass on both sides, a mountain in the distance, and two trees; the only other life seen is a rabbit, which leaps away when Mike howls at it. After looking down the road’s face, a narcoleptic episode begins. Mike trembles and sets himself down in the middle of the road. The film then cuts to an imaginary scene of Mike’s mother holding him in her arms, soothing him (3:34-5:14). This imagined scene points to a place that is intangible for Mike, especially temporally. The rapid movement of time, evoked by time-lapse photography, emphasizes how indeterminant Mike’s sense of time is. Outside of this moment, Mike’s mother is only seen in his memory through home-movies that intercut whenever he encounters something that reminds him of her, and often accompanied with an episode—as was the case with the cosmopolitan woman. His sense of past and present is thus blurred, as Amy Taubin observes: “Because he short-circuits before he can connect past and present, he remains as asocial as an infant, and in that sense, innocent” (83). Taubin emphasizes that his constant return to this past represents a longing for a return to the place of origin, which aligns with the cyclical structure of the film. However, it can also be a desire for human connection which is evoked in Mike’s remark that an indefinite road resembles a face, as well as his love for Scott, who at one point can be seen holding him in a similar way to his mother. Without Scott, though, Mike finds place back in Portland with the outsiders and squatters (see fig. 11-12). He grieves with them and rauously eulogizing Bob’s death with them in the same cemetery where Scott is burying his own father—perhaps the most “regionalist” scene in the film. The liminal sense of place Mike occupies thus displaces regionalist thinking, making it less about location spatially and temporally, but rather communally between individuals.

The conclusion to My Own Private Idaho typifies the sort of regionalism imagined in the three films I’ve examined. The film concludes on another road in Idaho and Mike delivers another soliloquy before falling into another stupor, a short and somber one this time: “I’m a connoisseur of roads. Been tasting roads my whole life. This road will never end. It probably goes all around the world” (see fig. 13). Once on the ground, a car pulls up and two men take Mike’s bag and shoes. After some time passes, another car enters the frame and the driver picks Mike up, places him in the passenger seat, then drives away (1:36:39-1:40:06). Mike’s liminal sense of place is nowhere else more profound than in these final moments. The road again evokes a sense of being placed and yet placeless, of being in between
not only spaces but the senses of being that traditionalist regionalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries prioritized. The final words also evoke the global by pointing to this liminal sense of place as transnational and constant “all around the world.” Mike’s stupor makes this sense of liminality more pronounced with his unawareness of where he is and how much time has passed since he went under pointing to what some may call placelessness and nothing else, as Robert Lang’s observations of the impossibility of Mike fitting into a mainstream definition of family emphasize: “If Mike has recognized anything new by the end of the film, it is that he is doomed—always to be alone and lonely . . . He can never ‘come home’ as Scott has done” (343). However, this view fails to make any inquiry of the last moment with the second driver. The uncertainty of a man picking up a body off the side of a road and placing it into their car can be dark, but Lang notes that Van Sant originally intended to make Scott the driver (341); the final version is shot from such an angle that the man is unidentifiable. Nevertheless, this observation foregrounds again Van Sant’s positioning of place in connections. In this case, Lyon refers to the connection as one that will allow Mike to “taste more of the road” (12). Rather than wherever he finds himself in, it is whoever Mike finds himself with that determines his sense of place. In reveling in such a liminal and fluctuating sense of place, My Own Private Idaho ultimately proposes a sense of place divorced from the fixedness of traditional regionalist dichotomies.

Fig. 9-12. Rather than locating place in a definite space, Van Sant chooses to locate it in the relationships between people.

For lack of other wording, Gus Van Sant’s first three films—and perhaps those set in Portland afterwards—revise regionalism by making its protagonists rootless. Nevertheless, it is impossible to say Van Sant’s films are not rooted in place and a sense of the local. Adapting the work of Portlandian
artists like Walt Curtis to film without compromise, something he is pursuing again in his most recent feature, is a clear connection to the local. But more so, his films take their viewers to Portland and in what Justin Vicari observes as a use of “group codes” such as the naming of Portland’s Old Town “Skid Row” in *Mala Noche* or the sight of the famous “Lovejoy Columns” in their original placement in *Drugstore Cowboy* (36). To an average viewer one is a happenstance nickname for the slums and the other is a set of nicely painted columns underneath an aqueduct in an industrial district. However, for Portlandians there is an indelible significance to the name and the image, they evoke a particular space, time, and identity of the city. This may be more significant in recent years as Van Sant has said in a 2007 video interview with the Criterion Collection that only parts of Old Town are hanging on to the character they took in his debut feature: “That area of Old Town in northwest Portland . . . it’s still holding on, it’s still a place where all the transients still exist . . . It still exists as sort of the world that Walt is writing about” (“Interview” 5:14-5:42). As processes like globalization and gentrification change not only rural spaces, but urban ones as well, it is only necessary that the study of regionalist literature adapts itself. It needs to turn to urban narratives and forms outside of the literary, and towards figures that lie outside of, or blur, its clean definitions of urban/rural, cosmopolitan/non-cosmopolitan, and global/local. This sort of progress has been made in the field of postcolonial studies, but without the same attention being given to American regionalism, the field will remain confined to nineteenth and early-twentieth century narratives of the South and New England. Such stagnation has already maintained an apprehension, if not a stigma, towards the field. By turning to places like Portland, Oregon in the late twentieth-century, and attentive artists like Gus Van Sant who render the individual’s sense of place with complexity, regionalist studies can progress and confront the matter of
placelessness in the postmodern world, whether it be the liminal sense of place I propose, or another proposition by a different scholar.

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, women had trouble finding vocation. Literature previous to this time period had traditionally been dominated by the patriarchal voice. In her essay, “Reading Regionalism: the ‘Difference’ it Makes,” Marjorie Pryse suggests that regionalist texts reject society’s place for the typical American woman and instead, regionalist texts test the boundaries of society’s already constructed notions for a female. When a woman leaves her domestic place, society considers her to be an outsider in that new place she occupies. This is because she is challenging these already imposed notions that society constructs for her. Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs is a text that illustrates Pryse’s idea that regional writing works against the categorizing of the nineteenth century American woman solely in a domesticated sphere. This text highlights Pryse’s idea that a woman’s place in society is her own. Her place is neither constructed by a patriarchal figure in a text nor is it created by societal stereotypes in general. Regionalism holds onto and preserves this idea of the female characters influencing themselves and other characters within the text as these female characters work to maintain an individual place of their own instead of occupying society’s recognized place for them. Henry James’ Daisy Miller represents patriarchal nineteenth century fiction, which offers a metropolitan counter story to what Pryse suggests as the text denotes what the society is used to. When readers consider Daisy’s ultimate fate, she hardly seems to exemplify the community of women Pryse points to in regionalist women’s writing, especially in The Country of the Pointed Firs; therefore, Daisy Miller counteracts Pryes’s idea of traditional women in regionalist texts, ultimately making it a realist text. Daisy Miller embodies qualities of a realist character as she remains true to her consistent mannerism throughout the course of the text despite how wrong she is according to
social norms, similar to Jewett’s narrator. Although Jewett’s narrator is not a young girl, she is the character, like Daisy, going into a foreign place—a landscape she is not used to. Readers can also see a comparison between Mrs. Almira Todd and Mrs. Costello. The narrator in Jewett’s text brings Mrs. Todd’s character into existence as the female narrator has power to create a character that has voice and an accepted vocation whereas Daisy, an innocent yet independent girl is confronted by a world that is represented by Mrs. Costello and Winterbourne that is unaccepting of Daisy’s actions. When juxtaposing the results of these women’s actions throughout the course of the text, readers can see how the end results of these two texts are completely opposite as Dunnet’s Landing extends warmth to Jewett’s narrator and she achieves spiritual growth while the result for Daisy in a realist text is death.

Majorie Pryse’s work contests this common ideology that woman are characterized in the domestic place in the home, kitchen, or bedroom instead of in a region or place that allows them to be free; Pryse claims that in regionalist texts, authors write to challenge this common ideology. Successful female characters give voice to Pryse’s claim that these regionalist texts test and challenge these preconceived, societal notions. Pryse suggests that readers must approach these texts from a different angle. Instead of reading and learning from the text from a traditional standpoint, Pryse encourages readers to analyze these texts outside of their normal ways of furthering analysis. Readers must break free from being used to traditional societal stereotypes and consider new ways of reading the text so that these stereotypes can be broken and the woman’s place can truly evolve. More specifically, readers must tear away from the stereotypical lens that the male is the dominant figure in the text. Readers must now understand that the female can have say in who they are as women.

In *Daisy Miller*, Henry James places emphasis on Daisy being a character who pleases her own individual self instead of playing the role of filling the domestic space further represented by Mrs. Costello and Winterbourne. The main male character in the text, Winterbourne, categorizes Daisy as “not a coquette in that sense; she was very unsophisticated; she was only a pretty American flirt” (James 33). Daisy is a character who “remains the most uncompromising and uninhibited of James’ many freedom-seeking heroines, a resistor of patriarchal authority who ‘has never allowed a gentleman to dictate to [her] or to interfere with anything [she does]’” (Barnett 287). James continuously counteracts this typical male stereotype by characterizing Miller as a young woman with her own independence and her own drive; however, because Daisy Miller’s characteristics and actions throughout the text are so authentic, society does not accept them. Daisy’s family is rich yet a little uneducated when it comes to what society expects from them. After Winterbourne asks Mrs. Costello her thoughts on the unique,
American family, Mrs. Costello remarks, “Oh yes, I have observed them. Seen them--- heard them--- and kept out of their way” (James 40). Mrs. Costello is a judgmental widow who continuously watches this American family and believes that the females in society should fit into the role that she has constructed. During this time period, a woman would not be as radical as Daisy Miller is; this would be seen as a problem within society Winterbourne quickly begins to understand Daisy’s opposition to society, and it frustrates him, as it is not the norm for a woman. As Pryse quotes from Lerner in her essay, “women stand in their resistance to patriarchal domination and their assertion of their own centrality in shaping society” (Pryse 50). James is highlighting the fact that Daisy Miller has these tactics; the only issue is that society does not accept them. This idea of the female acting outside of the stereotypical societal norms for a woman is common-- society, in this text, simply rejects their actions. Because Daisy acts so real with society instead of minimizing her true, free-spirited self, society rejects her.

James attaches realistic qualities to his female character, qualities that do not fit what Mrs. Costello or Winterbourne construct for her as Daisy creates and upholds boundaries for herself while breaking others instead of letting society determine these boundaries for her. Mrs. Costello draws attention to the fact that Daisy is “flirting with any man she could pick up; sitting in corners with mysterious Italians; dancing all the evening with the same partner; receiving visits at eleven o’clock at night” (James 160). A woman in this time period is to be considered shy towards men. There are numerous men in the text that Daisy does not let control her. She is careless with a free spirit yet knows how to handle herself. Because Daisy Miller is a rebellious character thrilled by freedom, this text is a “counter-narrative of American womanhood defined by freedom despite social constraint” (Johnson 41). Through creating a female character who exhibits paradoxical qualities of being both bold and responsive, James is “marking a new era in depictions of womanhood in American literature” (Johnson 41) by highlighting the issue of rejecting free-spirited, driven women due to her realist characteristics. None of these accepted actions seem to faze Daisy as she is an independent character who plays into Pryse’s idea of testing the boundaries of a society’s already imposed notions yet continues to get rejected by all parts of society. Early on, she is the one who develops boundaries for herself and Winterbourne. His continuous watchfulness upon Daisy relays to readers that he is clearly infatuated with her; however, she is the one who dominates him by saying, “I have never allowed a gentleman to dictate to me or to interfere with anything I do” (James 157). The dominant culture in this society would normally be set up as the main male character, Winterbourne. However, Winterbourne finds himself uneasy with the idea that
Daisy Miller refuses to fit in societies constructed, domesticated box for her; he ultimately rejects Daisy's unique and unfitting character. Although Winterbourne is surprised towards Daisy’s refusal to submit, she continues to refuse submission. In highlighting this young girl’s refusal to follow what society determines the status quo for her and society’s continuous rejection of her uniqueness, James highlights the realist overtones and illustrates to readers the difficulties and complexities behind executing Pryse’s regionalist ideas which are further executed by Jewett’s non-traditional, unnamed, female narrator.

The societies in these two texts are different because James’ world is a cosmopolitan world that values strict social hierarchical boundaries and status while the world of Jewett is simple where the feeling is companionship and quaintness. Regionalism is ultimately a category of realism, so the difference in place between these two texts is notable. The difference in these two worlds relays the sense of place that accompanies both realism and regionalism. In James’ cosmopolitan society shaped by Mrs. Costello and Winterbourne, Daisy lives outside of the norm. She walks with men society says she should not be walking with. Upon recognizing Daisy’s actions, an elder woman of Geneva, Mrs. Walker, declares to Winterbourne, “that girl must not do this sort of thing. She must not walk here with you two men. Fifty people have noticed her” (James 103). The fact that Daisy is walking with two men throws Mrs. Walker into a fury as she cannot stand Daisy’s actions when she says, “It’s a pity to let the girl ruin herself” (James 103).

The elder woman further controls Daisy by saying, “You should walk with your mother, dear,’ cried the lady from Geneva, losing patience” (James 106). Daisy quickly remarks, “my mother never walked ten steps in her life. And then, you know,’ she added, with a laugh, ‘I am more than five years old”’ (James 106). This lady who is controlling Daisy represents the society as a whole. Through Daisy’s remark to the woman, she does not submit but quickly uses comedy to satirize this woman. Mrs. Walker places Daisy on a pedestal in a figurative sense, but Daisy immediately jumps down. She stands up for herself in a moment where she should have submitted in a cosmopolitan world. Ultimately, the social constructs of these two texts are different due to the element of the text being in different places.

As a regionalist writer, Jewett first begins challenging gendered notions of society by making the narrator a female. The narrator of Pointed Firs is a defined woman of society who has created a life for herself. Even though the narrator goes unnamed and she is an outsider who places herself within the town of Dunnet Landing, it is notable that Jewett sets up this narrative as having a literal female drive the course of the story telling. Jewett immediately puts narrative control in the mouth of a female instead of a male. Jewett describes the female narrator as “a single passenger” (Jewett 3),
an outsider coming into this town, who travels independently to Dunnet Landing with hopes of finding “seclusion and uninterrupted days” (Jewett 6) so that she can write in silence and put her words on a page ultimately creating a voice for herself, something unusual for this time period. The female narrator of this text “is condescending about the simplicity and ignorance of the Landing, a simplicity and ignorance that she also romanticizes” (Sawaya 520). The female narrator describes the town of Dunnet Landing how she sees it—she describes the town to those reading. The narrator drives the course of the text; she relays to readers what is happening and ultimately has control of what gets said, similar to Daisy Miller—or so she thinks. One could say this narrator determines what is important enough to further relay to readers, which ultimately shows that Pointed Firs is a regionalist text working to encourage readers to read the text through a new lens in order to change the set ideals within this society.

Despite the fact that the narrator is a female, females otherwise drive the course of Jewett’s Pointed Firs further giving evidence of Pryse’s claim that women regionalist writers do assert themselves within these texts. In giving narrative control to the females, Jewett “transforms the typical ‘woman’s sphere’ that usually is a regionalized contained ‘space’ for nineteenth-century American women” (Pryse 50). Instead of Jewett creating the typical woman’s sphere as constantly being inside of the domestic place, Jewett gives the women within her text multiple different spaces to occupy. Sawaya furthers Pryse’s idea by saying

Jewett inherits from the nineteenth-century ‘cult of domesticity’ the idea of separate spheres in which woman is figured as a single class who, through the home, would provide compensation for man for his alienated labor and would unite the fragmented and competitive masculine American society in an oasis from itself. But, at the same time, Jewett substantially modifies this idea about domesticity by combining it with new ideas about woman’s role as a consumer of culture, an individual who has ‘leisure, culture, grace, social instincts, artistic ambitions’ as Henry James described this new woman (Sawaya 508)

Sawaya and Pryse present this idea of moving outside of the common place of the female domestic sphere. Jewett plays into this idea of separate gendered spheres through Mrs. Almira Todd’s profession. Mrs. Todd associates herself with a profession of her own. Although herbalists were frequently women, the fact that Mrs. Todd has this profession for herself is what is important here. She works partially outside of the domestic sphere as she creates the role for herself as the town’s herbalist and is known as “an ardent lover of
herbs, both wild and tame” (Jewett 3). Through using completely opposite adjectives within this quote, Jewett is suggesting that instead of filling the role of a calm and silenced woman that would otherwise be normal during this time period, Mrs. Todd serves as a multifaceted woman in this text: a woman who can be both wild and tame. Instead of filling the role of a shy, reserved woman, Jewett places Mrs. Todd in a position of equal power with the male doctor who also upholds power of healing. This role is a position of healing that puts her in a place where her status is nearly equal to the male doctor’s status in the town, and Dunnet’s Landing accepts this role instead of questioning it as the society in *Daisy Miller* does to Daisy. In making Mrs. Todd’s profession equal to the male doctor, Mrs. Todd “is beyond the ‘heavily domestic’ worldview of past generations of women and can see the world from a broad and scientific perspective” (Sawaya 519). Mrs. Todd is not limited in a professional sense, as she creates this profession for herself so that she can, as her own individual, contribute to consumer culture. Instead of giving voice to the normalized domestic culture for a woman during the nineteenth century, Jewett changes this idea and instead, gives voice to a different idea, just as Pryse claims the regionalist writer successfully does. Mrs. Todd and other female characters in the text reform culture without hesitation and ultimately make the reformation something that is normal to society as they unify with one another while upholding a culture where the male is not the dominant figure of the text. Similar to Daisy Miller, Mrs. Todd exists to exert a sense of independence for herself instead of being present in the text to adhere to society’s common, domesticated place for her as a woman. She is able to take care of herself as well as take care of others, which is an idea that Pryse highlights in a regional text.

By placing Daisy Miller, an untraditional, American girl, in this traditional, foreign landscape, James seems to test the boundaries of patriarchal control and male dominance that are otherwise constant in this society similar to how Jewett places her narrator in a foreign place as well. Instead of being so set in these old ways, society touches on trying to evolve; however, these ideas of evolution that an author of a regionalist text would normally execute are shut down in this text by a society that is so set in their ways because *Daisy Miller* is so real in its descriptions and mannerisms. While in a foreign place, American girl, Daisy Miller refuses to live by the society’s rules. She chooses to honor her own, unique individuality while in this pre-constructed foreign landscape, which ultimately causes society, more specifically the male patriarchy, to see her as a flawed woman. Her real characteristics result in society viewing her as troubled and outside of the normal realms of the domesticated sphere. Because Daisy Miller acts oppositely of how society thinks she should act as a young woman, society has a difficult time accepting her. Pryse writes, “regionalist writers across decades
and regional and color lines create visionary women, herbalist-healers, not as marginal freaks, but as central to the narratives and to the different perspective regionalism offers” (Pryse 51), an idea that is counteracted in this text as Daisy Miller is open minded and free-spirited without vision for herself. Daisy “goes with the flow” of what life presents her instead of planning out her profession and lifestyle in general. She is not a healer as Mrs. Todd is in Pointed Firs. Daisy is not present in the text to heal; she is present in the text to take what life puts directly in front of her at that one point in time. Some critics even categorize this text as a study, ironically James’ subtitle for the text. Winterbourne continuously has a watchful eye on Daisy as he observes her every move in this new place for Daisy. Winterbourne’s “pursuit of her is analogous to the study of a subject--- he is confused by her and he tries to understand her, to place her in one or another category, to evaluate her” (Page 591); however, he can never successfully attribute her to one specific place or category because she is not able to be confined and is ultimately rejected by society because of this. These ideas ultimately counteract those of which Pryse present in her work. Henry James uses the constant theme of independence as Daisy Miller’s main character trait to further this idea of realism in the text, which is ironic because this is the time when America was breaking away from England and James places his novella in a foreign landscape a few years following this larger independence. James presents Daisy through the lens of the American girl that celebrates this act of forthrightness and directness as a patriotic virtue to ultimately accompany the centennial celebration of American independence that was happening at the time that this book was published. All of these qualities are real for an American girl in a foreign landscape. This idea of freedom in the region of America juxtaposed with Daisy’s character being so independent and free suggests that James based his character on what was happening in the American region. James sets up the novel specifically by saying “in this region, in the month of June, American travellers are extremely numerous; it may be said, indeed, that Vevay assumes at this period some of the characteristics of an American watering-place” (James 11). James begins his novel this way to quickly relay to readers the comparison between America and his female heroine. After looking at the historical events of the time as well as James’ character, readers can see how James bases Daisy’s character of off America’s independence. By juxtaposing James’ description of the carefree American tourists present at in Vevay with the texts description of Daisy Miller, readers can see that James tied in elements of America’s freedom complemented through Daisy Miller’s freedom—freedom that is present throughout the course of the text, despite Daisy ultimately being captivated by society due to the fact that she dies in the end.
It is notable that throughout the course of the text, Daisy refused to submit and ultimately, this refusal led to her death instead of a warm welcome into a foreign society like that of the unnamed narrator in *Pointed Firs*. These two characters in these two texts end the novels with completely different fates—one with a new place to reside and the other, death. Daisy’s death “had been a terrible case of the fever” (James 153). Critics categorize Daisy as a heroine. So why make the heroine die at the end of her journey rebelling against society? Jeffery Meyers writes in “The Henry James Review” that “Giovanelli and Winterbourne—both complicit in Daisy’s death—stand next to the mound of earth above her newly excavated grave and stare” (Meyers 98). While Daisy is dead in the ground, these two men are still literally above her. After all her pleas to try and prove herself as an independent woman, Giovanelli continues to classify her as an innocent woman in the end, thus contradicting her journey of being rebellious and independent. Upon Daisy’s death, the men infatuated with her continue to place their gaze upon her. This is James’ way of showing that the patriarchy and already inflicted stereotypes will continue to be enforced despite the death of the heroine. Jewett’s unnamed narrator, embarks on a journey into a foreign territory. The narrator meets new people, and “each relationship signifies a watermark in the narrator’s sea-change as she moves from the ‘affectional realm of women’ into open waters—with each interstice making the next possible. Her passage then becomes a succession of brief, amazing moments of insight and knowledge, that spin out at the breaking open of the shell that encloses her understanding” (Subbaraman 62). Through her first voyage with Captain Littlepage, who is also considered an outsider, all the way to her voyage to Green Island, she creates a place for herself within this new landscape. In this regional text, the narrator is able to escape what would be called “stereotypical female roles” in Daisy Miller, and find a journey of success where she meets many new people who accept her voice.

These texts being categorized as realist and regionalist texts call readers to go about the unusual circumstances within the text from a new lens that is not otherwise considered normal. Pryse states “through a combination of dismantling categories of gender, class, and race, regionalism both disrupts our ability to read in the ways we have been accustomed to, calling into question hierarchies of color, gender, and class value, and makes us aware of other stories that we can ‘enter into’ but which we have not been prepared to understand” (Pryse 60). In reading these texts through this new lens, these pre-constructed, gendered hierarchies and mannerisms of society can be tested and altered to fit new notions and hierarchies. In establishing this new lens, Pyrse claims, “The narratives of regionalism emerge from a different social world than the one we have been taught in conventional ways to ‘read’” (Pryse 60). Generally, the male character takes control of the
text and drives the course of the novel. In these texts however, the female drives the course of the story whether the plot be about her or constructed by her. Jewett explores a way of writing counter traditionally as James falls into this idea of the free-spirited female being rejected by society. One of the greatest, most obvious differences between these two texts would be the ending. Because Daisy continuously rebels against society’s norms represented by Winterbourne and Mrs. Costello, she dies instead of receiving the welcome to society that the unnamed narrator in Pointed Firs does. Jewett and James use regionalism and realism within their novels to comment on these new issues of this century such as continual gendered boundaries. In bringing these concerns into the spotlight, society is able to change them and ultimately allow the place of the female to evolve and transform.

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Redefining Local Color through Regionalism: An analysis of Kate Chopin’s Regional Writing

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Marcel Proust explains that “the real voyage of discovery consists of not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes,” providing an interesting way to approach reading place in literature. When reading about people, cultures, and dialects separate from their own region, many view that place as an outsider rather than with Proust’s “new eyes.” Moreover, discovery in reading regional literature lies not within viewing the region for its observable qualities, but, instead, to see with a different respect, one that understands its intrinsic value rather than its objectifying qualities. Marjorie Pryse argues for this separate definition for Local Color in regard to her definition of Regionalism in “Reading Regionalism: The ‘Difference’ It Makes.” By highlighting this distinction, regional literature offers women a space to define independence, voice, and difference within a specific location as Kate Chopin exhibits with several female characters in The Awakening and “The Story of an Hour.”

Though most consider Local Color and Regionalism one in the same in regard to American Literature, this essay outlines many of the distinctions between the two, calling readers to not objectify female regional characters, but, instead, value them for their voice, independence, and difference. In Race and Culture in New Orleans Stories: Kate Chopin, Grace King, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and George Washington Cable, James Nagel claims “that Chopin’s emphasis on the folkways, dialects, and unique social customs of her settings placed her firmly in the Local-Color school of American fiction, which was being celebrated as an important new development” (119). Like Nagel, many believe that Local Color and Regionalism are one entity, signifying cultural distinctions within a region of the United States. Nagel writes, “the Local-Color movement gave specificity to the regional representations of people and settings, capturing the underlying values
and folkways of distinct locations throughout the nation and depicting the indigenous customs, social strata, ethnic issues, and ways of life in virtually every geographic area” (1). This explanation of Local Color embodies why many mistake Regionalist writing for Local Color, the difference between the two, however, lies in the characterization of females and people of lesser authority. While Local Color objectifies women, Regionalism calls readers to celebrate female characters for their independence, voice, and difference.

Although Chopin highlights the distinct features of New Orleans society through use of dialect and detailed descriptions of New Orleans culture, defining her as a Local Color writer, Chopin, instead, constitutes as a regional writer by creating characters who redefine patriarchal concepts of femininity. Pryse separates Regionalism and Local Color by stating that Local Color “represents regional life and regional characters as objects to be viewed from the perspective of the nonregional...frequently offered for that for that reader’s entertainment” (48). In contrast to Local Color, Pryse distinguishes Regionalism as “a particular view of American culture, a view from the perspective of marginalized persons, as well as a consciousness of difference” (48). Through Pryse’s critical lens, separating Regionalism from Local Color, readers gain a different approach to understanding regional writing, offering an insightful method of reading regional characters by their unique differences.

Although Nagel categorizes Chopin’s work as Local Color, Pryse argues a different opinion; one that defies the notions of Local Color writing’s objectifying portrayal of women. Pryse notes that Regionalism represents “few middle-class white male protagonists,” but, instead, a variety of women including “poor, elderly, unmarried, and sometimes ‘dark’ women, whose stories rarely have significance in Local Color writing (48). In both *The Awakening* and the short story “The Story of an Hour,” Chopin separates her works from Local Color by developing female characters that call readers to value their voice and difference including the unhappily married Edna Pontellier, the guiding and authoritative Madame Ratignolle, and the elderly and independent Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*. In addition, Chopin cultivates the female protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, in “The story of an Hour,” who exemplifies the confining qualities of marriage. Chopin’s regional characters deviate from Local Color standards of femininity, and Pryse confirms that such characters “reveal an implicit pedagogy that teaches some readers how to approach regional characters differently than they are represented in ‘classic’ American fiction, particularly in ‘local color’” (48). By highlighting characters that usually stand in the shadows in Local Color writing, Chopin teaches readers how to uphold women’s difference in voice and ambition rather than objectify them to a specific, patriarchal standard of femininity.
Chopin’s characters Edna Pontellier and Mrs. Mallard represent Pryse’s categorization of unhappily married regional women who defy the standards of femininity by outlining the restricting ideals of marriage. Pryse states that “women engage in many activities in the texts of regionalism, but courtship and marriage are rarely highlighted as goals” (50). In “The Story of an Hour,” Mrs. Mallard represents the diminishing effects of marriage on women who strive for freedom and independence of self. When Mrs. Mallard discovers the news of her husband’s “death,” she responds in a peculiar manner: “She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance” (1). Instead, Mrs. Mallard responds with “monstrous joy” and an abundance of emotions that makes “her pulses beat fast” (2). Through Mrs. Mallard’s character, Chopin highlights women who envision the hope of freedom and independence from the restraints of marriage. Regionalist writers intend to represent women in a different light so that they represent women as an independent body separate from the reliance or control of men. Mrs. Mallard’s character demonstrates this regional difference when Chopin writes, “When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped from her slightly parted lips. She said it over and under her breath: ‘free, free, free!’” (2). Mrs. Mallard’s ability to strikingly embrace freedom of self over her marriage to her husband symbolizes her independence, voice as she articulates her feelings about her newfound freedom, and difference as a woman who prioritizes herself over her marriage.

Although Mrs. Mallard speaks no ills of her husband, she still feels oppressed, signifying the oppressing institution of marriage rather than the oppression of a man. Chopin writes, “She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome” (2). In these lines, Chopin critiques the oppressive nature of marriage, justifying Mrs. Mallard’s happiness with her husband’s death. Through this short story, Chopin offers Mrs. Mallard a voice against the restrictions of marriage, highlighting a different female perspective of the institution of marriage. With this characterization, Chopin separates her short story from the objectifying ideals that encircle Local Color stories, and to conclude the short story, she keeps Mrs. Mallard’s hunger for freedom intact even as she dies. Mrs. Mallard’s husband unexpectedly returns, but by the time he sees Mrs. Mallard, she has already died: “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills” (3). Although Mrs. Mallard tragically dies, freedom and difference remain intact with her character. The abundance of joy that Mrs. Mallard experiences when she
discovers freedom becomes so overwhelmingly powerful for her weak heart to bear, symbolizing the impact of female independence on women who regularly suffer in confinement.

In a similar manner to Mrs. Mallard’s search for freedom outside of her marriage, *The Awakening’s* Edna Pontellier suffers from the effects of an unhappy marriage, providing an additional critique of the narrowing freedoms of women within marriage. Chopin writes that Edna’s marriage to Mr. Pontellier “was purely an accident,” again noting that marriage is not the goal of this regional text (39). Although extreme circumstances allow Mrs. Mallard the temporary ability to discover freedom from marriage, Edna Pontellier suffers in silence as she attempts to find a voice against the oppressing effects of her marriage. Pryse notes that “in regionalist texts, regional characters engage in acts of resistance that challenge their definition” (50). Chopin’s Edna Pontellier represents this regional character that defies the traditions of marriage and the restraints imposed upon women in New Orleans society. Mr. Pontellier recalls how Edna perceives marriage by saying, “she says a wedding is one of the most lamentable spectacles on earth. Nice thing to say to her husband!” (89). Edna’s conceptualization of marriage provides readers with an understanding of why she defies the very nature of marital bonds and wifely duties.

Edna Pontellier engages in many acts of defiance against her marriage including moving out of her husband’s home, to which Mr. Pontellier attempts to sway her decision by reminding her of their societal reputations that they must uphold: “When Mr. Pontellier learned of his wife’s intention to abandon her home and take up her residence elsewhere, he immediately wrote her a letter of unqualified disapproval and remonstrance…He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and he begged her to consider first, and above all else, what would people say” (116). Edna’s defiant behavior frustrates her husband, because the inability to control his wife reflects his own social standing, and Chopin highlights how Local Color men often objectify female characters through Mr. Pontellier’s dialogue about Edna. Chopin’s narrator comments on Mr. Pontellier’s anger towards his wife’s defiance by saying, “the absolute disregard for her wifely duties angered him” (79). Mr. Pontellier’s primary concern for his wife is that she conducts herself in a manner that men believe women should behave. Mr. Pontellier then expresses his concern for her transitioning character by saying, “she’s making it devilishly uncomfortable for me…She’s got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women” (88). Chopin uses Pontellier to portray these confinements of marriage, showing the ways in which men envision the limitations of women’s freedoms. He speaks about Edna’s desire for additional rights as a woman, but Mr. Pontellier dismisses it as a sort of silly fantasy. Chopin intentionally writes that “it sometimes
entered Mr. Pontellier’s mind to wonder if his wife were not growing a little unbalanced mentally,” hinting at the ways in which men perceive women’s sanity in regard to their demands for experiences outside of the domestic (79). Mr. Pontellier, in turn, acts as a representation of the objectifying man who valuing women primarily for their matronly characteristics, allowing readers to value Edna’s dismissal of her marriage and her search for freedom.

In addition to her acts of defiance against her marriage, Edna expresses her defiance against the norms of women’s appearances, representing a regional character who challenges the objectification of the female body. Mr. Pontellier becomes astonished at his wife’s appearance after she stayed in the sun too long: “‘You are burnt beyond recognition,’ he added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (24). Here, Chopin depicts the regional characters that Pryse discusses: a male character who objects and a female character who defies, and together, these characters critique females in subordinate positions. Edna reacts to Mr. Pontellier’s comment about her tanned skin in defiance: “She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands, and surveyed them critically…looking at them reminded her of her rings, which she had given to her husband before leaving for the beach. She slipped them upon her fingers” (24). Edna resists the patriarchal gender standards for women as the wife of a prominent man in New Orleans society in this instance. Once Mr. Pontellier criticizes Edna’s skin tone, Edna cheekily analyzes her hands and asks for her wedding rings, signifying the ways in which she taunts her husband’s objectifying comment. Although Edna is “burnt beyond recognition,” she reminds her husband that, despite the ways in which she defies patriarchal standards of beauty for women, he still remains legally bound to her. Moreover, this provides Edna a sense of power within her confining marriage. Although her marriage is inescapable, she still pushes the limits of feminine beauty in an attempt to defy the limitations of marriage.

Pryse also describes female bonds and relationships that help readers envision a new understanding of women in literature in a positive and uplifting manner rather than the ways in which men objectify women in Local Color texts. Pryse notes that another activity that females engage in throughout regional texts focuses “on female friendship, sisterhood, mother-daughter or neighbor pairs, or women in community groups rather than a protagonist’s relationship to a husband or father” (51). In Chopin’s The Awakening, Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele Ratignolle create this bond of sisterhood and female companionship for Edna. Throughout the novel, Edna finds herself lost within her immersion into New Orleans society and in need of guidance from these more experienced and mature women. New Orleans society proves to be a different world to Edna, and her childhood in Kentucky leaves her unaccustomed to the differences in society.
Through these bonds of sisterhood and female companionship, Chopin makes a statement about the notions of feminine boundaries in regard to appearance, sexuality, and duties of women of her time at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Adele Ratignolle and Madamoiselle Reisz create a powerful bond with Edna that ultimately awakens her understanding of self as a feminine body: Adele offering a mother-daughter bond and Reisz offering a neighborly friendship. Early in the novel, Adele places her hand upon Edna’s as a means of comfort, but Edna finds this peculiar: “The action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress. She was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either in herself or in others” (38). In these lines, Chopin outlines a regional distinction of New Orleans society in regard to the outward physical and vocal expression of sexuality and friendship. “The Biographical and Historical Context” of *The Awakening* contextualizes the vast regional differences between Edna’s Kentucky childhood and her immersion into Creole society:

Differences in values and behavior between the Catholic French Creoles of New Orleans and the Kentucky Presbyterians during the years before and after the Civil War could hardly have been more striking...In keeping with this atmosphere of social freedom, women in Creole culture, as is evident in *The Awakening*, were far less affected by the Victorian strictures that dictated the behavior of middle-class women in other parts of the country... Creole women participated fully in the sensuous atmosphere that surrounded them: drinking wine, enjoying music and literature, wearing bright colors, and entertaining lavishly (8,9).

These regional differences provide Edna with a cultural playground to enlighten her being with new understandings of femininity, and through her female companions, Edna experiences the excitement of Creole culture.

Early in the novel, Adele provides Edna with a freedom of expression that she never knew before, and a safe place for her to confide her inner thoughts, thus awakening her desire to expand the bounds of female identity. With their friendship, Adele acts as a motherly influence and provides Edna the courage to discuss her innermost thoughts and struggles, ultimately providing her freedom of self: “Edna did not reveal so much as all this to Madame Ratignolle that summer day when they sat with faces turned to the sea. But good part of it escaped her. She had put her head down on Madame Ratignolle’s shoulder. She was flushed and intoxicated with the sound of her own voice and the unaccustomed taste of candor. It muddled
her like wine, or like the first breath of freedom” (40). Although Elizabeth LeBlanc argues in her critical essay, “The Metaphorical Lesbian: Edna Pontellier in The Awakening,” that Adéle symbolizes Edna’s lesbian attractions, her attractions to Adéle in fact reflect her desire for a motherly influence. Chopin states, “Mrs. Pontellier liked to sit and gaze at her fair companion as she might look upon a faultless Madonna” (32). Edna becomes attracted to Adéle’s motherly beauty, as most children look up to their mothers, comparing her to Madonna, the representation of a perfect mother. Kate Chopin writes about Edna and Adéle’s first physical encounter by saying, “‘Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier which was near her. Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly, with the other hand, murmuring in an undertone, ‘Pauvre cherie’” (38). Although LeBlanc argues, “Adéle’s first caress, a clasp of the hand, melts the startled Edna’s habitual coolness and paves the way for her sensual and sexual awakening,” this first caress acts as a calming touch of a mother as Adéle calls her “my dear” (247). Furthermore, Adele’s inviting Creole persona and motherly influence provides Edna with the courage to express her emotions like never before. Adele’s friendship allows Edna to effortlessly transition into the regional female character that pushes the boundaries of femininity by providing a voiceless female with authority, inviting readers to respond in the same manner.

In addition to Adele’s companionship to Edna, Chopin also offers the regional ideal of female companionship and communal bond through the elderly Mademoiselle Reisz, who acts as an artistic inspiration for Edna. Pryse argues that “differences abound in regionalist texts, and they range across a wide spectrum, loosely denoted by ‘gender.’” For example, women characters and their stories receive a great deal of attention in the texts of regionalism, and some of the most memorable characters are young girls or old women” (50). Reisz embodies Pryse’s “elderly” character that inspires and provides a neighborly companion for young Edna, rather than a woman, objectified by her deteriorating female body. Chopin writes, “It happened sometimes when Edna went to see Mademoiselle Reisz that the little musician was absent…The key was always left in a secret hiding place in the entry, which Edna knew. If Mademoiselle happened to be away, Edna would usually enter and wait for her return” (118). Reisz exemplifies Pryse’s idea of positioning female characters that represent neighborly pairs or women in a community group over the protagonist’s relationship with a father or a husband. Reisz leaves a key for Edna to enter her home even when she is away, providing a space for Edna to find companionship away from her marital home. Through Reisz’ neighborly companionship, Edna experiences a desire for independence through artistic expression: a desire that transcends her desire for marital and motherly roles.
Mademoiselle Reisz depicts the “difference” that Pryse describes as regional by valuing artistic expression over the confines of marriage, and as Edna experiences Reisz’ artistic talents for the first time, she experiences the same emotions as Mrs. Mallard when she learns of her newfound independence from marriage. Instead of focusing her time on her husband and her children, Reisz turns to artistic expression through playing the piano to find value in her life, representing a female life outside of the domestic space. The first time that Edna hears Reisz play the piano, she experiences a shocking and unsettling appreciation for the music that leaves her unstable, much like Mrs. Mallard when she discover the freedom of independence from her marriage. Chopin describes Mrs. Mallard by saying, “She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams” (1). Reisz’ music provides Edna with the same feelings as Mrs. Mallard, an abundance of joy and emotions that are difficult to control: “she waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her” (47-48). Both Edna and Mrs. Mallard experience the unyielding profusion of emotions that symbolize the overpowering impact of female independence.

Reisz’ music represents much more to Edna than others who understand it as a merely a talent, instead, Edna understands her music by the female independence it provides Reisz, providing readers with an understanding of why Edna uncontrollably experiences such exhilarating emotions. Reisz’ song contributes to much of Edna’s awakening, helping her to value artistic expression over her domestic life. Chopin writes, “there was nothing which so quieted the turmoil of Edna’s sense as a visit to Mademoiselle Reisz. It was then, in the presence of that personality which was offensive to her, that the woman, by her divine art, seemed to reach Edna’s spirit and set it free” (101). In these encounters, Edna also acquires guidance from the elderly Reisz, something that regional texts offer readers. Chopin gives the neighborly mentor qualities to Reisz rather than objectifying her by her aging appearance as a woman in fiction. When Edna goes to Reisz’ home, Reisz asks, “what are you doing?” to which Edna replies “painting” (86). Mademoiselle then offers Edna advice that helps her to grow as an artist: “I do not know your talent or your temperament. To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul” (86). By understanding Reisz’ character in the ways in which regional literature values her difference as a character—
a female who positions artistic expression over marriage—rather than the ways society objectifies elderly women, provides readers with a means of valuing Reisz’ character for the ways that she awakens Edna’s yearning for independence and voice as a female in nineteenth century America.

In the end of *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier suffers a tragic death similar to Mrs. Mallard, in that both characters die in the hope for female independence. Throughout the novel, Edna relates freedoms of women with the sea, for example, she claims that “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul” (35). Edna discovers independence through inward contemplation from the voice of the sea, contemplation that helps her process the ways in which women should be valued in society. Towards the beginning of her awakening, the narrator describes how Edna lives a dual life: “that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (35). Edna understands the value of the sea in this sense by inwardly questioning the confines of female identity, even though she lacks the means to outwardly act upon her thoughts early in her awakening.

As Edna takes the plunge into the sea at the end of the novel, the sea transitions from a viewpoint for inward contemplation to a space for expressing vocal concerns for female independence. At the shore, Edna can inwardly question female societal restrictions, but, by entering the sea, she emerges into the space in which she makes a statement to the patriarchal society about the extension of female autonomy. In doing so, however, Edna suffers from “exhaustion” that leads her to her death, unable to withstand the backlash from society. The narrator states, “she went on and on. She remembered the night she swam far out, and recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now” (139). Her fear lies within society’s backlash against her ideals for female voice and independence. Regaining the shore means that she can quickly go back to inwardly questioning rather than vocalizing her concerns. In the end, however, Edna wants “to swim far out, where no woman had swum before,” but in doing so, she cannot withstand the backlash of society’s harsh standards of femininity (49). Despite her sudden death, however, women and regional literature can celebrate Edna’s death as a sacrifice for all women: a martyr for a transition in female independence and an example for the future female voices in America.

Edna’s death similarly reflects Kate Chopin’s literary career in many aspects including how Chopin also paves the way for female voice and independence through her scandalous—at the time of publishing—writing. Chopin’s *The Awakening*, although accepted today and often studied for its critique of society’s restrictions for female mobility and artistic expression,
presented many unwanted new ideals for women during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. “The Awakening: Struggles Toward L’écriture Feminine,” an article by Francesco Pontuale, highlights some of the reasons why Kate Chopin’s novel conducted so much backlash. Pontuale states:

Unlike other American novels published in the same period, *The Awakening* makes references to sexual pleasure and to the sexual life of a woman. This is especially daring given its social and historical context: the American South among the Creoles of New Orleans at the end of the last century…women, especially those of the upper classes, were expected to conform to strict feminine gender codes and were confined to the social straitjacket of ‘the lady’—‘a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still (Pontuale).

Kate Chopin’s Edna defies many standards of femininity during the early twentieth century causing a patriarchal society to not sweep the defying qualities of *The Awakening* under the rug, but make a statement by banning it from “the libraries of St. Louis, the city where Kate Chopin lived at that time” (Pontuale). Thus, Chopin’s reputation suffered as the conservative agenda ostracized her from St. Louis society. The irony of Chopin’s message to a patriarchal society becomes evident when she herself suffers from the same struggles of isolation as her protagonist Edna. “A Biography of Kate Chopin” by Neal Wyatt outlines how the unreceptive refusal of *The Awakening* impacted her life: “the content and message of *The Awakening* caused uproar and Chopin was denied admission into the St. Louis Fine Art Club based on its publication. She was terribly hurt by the reaction to the book and in the remaining five years of her life she wrote only a few short stories, and only a small number of those were published” (Wyatt). Just as Edna suffers in silence from attempting to defy societal rules, Chopin suffers this same silence by being ostracized from St. Louis society, forcing her to write behind closed doors. Wyatt continues by referencing Lazar Ziff: “she ‘learned that her society would not tolerate her questionings…She was alive when the twentieth century began, but she had been struck mute by a society fearful in the face of an uncertain dawn” (Wyatt). Edna’s awakening allows her to experience a modern sense of female ideals where females possess the ability to outwardly express sexuality and difference, but in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these modern day freedoms were inarticulate to Edna and deafened by a patriarchal society. This time in history refused this freeing sense of womanhood, prompting Chopin’s inability to voice concerns about the limita-
tions of womanhood to an audience that would listen. At the close of *The Awakening*, Edna suffers from a death that prevents her from a continued challenge to how society perceives women. Similarly, society’s ostracization of Chopin causes a temporary “death” in her publication, thus disabling change to the limited freedoms of women.

Despite both Edna and Kate Chopin’s deaths, both act as a martyr for female independence, voice, and difference, challenging the ways in which society perceives womanhood. Through Kate Chopin’s bold female characters in “The Story of an Hour” and *The Awakening*, she exemplifies Marjorie Pryse’s idea of Regionalism, a regional text that upholds womanly differences rather than objectifying them. Through characters such as Mrs. Mallard, Edna Pontellier, Adele Ratignolle, and Mademoiselle Reisz, readers understand the intrinsic value of females within a region rather than their ability to comply with the patriarchal standards of femininity.

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Rehabilitation in Confinement Literature: Corruption and Exploitation in Stephen King’s *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*  
Mikela Johnson

The irony of an innocent man wrongfully sent to prison, only to become guilty after breaking out of prison is an all too telling story about the rehabilitation system American prisons insists is necessary. Prison in literature, much like life, serves as a symbol of law enforcement and restrictions for the public to abide by. Rehabilitation facilities stand as reminders of our own humanity and to humble us as we often ostracize criminals we deem lesser than us. Reflecting on Stephen King’s novella *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, prison symbolizes justice, authority, and consequence—all things the United States prides itself on. Shawshank holds captive the lives of Andy Dufresne and Red with the narrative told through Red’s perspective. Andy becomes the focal point of Red’s story after Andy is wrongfully sent to prison for the murder of his wife and her lover, eventually escaping the confines of Shawshank to start anew. Stephen King utilizes prison to illuminate the ever-present issue of corruption within the penitentiary system through characters like Red, Andy, Warden Norton, and several more who appear throughout the narrative. Red, the narrator of the book, shows those who have never been incarcerated and who have never been employed by a prison an insider’s perspective on prison routine. Through institutionalization, the façade of rehabilitation, and the confiscation of agency in *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, Stephen King uses Shawshank prison to provide a place separate from American society where outsiders can momentarily see through the eyes of a dehumanized criminal.

Stephen King contrasts Shawshank Prison and Zihuatanejo, Mexico through the characterization of Red as the embodiment of Shawshank and Andy as Zihuatanejo. Environment shapes character and thus shapes peo-
ple—and for Red having been in Shawshank over thirty years, he becomes the product of life in prison. Red’s desire for freedom (Zihuatanejo) juxtaposes with his desire for safety, routine, and familiarity in Shawshank, the realm he feels validates him for his hard work as the “guy who can get it for you” (King 15). His role as the supplier gives him meaning and purpose whereas on the outside, the state of Maine sees him as a criminal with little to offer. Andy entices Red with the thought of Zihuatanejo, “Down in Mexico. They say it has no memory. And that’s where I want to finish out my life, Red. In a warm place that has no memory” (King 75). Andy latches onto the essence of Zihuatanejo and allows himself to become the enticement of escape for Red and himself. Andy places the years of turmoil he faces into the knowledge that someday he will find himself in a place that has no idea who Andy Dufresne is because, as Andy says, Zihuatanejo has no memory. The best part of having no memory means there is no one to force him to handle dirty work and no one waiting to assault him because of an unfortunate reputation. King contrasts these men because they are meant to be reflections of the other—albeit representing conflicting ideals. Andy essentially embodies the promise of refuge in Zihuatanejo and uses this to remain calm and always a step ahead of his peers. Red remains skeptical of Andy’s unwavering hope and skeptical of the concept of hope as it exists for men in prison. Scholar Luc Bovens evaluates Red’s skepticism as “Red not only has it right inside the walls of Shawshank, but that under any circumstances, a life in which one has no hopes is better than a life in which one does have hopes” (Bovens 670). This idea comes to the forefront after Red fumbles over his words to make up an excuse, so he will not daydream about the idea christening himself, along with Andy, under new aliases and seeking refuge in Zihuatanejo, a place outside of the confines of Shawshank Prison. In defense of himself because he feels ashamed of his fears, Red tells Andy “I couldn’t get along on the outside. I’m what they call an institutional man now. In here I’m the man who can get it for you, yeah. But out there, anyone can get it for you. Out there, if you want posters or rock hammers or one particular record, you can use the fucking Yellow Pages. In here, I’m the fucking Yellow Pages. I wouldn’t know how to begin. Or where” (King 79). Even Red’s frequent use of profanity shows his reluctance to so much as entertain the idea of getting out and finally earning some sliver of freedom. The universal fear of not being useful haunts Red; his attempt to convince Andy he cannot go appears more like an attempt to spare himself the disappointment of a potential letdown. Andy, much like Zihuatanejo, harbors an element of mystery. Without Red’s commentary, Andy hardly seems like a real human being and more like a manifestation of hope, and the piece of Red he conceals out of fear. Shawshank has yet to extinguish Red’s value of hope because his identity in the prison gives him
protection. Though often lacking control, the prison controls its environment in terms of prisoner intake—so navigation and survival within the perimeters of a guard-infested penitentiary seems like the safest route in Red's perspective. Red reflects over Andy's proposition and thinks to himself, “The whole idea seemed absurd, and that mental image of blue water and white beaches seemed more cruel than foolish—it dragged at my brain like a fishhook. I fell asleep that night and dreamed of a great glassy black stone in the middle of a hayfield” (King 80). Despite his efforts to combat his emotions, Red dreams of finding the key—and eventually getting caught by the police. This moment delves into Red's mind and reveals the reason he tries not to think about parole and having to survive on his own for the first time in over two decades. Though Red associates himself with the negative aspects of Shawshank, he represents the people of the prison who fight to overcome their insecurities as not just men, but in ways to subvert the prejudices of committing any kind of crime by attacking their crumbling humanity. Andy requests Red to entertain the idea of leaving for Zihuatanejo, the place with no memory as he says, but Red hides behind the notion of institutionalization. This contrast does not just focus on the differences of Shawshank and Zihuatanejo, but that they represent a shared common dream of freedom, a goal to work towards to keep them going and not succumb to the misery and uniformity of prison. Zihuatanejo acts as a lifeforce and Christ-like figure for Andy. Andy's solace lies in Zihuatanejo and Red's finds itself not only in Mexico, but in Andy, his friend. Mexico alone could not entice Red and is not the one that Red wholly desires to get to, but to Andy. Andy becomes Zihuatanejo and becomes the part of Red who genuinely wants to be free. Zihuantanejo beckons Red as it did Andy and draws him to make a daring decision to violate his parole. On his journey to Zihuatanejo, Red expresses his enthusiasm and notes that he finds he is “so excited I can hardly hold the pencil in my trembling hand. I think it is the excitement that only a free man can feel, a free man starting a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain” (King 107). As an audience who journeys through Red's experience alongside him, we feel an overwhelming amount of joy for his success. Red is a shining example of a man who atones for his crimes and comes out free on the other side. While not exactly detrimental to his life, committing another crime certainly becomes the push Red needs to finally flee to Mexico. The outside can be as emotionally and physically taxing as prison, which means Red still needs that hope and understands he has to follow it.

Shawshank does not rehabilitate its prisoners so much that instead, the system institutionalizes them through the Warden's frequent use of solitary confinement amongst many methods of dehumanization. The goal of prison, at least as the penitentiary system presents it, is to rehabilitate convicts and
transform them into law-abiding citizens who are worthy of acceptance and act as proof the American prison system accomplishes its job. One way to institutionalize a group of prisoners at once is solitary confinement. In his article, “In/visibility: Solitary Confinement, Race, and the Politics of Risk Management,” Adam Ewing explains the original intent of solitary confinement and states that, “In practice, solitary confinement was a device of containment; a means to bottle dissent, to forego the pretense of rehabilitation” (Ewing 109-110). Stephen King's extractions from the reality of prison humanizes Shawshank and makes it believable, most especially with Norton's frequent use of solitary confinement. Solitary becomes an increasingly frequent housing for Andy because he hardly drops his resolve and refrains from allowing his emotions to overcome him. The moments he does lose emotional control, like when Norton denies him a chance to get another trial, Norton forces him into solitary to silence Andy's determination. Norton's efforts to force Andy into submission ultimately fails because of his intent on having his guards constantly watch Andy. They cage these men like animals, displaying them for personal entertainment and provoking them because they know there is nothing the inmates can do to stop them. There always remains a voyeuristic aspect to these cells—enforcing the feeling of someone always watching them. Norton means to dominate these men as if he is the God he claims he worships devoutly. Norton strikes fear into these men using solitary, religion, and slave labor to control them, so he has an unwavering supply of free labor. Part of Norton's strategy to keep these men on tight leashes is by implementing the harsh conditions of solitary confinement. Ewing delves into the effects solitary has on the human psyche:

Our sense of self is shaped through our interaction with others. In the absence of this contact—in the absence of the rush of stimuli we are accustomed to processing as sociable and free beings—the mind begins to dull, to atrophy. After only a few days in solitary, brain activity on EEG readings declines. Prisoners become hypersensitive to stimuli, withdrawn, apathetic, and clinically depressed—sometimes catatonic (Ewing 112).

His evaluation of the effects solitary confinement has on inmates becomes a sharp reality for the men in Shawshank. Solitary deteriorates their health physically as Red tells us, he further describes his experience with solitary and the visual effects it has on the inmates, “Solitary was always well populated. Men lost their teeth not from beatings but from bread and water diets. It began to be called grain and drain, as in ‘I'm on the Sam Norton grain and drain train, boys’” (King 57). Warden Norton legitimizes the institution of violence by using the more dangerous convicts as weapons to
intimidate characters like Andy—a victim of rape in Shawshank for much of the twenty-eight years he spends inside its confines. Normalizing this degree of violence and manipulation completely disrupts the flow of the supposed ‘rehabilitation’ aspect and only succeeds in inciting more ghastly behavior. Red harkens back on his initial observation of the state prison throws a person into, “you do get institutionalized. When you take away a man’s freedom and teach him to live in a cell, he seems to lose his ability to think in dimensions” (King 83). As an example, Red brings up a former inmate by the name of Brooks Hatlen, “In prison, Brooksie had been a person of some importance. He was the librarian, an educated man. I heard he died in a home for indigent old folks up in 1953, and at that he lasted about six months longer than I thought he would. Yeah, I guess the State got its own back on Brooksie, all right. They trained him to like it inside the shithouse and then they threw him out” (King 49). What is incredibly intriguing about this comparison is that Red mirrors Brooks. Both men feel they hold great importance amongst their fellow convicts because their services as suppliers are needed. Unlike Brooks, however, Red defeats his reliance on Shawshank and succumbs to the temptations of hope to violate his parole and leave to join Andy in their promised land. Unfortunately for old crooks like Brooks, they revert to childlike stages, always needing assistance in order to survive because they cannot take care of themselves without help. This is more than just a mental dependency on that security, but also a physical dependency.

Shawshank Prison is often worst than just a facility that pervades personal space and institutionalizes its criminals. Stephen King humanizes Shawshank by constructing it into a facility readers can establish personal connections with, whether those connections stem from people or experiences in confined places. As fate would have it Andy, Red tells the readers, refrains from becoming institutionalized despite being in Shawshank over twenty-five years. Instead, he uses the miserable and dehumanizing work to hold his place one step ahead, holding onto his fake identity and his beacon of hope: Zihuatanejo. Red reminds readers that Andy Dufresne “wasn’t that way [a newly-released con who commits a crime to be thrown back into jail], but I was. The idea of seeing the Pacific sounded good, but I was afraid that actually being there would scare me to death—the bigness of it” (King 83). This constant distinction recalls their differing personalities, yet they appear to be two halves of a whole person—Andy as the more resilient and vivacious soul while Red restricts himself to the insecure and dehumanized person he is inside the prison. The dependency on a familiar place and the fear of the outside is placed on the fact prisoners lack control of the freedoms that the staff allots then. In order to successfully institutionalize a person, the system must begin with stripping these men of their agency.
The loss of agency is a common factor of prison within and out of literature, following these officers and wardens performing their daily routines of dehumanizing inmates to maintain and control them. Tommy Williams becomes the focal point of Andy’s stripped agency because his experience in a past penitentiary with the murderer [Elwood Blatch] of Andy’s wife and her lover becomes a path towards Andy’s freedom. Tommy confesses to Andy that he knows who Andy’s wife’s murderer is and recounts the information Elwood tells him, “There’s one guy doing time up-Maine for these two people I killed. It was this guy and the wife of the slob who’s doing the 45 time” (King 62). At first Tommy’s story sounds too good to be true, until Elwood delves further into the murder of Glenn Quentin and Andy’s wife. Tommy continues his story, so he can be sure to provide Andy the information he needs to finally break free from the bars that oppress him, “El said Quentin was in the sack with some hotshot lawyer’s wife and they sent the lawyer up to Shawshank State Prison. Then he laughs this big laugh” (King 62-63). Though Andy is not a lawyer, the connections can clearly be made because Glenn Quentin is the man Andy’s wife had an affair with and the man the state accuses him of murdering. As usual, Norton refuses to acknowledge Andy’s pleas for freedom because he is self-aware of the possibility his reputation will tarnish should Andy reveal the insides of Shawshank, at least the version the public never sees. Red repeats what Andy tells him of his meeting with Norton, “I like you right where you are, Mr. Dufresne, and as long as I am warden here at Shawshank, you are going to be right here” (King 71). Norton becomes possessive of Andy, like Andy is his toy to play with and break. Norton maliciously harvests Andy against his will because Andy no longer wishes to partake in Norton’s corrupt schemes, which means the chance of Norton getting caught increase significantly. Norton eradicates any chance Andy has through throwing him into solitary and manipulating Tommy Williams into transferring to a separate penitentiary Red understands as “Cashman” (King 30). With Red as the communicator of this story, we receive information constantly restricted from us, it shows readers that when you are on the outside of a place or even a human being, there will always be gaps in your knowledge because to understand these references, or to even have the ability to empathize with someone, you must be on the inside and share these experiences. Red tells his version of Andy in what we classify as ‘confinement literature’. Red turns his experience into a story and this is one-way Red combats the confiscation of his agency, or free-will. Marc Lamont Hill defines confinement literature as it “refers to any work of fiction or nonfiction that deals with the fundamental issue of human captivity” (Hill 19), and as Red remains in captivity, his story brings to life his woes inside Shawshank and paves a route for readers to comprehend and imagine the difficulty
in incarceration. In her study of modern prison versus prison in the past, Molly Murray states the “Guantanamo prisoners used poetry not only to describe their particular experiences of abuse, but also, more generally, to assert a continued intellectual freedom in the face of that treatment” (Murray 148). Red may not utilize the staff and cleverly manipulate them in the ways Andy can, but he certainly expresses himself in the story he writes over the years. Aside from the fact that officials search soon-to-be former prisoners to ensure they are ready for departure, Red never really loses his experiences inside the prison, nor the impression Andy still makes on him even in his absence. Despite the staff of the prison constantly neglecting the other inmates while still limiting their freedoms, Red nonetheless expresses himself and manages to conceal his life’s work. As a result of neglect on the staff of Shawshank, prisoners, like Andy, suffer from the other dehumanizing instances such as repeated gang-rapes, or being a target for aggression based on appearance.

Norton threatens Andy with the ever-present issue of sexual assault in prisons should he decide to end handling Norton’s books—proving the prison’s neglect of the excessive violence common throughout Shawshank. From the moment Andy arrives at Shawshank, Bogs Diamond and the Sisters target him as their next prey. Throughout Shawshank, the rumors acknowledge the Sisters as “to prison society what the rapist is to the society outside the walls” (King 32) and the conflicts arising from this fact surround the constant neglect at the hands of the guards. Stephen King sets up multiple perspectives within this novella, and in this case, it becomes the insider-outsider perspective of sexual assault. Those who have undergone these experiences understand the issue amongst officials who refuse to handle rapists accordingly. Male rape, an already a controversial topic surrounding prisons that many ignorant people do not believe exists (as inhumane as that is), comes to the forefront in this novella as a statement. Reflecting on actual recounts of rape in prison, activist Stephen Donaldson comes to mind. Man and Cronan’s entry to the Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1973) discusses the horrors Donaldson faced in jail, “he was gang-raped approximately sixty times by numerous inmates. Upon his release, Donaldson did what few others have the strength and courage to do: he spoke out” (Man, Cronan 127). The thought of this happening even once to a person is appalling enough, but like Stephen Donaldson, the Sisters continuously assault Andy, even to the knowledge of the guards. During an interview with a Texas prison warden, the warden comments on the increasing problem of rape in prisons and ways victims must act if they want to avoid becoming a target, “an inmate who knows about the prison culture and takes great care to act appropriately has a better chance of avoiding victimization” (Man, Cronan 44). Victim-blaming shows blind
ignorance and an unwillingness to correct an obvious recurring problem. The only individuals to blame for rape in prison are the rapists and the well-aware staff who avoids confrontation with this level of aggression. Red mentions a time of neglect for Andy’s repeated assault and informs his audience that Andy had a tendency to fight back against his oppressors, “Andy punched back and bloodied the lip of a big, hulking sister named Bogs Diamond—gone these many years since to who knows where. A guard broke it up before it could go any further, but Bogs promised to get him—and Bogs did” (King 33). This type of violence should never happen and in this instance, it is absolutely preventable. Norton benefits from these occurrences because it shows the rest of the inmates what happens to those who hope. Warden Norton forces Andy to continue doing his bidding by threatening him with the wrath of the sodomites—ensuring Andy he will no longer receive ‘special treatment’ or protection from the guards.

The physical and mental exploitation of prisoners exists within Warden Sam Norton’s Inside-Out program, secretly a laundering scheme he forces Andy to run. This story comes to the readers through Red, who incidentally becomes the listener as he does not know what happens in private with Andy and Norton. Andy communicates information of Norton’s corruption and intentions with the prison—as well as the workers he manipulates for monetary gain. Red notes that in the media, Norton’s Inside-Out program “sounded like a real advance in practical corrections and rehabilitation. There were prisoners out cutting pulpwood, prisoners repairing bridges and causeways, prisoners constructing potato cellars” (King 57). This program asserts the ‘giving back to the community’ rhetoric as an attempt to present the prisoners in a better, much more forgiving light. Norton prides himself on his Christian values so it is only natural he gives off this impression with his prison. However, the Inside-Out program is nothing more than a scam to exploit the convicts and force them to work slave labor as well as receive slave wages while Norton shovels the money into his own pocket. Put into the position of authority, this makes Norton feel powerful—like he is superior to his staff and the inmates. As Red hears it, “The construction businesses in the area were deathly afraid of Norton’s Inside-Out program, because prison labor is slave labor, and you can’t compete with that. So, Sam Norton was passed a good many thick envelopes under the table during his sixteen-year tenure as Shawshank’s warden” (King 57). Norton’s deliberate corruption in laundering money and having Andy process the cash overrides his good and Christian lifestyle he insists he upholds. Norton is no better than the prisoners he abuses, and he proves that the moment he maliciously imprisons Andy despite knowing Andy is innocent. Norton’s desperation to refrain from getting caught and thrown into prison himself pushes Andy towards furthering his escape—knowing he will not receive
justice for his wrongful imprisonment. Andy becomes desperate at this point and knows the time he has left to escape begins to decrease the more attention he draws to himself. Norton transfers Tommy and denies Andy any chance at redemption; He unknowingly pushes Andy further towards his scheme to become Peter Stevens and essentially escape to head for a place often likened to an escape, or like a getaway.

Prior to entering prison, Andy creates a false identity and uses this identity to maintain his calm reserve. In preparation for his prison sentence, Andy finds a way to cheat the justice system by selling his possessions with the help of a friend who believes in Andy’s innocence. Through this tedious act, Andy separates his identity into two people: Andy Dufresne and Peter Stevens, “Outside these walls, Red, there’s a man that no living soul has ever seen face to face. He has a Social Security card and a Maine driver’s license. He's got a birth certificate” (King 76). Andy outdoes himself with his extremely elaborate plan for escape—so much so that he ensures no official can touch his identity while he is in prison. Hope drives Andy and keeps him from allowing Shawshank to institutionalize him, without Peter Stevens, Andy’s purpose might as well be dead. Bovens continues his examination of hope’s value in literature and reminds us that “Hope is instrumentally valuable in that it has an enabling function, in that it counteracts risk aversion, and in that it spawns more attainable constitutive hopes” (Bovens 670). Red sees Andy as a beacon of strength, wonder, and foolish hopefulness in his moment of bliss as he discusses Zihuatanejo. Andy solidifies his plan once he is free of Shawshank, “Peter Stevens is locked in a safe deposit box at the Casco Bank in Portland and Andy Dufresne is locked in a safe deposit box at Shawshank,” focusing on the “key that unlocks the box and the money and the new life is under a hunk of black glass in a Buxton hayfield” (King 78). The black glass becomes a recurring motif when Red mentions he dreams of finding the key under that rock in the Buxton hayfield. In Red’s case, the key in his dreams symbolizes finding the way to unlock his mind from blocking out any dream of getting away from Shawshank State Prison. Peter Stevens serves as Andy’s ‘get out of jail semi-free’ card and ensures he can safely make it to Mexico with an I.D. that does not read back the name ‘Andrew Dufresne’. Through years of planning and cunning execution, Andy manages to hide in plain sight, and there is nothing to be done about it, as long as Andy successfully crosses the border. Incidentally, the act of escaping from prison is an extremely high crime and thus makes Andy at the very least guilty of one major crime.

Innocence and guilt serve as binary oppositions throughout the novella and create an insider-outsider perspective that separate the audience’s knowledge from Red’s. As Red explains, he was not present for Andy’s trial nor the murder of—so he is uncertain of Andy’s alleged innocence. There must
be a social understanding and agreement of what dictates good and bad, at least there needs to be, but as it turns out, Shawshank prison serves as an institution that forces inmates to commit crimes against their will. Red has been a prisoner for more than two decades, often noting he seldom believes any man that proclaims their innocence, “everyone in prison is an innocent man. Oh, they read that scripture the way those holy rollers on TV read the Book of Revelation. They were the victims of judges with hearts of stone and balls to match, or incompetent lawyers, or police frame-ups, or bad luck” (King 18). Red mocks these men because as one of the only honest guilty men of Shawshank, he knows a liar when meets one. The lifestyles of these men are increasingly difficult, far more so than those of us who luckily do not share the prison experience. Andy’s place in high society prior to his murder allegations follow him into Shawshank prison, creating a foul reputation the prisoners and staff are eager to believe, including the Warden. Norton insults Andy during their meeting after Andy’s time in solitary is up, “You see, you used to think that you were better than anyone else. That look is gone now, and I like that just fine. It is not just that you are a useful vessel, never think that. It is simply that men like you need to learn humility,” (King 71). Norton derives pleasure in causing Andy harm and humiliating him which asserts his role as a sadist. Having spent years and years with the Warden constantly poking and prodding him, Andy is driven to the point of crime. Outsiders alone understand Andy’s desperation even if they have never been to prison because if you are a person who has never lost their freedom—you do not know firsthand the dangers of life without it. Lamont Hill asserts the idea that personal stories “create space for expanding the reader’s conception of prisoners. This is largely because, as opposed to the other strands, authors of personal confinement literature often acknowledge (or at least do not contest) their guilt” (Hill 22). Red accepts his criminal past and even his present considering he distributes illegal contraband amongst his fellow inmates. Red’s memoir serves as a medium for others to go through so they can have some understanding of Red’s encounter with controversial issues all prisons harbor. Andy goes into Shawshank an innocent man and manages to break out of prison which incidentally makes him guilty of a rather high crime. With the wealth of knowledge inmates share amongst each other, prison becomes the Grand Central Station of transferred information. Prison fills itself with people from a variety of backgrounds who tell stories about places many have never been, creating worlds they will not explore, and that has Red even more curious about Zihuatanejo. This insider-outsider opposition creates gaps in comprehension and the only way to gather information is to get it for yourself. As we discover at the end of Stephen King’s enthralling novella, there are no dissociations from innocence and guilt when the initial inten-
tion for Shawshank’s prisoners is to exploit their physical attributes in favor of assuring their safety as well as their opportunity for redemption.

Despite the intention to preserve and enhance one’s humanity, prison systems shield themselves behind the façade of rehabilitation. They do not preserve humanity so much as they strip it to make convicts reliant on the system. For prisoners who are institutionalized, the facility becomes a place that provides meals, a place to sleep, and an area where they understand the routines, essentially it becomes an easier life for convicts who were once homeless or convicts who know they do not have the strength to make it by themselves. The expectation for perfection sets convicts up for failure and the frightening aspect about this revelation is the system knows they make life nearly impossible for prisoners and former inmates. Stephen King means to display the differences between the worlds of prison and society, those that only people who have been to prison and never have been to prison understand. Confinement literature expands its horizons throughout each form of literal and literary confinement, whether that be in terms of enslavement, political incarceration, or the fictional form like Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption. The book ends on a notion of rebirth more-so than redemption. With Andy’s identity change, one can assume Red may follow his lead and christen himself under an inconspicuous alias, that is if he makes it to Zihuatanejo.

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