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# Nostalgia, Class and Rurality in *Empire Falls*

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In American society, rural spaces – particularly those of the working class – are seen as stagnant holdovers from a temporal past that "modern" society has evolved beyond. As a result, working-class rurality and those living within these places are viewed as static, ignorant, insular and so on: whatever places do not conform to the appearance of "modern" progress and development simply must be regressed, on both socioeconomic and cultural levels. While scholars in some disciplines are attempting to redress this misconception, other disciplines (like literary studies) largely align with the mainstream perspective that rurality represents a regressed past to our evolved present. However, despite the critical lack of attention to rurality as a viable space in the present, we can see in various fictional works that working-class rural spaces can effectively show us the interrelationship of rural spaces with "modern" society and culture in the present, the continuing relevance and deep history alike of said spaces, and the potential of these fictional working-class rural places to confront America's norms of progress and development within and without their fictional borders. Richard Russo's fiction illustrates the potential to bring out this critical working-class rural voice. Russo's fictional treatments afford the reader an opportunity to witness the ever-changing complexity (not the temporal and cultural regression) of working-class rurality. In turn, Russo's fictional working-class rural spaces offer a counterperspective to the mainstream (defined here as middle-class and (sub)urban) notions of progress that otherwise dismiss these perspectives. In his book *Empire Falls*, Russo uses nostalgia to assert this counterperspective. This nostalgia not only reaffirms the postwar and early twenty-first-century working-class rural identity of Empire Falls, but it also offers a critique of dominant conceptions of progress and development that continue into our present.

## CLASS AND RURALITY

America's view on rural spaces and people posits rurality, particularly that of the working class, as a place located in a regressed past, outside modern, (sub)urban concerns. At best, working-class rurality is viewed as static, ignorant, insular and so on: whatever places do not conform to the appearance of "modern" progress and development simply must be regressed, on both socioeconomic and cultural levels. In reality, working-class rural places

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and people are not pre-civilized places stuck in the past. The challenge is to bring out this counternarrative within a mainstream society that effectively silences this voice. Is it possible to bring out working-class rural places not as they are devalued by mainstream American society and culture, but in their unique positions in the present? Further, what could this unique voice contribute to American society at large?

Where disciplines within the social sciences bring working-class rurality to bear on American society and culture,[1] there has been a dearth of attention to these places in literary criticism. As one scholar points out with regard to literature, "the rural is valued only as a touchstone for the cultured, urban, therefore, civilized human,"[2] and thus is not considered a viable subject for modern, cultural critique. This literary view mirrors the larger American view towards working-class rurality outside fiction. However, despite the critical lack of attention to rurality as a viable space in the present, we can see in various fictional works that working-class rural spaces effectively show the interrelationship of rural spaces with "modern" society and culture in the present, the continuing relevance and deep history alike of said spaces, and the potential of these fictional working-class rural places to confront America's norms of progress and development within and without their fictional borders.

One author who effectively shows us the continuing relevance of working-class rural places in the present US is Richard Russo. Russo's fiction gives us insight into places and people we may disregard in everyday life. In his novels, Russo shows the perseverance of small towns that have not been subsumed by middle-class (sub)urban progress and development, even as they continue to be marginalized by it. Further, Russo introduces historical depth to his fictional working-class small towns, often through the memory space of his working-class rural characters. The reader may then, in part, experience this fictional history through the more interior space of the working-class rural characters in question. As a result, Russo's fictional worlds may extend dignity to the working-class rural places deemed irrelevant, backward and behind the times outside his novels' borders. Reading Russo's work in this fashion adds to a larger conversation regarding working-class rurality within the US: as the rural social sciences have shown us, these

[1] See scholars like Matt Wray (particularly *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006)) and, most recently, Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

[2] William Conlogue, *Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 6.

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are not places "left behind" modern society and culture. Russo's representations reinforce this assertion, and through references readily familiar to a given reader.

Russo's works are written from the perspective of someone who is familiar with working-class rurality, and sees its value in both past and present.[3] Although one should not make too much of the subject matter of Russo's fiction and his own working-class rural background in postwar upstate New York, it is worth briefly commenting on in order to draw out the ways in which his fiction interrelates with American society and culture after the Second World War and, particularly, the working-class rural places that the US continues to dismiss. If we consider the following quote from Russo, we can see the interrelation of his fiction and the world outside its borders:

> And I think that small towns, certainly … my fictional small towns, have become places where people are hanging on to hope and hanging onto [*sic*] pride, and hanging on by a thread that seems to me now at least much more slender than it was when my father's generation came home at the end of the Second World War.[4]

Although it would be a mistake to call Russo's work autobiographical, it is not wrong to see the interconnections between his novels ("*my* fictional small towns"), his personal life ("my *father's* generation") and changes in American society (contrasting between present small towns and "the end of the Second World War"). Although Russo's works are fictional, they give us insight to norms of progress and development underscoring these changes, into who runs counter to these changes, and into what this counter offers our naturalized norms of progress and development.

Through a reading of *Empire Falls*, we can see this interconnection between Russo's fictional spaces and larger postwar and present contexts. Russo not only evokes a larger history of deindustrialization that is familiar to the reader, but he also brings out a working-class rural voice that is often dismissed in the American cultural imagination. Further, Russo uses a town and its people to critique the larger norms of progress and development that have structured American society since at least the postwar period, a particularly salient point when we consider that this town is less valued by mainstream society (defined here as middle-class and (sub)urban in both geographic and cultural space) because it is both working-class and rural.

[3] Critics see Russo concentrating on his "natural subject": the rural working-class similar to his childhood upstate New York community. Jay Parisi, ed., *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 2000. Russo, and his interviewers, also often evoke his background in interviews (see "Richard Russo's Small-Town America," *National Public Radio*, 1 Oct. 2007, available at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14806290).

[4] "Richard Russo's Small-Town America."

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In order to assert this working-class rural voice, Russo uses memory and, specifically, nostalgia. This nostalgia helps this working-class small town assert its perspective in relation to the postwar and present mainstream that places it in some nostalgic past. However, it is important to note that nostalgia, at least that of the local residents, is not a regressed return to some idealized past but reflects part of the town's identity in the present.

The parallel between individual nostalgia and the history of the town reflects Russo's use of the personal to make sense of larger socioeconomic changes within the novel. Empire Falls, Maine is a familiar New England mill town: formed around outside interests over a century ago (symbolized in the Whiting family), this town relied upon the textile mill for its economic survival until the mill's closure in the postwar period. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the people of Empire Falls still hang onto their community, hoping against hope that the mill will eventually reopen and return their relative prosperity. The narrator shows us the experience of this larger history on a more individual level, mostly through the relationship between two families: the working-class Robys and the wealthy Whitings. The reader is led to believe that Francine's economic control of the town and of Miles Roby, the Robys' eldest son, is to avenge the affair between Francine's husband C.B. and Miles's mother, Grace (and directly witnessed by Miles one postwar summer on Martha's Vineyard). The relationship between the Robys and the Whitings, while clearly played out on a personal level, intersects with that of the town's history and its place within the mainstream, postwar and present.

## NOSTALGIA AND *EMPIRE FALLS*

There is an overlap between nostalgia and working-class rurality in American culture. For some people, the two are inextricable: rural/small-town spaces are firmly situated in the past, accessed only by American nostalgia for a more comfortable, simpler time.[5] Although there is increasing critical commentary regarding the usefulness of nostalgia for American society and culture,[6] the same cannot be said for larger conceptions of rural spaces. Rurality, and

[5] Representations of rurality and the small town are considered nostalgic because they are no longer actually experienced in postmodern society. For an example discussing the filmic image in particular, see the collection *Representing the Rural*. Rural sociologists point out that this view of rurality is apparent across discursive forms, including literature. See Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfeld Bell and Margaret Finney, eds., *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

[6] See Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in Retro America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), for one example.

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particularly that of the working class, is either disregarded completely as a place no longer existing within the US, or it is considered always one step behind modern society and culture. This is true of both a postwar society undergoing rapid sociocultural changes and of present times.[7] While some scholars in the rural social sciences are redressing this issue, there has been very little work done towards this end in more humanities-based disciplines, like literature.[8]

The use of nostalgia/memory to represent the complexity of working-class rurality in fiction, then, may seem only to reconfirm the regressed position of these places in American society and culture. However, if we consider that "nostalgia" and "rurality" are not truly regressed, but are complex spaces that are indeed relevant to larger sociocultural contexts, we can see the ways in which the viability of a place like "Empire Falls" can be drawn out through the use of nostalgia. To navigate such a reading, it is helpful to consider the use of nostalgia in *Empire Falls* from the perspective of "critical nostalgia" (Sinead McDermott) and "critical regionalism" (Douglas Powell). Both of these terms similarly assert the personal and/or local within larger sociocultural contexts, and yet do so from different angles: McDermott from a literary-studies standpoint and Powell with a more general view of rural landscapes in American culture. From these different angles, both authors assert that rural places in American society and representations of these places attest to the interrelation of rurality/modernity, and to the capability of rurality to critique naturalized norms. For McDermott, this interrelationship can be discerned through a "critical nostalgia" that is read in concert with the "longer historical memory of the land,"[9] where Powell's "critical regionalism" is concerned with the "very act of forging, through cultural criticism, the broader cultural, political, historical, and geographical connections around a particular text, image, or artifact of local cultural conflict."[10] In McDermott, nostalgia from the personal

[7] For the postwar period, see articles like Gerald W. Johnson, "Denizens of the Rural Slums," *New Republic*, 23 May 1960, or the more idealized approach in "Escape to the Country," *Life*, 25 (27 Sept. 1948). For the present, one need only look at popular renditions of working-class rurality ("rednecks," "white trash," "hillbillies") to recognize their regressed status in American society.

[8] Some exceptions can be found: William Conlogue and Tom Lutz (Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)) in literary studies, and Anthony Harkins (Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)) in history.

[9] Sinead McDermott, "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in A Thousand Acres," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, 1 (2002), 389–407, 395.

[10] Douglas Reichert Powell, *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 19.

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level is opened to larger sociocultural criticism and understanding, a point that can be reversed in Powell: from the local landscape that appears stagnant, we can see the complex, personal lives lived in part through this landscape.

Reading these theorists in concert with a novel like *Empire Falls* accomplishes a couple of things. First, and particularly with McDermott, it is possible to consider representations of the rural individual as reflective of and potentially impacting upon larger sociocultural contexts; this is accomplished through fictional representations of nostalgia. However, it is through Powell that we can more fully join rurality to a "modern" society that dismisses it. With Powell, we can parallel the fictional portrayal of communities that appear to be stagnant and regressed in their "landscape" with actual places outside a novel's borders. With such a reading, fiction like Russo's more directly brings out the nuance of community that can be overlooked in seemingly regressed, rural landscapes in reality. These two approaches, while bringing out a working-class rural voice in fiction and beyond, also help draw out the critique that may exist within these places.

It is at this point that a "critical nostalgia" and a "critical regionalism" may be viewed as bringing out an otherwise dismissed working-class rural voice. The reader of *Empire Falls* is told immediately that the landscape of the novel, although seemingly stagnant, holds the complexity of the local community: it forms the backdrop of the town's hopes and disappointments. Instead of gazing away from the abandoned textile mill at the end of Empire Avenue, we are told that the townspeople's "natural preference was to gaze down to where the street both literally and figuratively dead-ended at the mill and factory, the undeniable physical embodiment of the town's past."[11] The landscape in *Empire Falls* is the scenery of both personal and communal loss, rooted in the closure of its mill approximately fifty years ago. At this point, it may be tempting to read the landscape of *Empire Falls* in the same fashion as Theo D'Haen reads the landscape of another Russo small town "left behind" by the winds of progress: a testament to a way of life "embalmed" in history,[12] a town with the "out-of-time nostalgic aura" from somewhere around the "1930's to 1960's."[13] This misconception places working-class rurality in a regressed place similar to mainstream conceptions. In *Empire Falls* this misconception is battled through the temporal interweaving on the

[11] Richard Russo, *Empire Falls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 19.

[12] D'Haen's critique is of an earlier Russon novel. Theo D'Haen, "The Return of History and the Minorization of New York: T. Coraghessan Boyle and Richard Russo," *Revue français d'études américaines*, 42 (1994), 393–403.

[13] Richard Russo, *Nobody's Fool* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

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(perhaps critically) nostalgic personal/communal level and, relatedly, within the landscape itself. Empire Falls may appear regressed to those looking in from the outside, but it is through those on the inside of the town that the reader more fully understands the complexity of this community, and can perhaps more fully participate within what can be considered the town's part in a "critical regionalism."

At the beginning of the novel, Miles does not participate in the town's potentially critical stance. As he questions the continuing hope that the mill will reopen, bringing back the relative prosperity of the postwar period, Miles wonders, if the "old buildings were razed, would the town that had grown up around them be forced to imagine a future?"[14] However, we can see within this question that despite the appearance of stagnation or just plain regression, the town had "grown up" around these abandoned structures, implying not just a sense of change on the level of landscape, but also in regard to the personal: "imagining a future" implies that even if the residents are constrained by their immediate opportunities, they are capable of active participation within their future, even if this future is at times idealized in terms of the past.

Within *Empire Falls*, this past is remembered through a conflicted nostalgia. This conflicted nostalgia can be seen in "The Way It Was" series in the local paper, a photo series showing a more prosperous past to its seemingly doomed present. Where Miles sees in the pictures that "the town itself was awaiting some cataclysm that would finish them all off," he also cannot see within his very own questions the opportunity of this town to legitimate itself through its past: "Who were these people and what did they mean to us? The photos seemed to ask. Where have they gone? Why do we remain?"[15] These photos represent the reaffirmation of pride in the past, yes – but also an implicit acknowledgment that this town has persevered for generations, despite its shrinking importance in regard to economic or cultural viability: you could harmlessly "strafe" Main Street with gunfire, but the town is still alive.[16] While the rest of the country continued to grow more (sub)urban (i.e. "modern"), working-class small towns like Empire Falls persevered despite their seeming failure at achieving mainstream success: the question "why do we remain?" may be an accusation, but also a celebration, even if this celebration is simultaneously cloaked in loss.

At this point, Miles cannot access the nostalgia that helps this particular working-class rural community reassert itself within US society. Nor, by

[14] *Empire Falls*, 19. [15] *Empire Falls*, 297. [16] *Empire Falls*, 297.

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extension, can he access the implicit critique of the mainstream that arises from this nostalgic, communal voice. This critique counters a mainstream society that runs within its own codes of exceptionalism,[17] and the valuations that emerge from this particular purview. The use of nostalgia by a community of people considered regressed from the mainstream is interesting, especially if we consider that nostalgia connotes sentimentality, insulating people from change in the present and future. It is clear, though, that nostalgia is a place of empowerment for this particular community: although this nostalgia may appear an exercise in stagnation as Miles points to at the beginning of the book, it is also a place to act out community voice. Simultaneously, this voice opens up larger cultural norms to criticism through its very difference. Although a community with its fair share of negative traits, it is also a viable identity that can find self-respect outside the norms of "progress."

Various characters throughout the book demonstrate this self-respect, most notably Miles's father, Max. Despite the fact that those in Empire Falls are constrained by a depressed economic situation, Max exhibits individual choice and power to attain dignity and respect on one's own terms, even as these terms may be offensive (and at times harmful) to others. We are told in an italicized flashback,

> "Always remember one thing about cops and lawyers," Max said. "The worst they can do to you ain't that bad." He paused to allow his son to digest this hard-won wisdom. "They like to think they got you by the balls, but they don't."[18]

Max's lack of regard for authority has more than legal implications: by establishing that laws are only minor inconveniences that cannot truly touch a man himself, Max introduces the idea that governing authorities are arbitrary manifestations. Although it would be a stretch to say that governing authority (in this case law and order, although this could also be extended to economic and cultural authority) has only a small effect on the experience of everyday life, Max exhibits that these laws do not *define* a person, no matter

[17] My use of the term "exceptionalism" is in line with literary critics that discuss this term as a confluence of larger ideology and personal trait. For example, Laura Hapke discusses exceptionalism in America: "it remains Americans' ideology of 'exceptionalism' that class boundaries seem fluid in a country of such unlimited economic possibility." Laura Hapke, *Labor's Text: The Worker in American Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 5. In other words, exceptionalism rests in part upon notions of meritocracy and upward mobility – "fluid" boundaries between classes give the impression that those capable can achieve the naturalized cultural norms of mainstream society, and those failing are simply expressing their personal inadequacy.

[18] *Empire Falls*, 232.

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how lowly this person may appear: far from natural, these laws are merely manmade systems.

Max's attitude, while acted out on a personal level, is a manifestation of the community's own historical attempt to control its fate.[19] Although a fictional scenario, the plight of Empire Falls is familiar to the twenty-first-century reader who has seen the effect of deindustrialization across the country; Russo's fictional account potentially sheds light on the seemingly insular and regressed actions of working-class small towns outside the novel's borders. The fictional history outlined may be brought to bear on the real history of which the reader is aware. In the postwar period, Empire Textile fell victim to the larger globalizing processes affecting many small towns and cities built around industry of some sort: sold to a multinational firm in Germany, the mill was bought for "tax advantages" and eventually moved south and overseas, leaving an entire town out of work.[20] Clearly, that the mill was first used as a tax shelter and then sold piecemeal to remain "competitive with foreign operations" makes smart business sense:[21] such ruthless practices ensure that the bottom line will be as high as possible for the company and, relatedly, the goods cheaper for the consumer. In this sense, putting out a working-class small town is an unfortunate inevitability within the evolving geography of "progress," away from the rural and towards the (enlightened) cities and, relatedly, towards economic and personal prosperity.

The workers, however, did not see this buyout in the same light: skeptical of its new debt-laden practices, the workers put their full efforts behind the company, by taking pay cuts and job loss to increase productivity and ensure the mills' short-term existence.[22] However, productivity meant little in a new economy increasingly centered on abstract figures. The lack of mainstream sophistication of these working-class rural people is reflected in their different perspective on outdated modes of production already disappearing by the postwar period; that these same workers and their families still cling to these modes in the early twenty-first century exposes their negative difference from the mainstream in the present.

[19] By accepting preexisting structures, the town's actions (like Max's) may seem apolitical. In the sense that these actions do not attempt to directly change these structures, such a reading would be correct. However, the sense of pride that these actions exhibit speaks to another political move – self-respect in a way of life deemed regressed by mainstream society. These actions become, in part, political through assaulting the taken-for-granted norms of exceptionalism (i.e. upward mobility, progress and development).

[20] *Empire Falls*, 342–43. [21] *Empire Falls*, 342. [22] *Empire Falls*, 342.

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Further proof of the town's regression in postwar (and present) exceptionalist terms is the rejection of job relocation down south, citing house ownership, mortgages and local family as reasons.[23] By not bettering themselves physically and therefore economically (physical mobility away from Empire Falls signifies both upward and personal mobility within the book's mainstream voice[24]), it is easy to accept the narrator's description that "staying was easier and less scary than leaving, and because for a while at least they would be able to draw unemployment benefits."[25] These people could never be "exceptional": they were too ignorant and lazy to fully attain the fruits of America laid out for anyone to capitalize on. But the narrator gives another side to their perseverance:

> Others remained out of pride. When the realization dawned that they were the victims of corporate greed and global economic forces, they said, okay, sure, fine, they'd been fools but they would not, by God, be run out of the town their grandparents and parents had grown up in and called home.[26]

In other words, these people would find a way to survive without giving up their identity, here typified through multigenerational residence in Empire Falls. According to the narrator, these people saw the larger *system* and how it had economically used the town, but they would not resign themselves to that fact ("they'd been fools" but refused to be "run out of town" towards the mainstream championing such a move).

Although a seemingly simple town full of simple people, this history allows the reader to view Empire Falls with more complexity. Further, the town lends the reader an opportunity to critique the larger norms which American society takes for granted. Through the attempt to persevere, the town implicitly leads the reader to turn a critical eye towards the effects of "corporate greed" and globalization that has increasingly structured the American economic and cultural landscape since the postwar period. In some ways, globalization may be an inevitable step of development and progress – American free enterprise turned back upon its least exceptional of citizenry. However, the town shows us that we do not get smarter, we do not evolve simply because the years pass by – the new systems, while bigger, are not necessarily better.

[23] *Empire Falls*, 343.

[24] The move away from Empire Falls signifies upward mobility throughout the book, particularly in regard to college-educated success that can only be attained outside the borders of the town (see Grace's insistence that Miles attend a school far away so that he won't "come running back to Empire Falls" (*Empire Falls*, 394)).

[25] *Empire Falls*, 343.

[26] *Empire Falls*, 343.

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Although the narrator outlines this history for us, it is through the nostalgia of the community that the loss of this past and its meaning for this particular community is accentuated. However, the community of Empire Falls also uses its nostalgia in order to assert its viability in the past and present, something Miles too eventually uses to gain acceptance of his devalued sociocultural position, and the idea that this devaluation does not have to define him. Although Miles does accept his life, his "personal failure" does not just disappear as he accepts where his life has gone thus far,[27] just as those in the town do not forget their devalued status: they may be proud of their community, but there is also the remnant of bitterness.[28] However, instead of being consumed by this failure, Miles too sees himself as a source of pride, and uses nostalgia to reach this epiphany. As the narrator explains, Miles's "nostalgic emotions" that brought him to the childhood resort on the Vineyard "made him feel more than a little foolish" – yet this nostalgia still prompted him to navigate beyond the "NO TRESSPASSING" sign at the border of the property.[29] Nostalgia is shown here as a return to a childhood moment of happiness, but also an opportunity to delve further into his past and, relatedly, his present position. The bittersweetness of this particular childhood memory reinforces the conflicting nature of Miles's nostalgia: opportunity and happiness had presented themselves through C.B.'s money and power, but it was a happiness to remain contained on the symbolic boundary of the Vineyard up to this point. This nostalgia helps Miles critically interrogate this containment, in relation to his self and his town: "It was time to return to Empire Falls, to his life. Better to be a man there, his 'Sojourner' dream had shown him, than a boy here."[30] This statement reverses mainstream logic that would posit a working-class rural position as the simple and naive and a move towards the mainstream Vineyard as a social and cultural improvement. Instead of necessarily progressing from regressed "child" to enlightened "man" within the symbolic Vineyard, Miles finds worth beyond the classed and geographic position of his locale: one is not necessarily regressed if one lives in a place like Empire Falls, nor is somebody necessarily an authority if they are in the mainstream. Ironically, it was his brief respite as a child in a parallel world of power and money that did more to hinder his dignity than the working-class rural environment of Empire Falls.

[27] *Empire Falls*, 468–69.
[28] One striking example is Miles's childhood neighbor, Jimmy Minty.
[29] *Empire Falls*, 469.
[30] *Empire Falls*, 472.

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## NOSTALGIA AND COMMUNITY

The town – and, on a more individual level, Miles – demonstrates a "critical nostalgia" towards the mainstream and the devaluation of Empire Falls by this mainstream. Further, this nostalgia is coextensive of the landscape experienced by the town: as Miles experiences his nostalgia through the physicality of the Vineyard, so the town experiences its own through its immediate landscape. In both cases this nostalgia is not insular, but implicates larger communities and their place within particular sociocultural contexts. This nostalgia, in some ways, presents a challenge to the mainstream society outside its borders: it may be surprising to the reader, for example, that working-class rural people may be fictionally represented as agents in their past, present and future. In addition, this nostalgia interrogates the larger notion that working-class rural places are unchanging entities, stuck in some past that the mainstream has evolved beyond, for memory itself attests to changes on personal and historical scales.

This point is further accentuated if we consider that this local community's nostalgia is held in contrast to a more familiar mainstream nostalgia that is also experienced within the town's landscape. In *Empire Falls*, the town's landscape provides the locals a place to relive their hopes and disappointments; but the town also provides a place for the more mainstream to relive its own nostalgia on different terms, and through the same landmarks used by the town. By placing these seemingly opposed nostalgias within the same landmarks, Russo shows us that despite our mainstream attempt to place working-class communities in the past, these communities are very much part of the present. Further, this difference may operate as a way to critique the taken-for-granted norms of progress and development that structure mainstream American society. In this way, the landscape of Empire Falls is the site of a "critical regionalism."

One obvious landmark is the diner where Miles works. At some level, the diner is a focal point for the local citizenry, but also a microcosm of the town's history of hope and despair. It is symbolic that Francine manipulates Miles's own hopes and disappointments through promises of eventual ownership; with ownership of most of the town's real estate, Francine is able to decide who will succeed and fail – economically and, to an extent, personally. However, there is more to the diner than her manipulation of Miles and the town. Francine evinces the belief that the "Empire Grill was a landmark … and that Empire Falls, if its residents were to remain at all hopeful about the future, needed the grill to survive, even if it didn't

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thrive."[31] There is a truth behind this statement. In some ways, the diner represents the history, perseverance, decline and even the hopes of the town; it is a place of community.

However, the diner also becomes another place of nostalgia for those of a different perspective. By introducing "International Nights" as a way to bring in more profit, Miles and his brother David are attempting to attract a new clientele in order to boost profits. These dinners, a "relatively new thing" for the diner, are meant to attract customers from the nearby college: students and faculty coming for cheap meals in their "BMWs and Audis" that disappeared at the end of each school year.[32] There are a few ways that this new clientele is separated from the locals of Empire Falls. The transience of these customers (along with their cars and occupation) is symbolic of their relative wealth and higher status: these people are the college-educated, not the ones "left behind" in decaying small towns like Empire Falls. This difference between the professors and the town is also highlighted through the temporal locations of these two demographics within the diner itself: the relatively new dinners are reserved for the college clients, whereas the standard breakfast and lunch that had always been served at the diner continue to be reserved for the locals.[33]

This segregation also exists in the nostalgic ties between this new clientele and the diner. Although drawing in these new clients was necessary to "survive the local economy," this draw is done on different terms than the Empire Grill usually serves to the town.[34] According to Miles's brother, the college clients "would consider the grill's worn-out, cigarette-burned countertop and wobbly booths 'honest' or 'retro' or some damn thing."[35] Perhaps this nostalgia for small-town diners is something more familiar to the reader. The diner becomes a return from the past, the idealized rural working class who clearly no longer exist for these customers, except as their establishments *appear* in fashion: hence the word "retro" to denote the reinvention of something in the present that has already passed. The diner, under these pretenses, is not something that lives in the present, but is a relic preserved for the consumption of the mainstream. However, as the last phrase "some damn thing" points to, the town is critical of this mainstream nostalgia, even as it physically exists in the same place as the local community. If this mainstream nostalgia keeps the diner running in part, so be it – but it does not define the local relationship with its institution, a relationship that continues outside the Thursday-through-Saturday

[31] *Empire Falls*, 37. [32] *Empire Falls*, 42. [33] *Empire Falls*, 42.
[34] *Empire Falls*, 101–2. [35] *Empire Falls*, 101–2.

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"International Nights." Although both sides are located within the same country and in fact the same county, these "international" nights may refer to more than food, becoming representative of the different worlds these two sides appear to inhabit.

The mill operates in a similar fashion to the diner. Clearly, the mill's structure is a reminder of the town's prosperous past as well as its dismal present and its lack of future potential. Yet the hope of the town still centers around the cyclic rumor of its reopening.[36] When the rumors appear substantiated by a limo, the "men in dark suits" and Francine at the mill, we see once again the different relationship between these outsiders and the locals. When the mill is sold, becoming the "Knox River Restoration Project" housing a brewpub, a credit-card company and new riverfront real estate, the mill itself further represents larger economic shifts in the US, from manufacturing of a sort to white-collar and service industry. However, where these larger shifts may be considered an evolutionary step forward, this new vision of the mill is not the salvation originally hoped for by the Empire Falls community. As the diner is "retro" to fit the needs of a more powerful mainstream, so the Mill itself becomes directed at white-collar consumption: both the brewpub and the riverfront real estate connote an attraction for a wealthier clientele. While these "developments" will offer jobs for the locals in the town, and this can be seen as a relative prosperity, we can infer from our real-world knowledge that these jobs will not provide the same type of economic security that the Mill had up to the postwar period. Far from being able to save the community, this new development in the service of the mainstream may completely rip it apart for good:

> If what David had described was an unalloyed blessing, then Miles would be glad. For his brother, for Bea, for Charlene, for all of them. He didn't expect anybody to share his resentment about the way it was coming about, that once again the lion's share of the wealth generated would never reach the citizens of Empire Falls. The houses they couldn't afford to sell last year would be houses they couldn't afford to buy the next.[37]

While wanting to rejoice in this new boon, Miles understands that some things never change, and that this stagnation has more to do with the way Empire Falls is used (and viewed) by the mainstream, and nothing to do with the actual residents of the town. Just as the mill exploited the town, so will its new yuppified restoration; like before, the homes that the townspeople

[36] See *Empire Falls*, 25–26, for an example.

[37] *Empire Falls*, 462.

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fought to save when the mill closed may be taken from them again, this time through rising property values, and therefore taxes.

However the reader chooses to view this restoration may indeed be coextensive of their sociocultural purview: is "development" always good? Is "progress" only what is in appearances that of the mainstream? Yet, by the novel's end, we are instructed to at least question this most recent development from the very community that may be dismissed by American society and culture. On the one hand, the school shooting that sends Miles and his daughter, Tick, to Martha's Vineyard for recovery seems like the impetus bringing the town to rock bottom, to be cleansed by record-breaking snow and the spring flooding of the entire town – the same flood killing Francine,[38] making room for the "new," starting from scratch. But it should not be forgotten that this new "prosperity," a mixed blessing at best, is itself rooted in the past, "that all of this new hope and confidence was built on the foundation of a loss everyone was far too anxious to forget."[39] Although Miles ties this "loss" to the victims of the school shooting and therefore the personal, it is not detached from the larger socioeconomic implications of the town. The introduction of white-collar industry and rising property values to a working-class small town may be largely considered a sign of "progress," a step forward in a historical trajectory, but the potential erasure of this working-class rural town is not necessarily one embraced by the community itself. Whether this community can maintain its identity within this structure is left unanswered, but its death within this novel is not inevitable, or necessarily desirable.

This open ending can also be brought to bear upon the larger context outside its fictional borders. Russo's work, although fictional, parallels the larger socioeconomic shifts occurring in the US – it is no secret that both rural and urban areas across the country have suffered tremendously from economic restructuring. However, where we are merely instructed to accept this change and its effects on communities as an inevitable fact of life in the "real" world, as part of a larger evolutionary chain towards national progress and development, Russo gives us another perspective. Perhaps we are not as evolved as we think, nor our social and cultural systems so secure. And he uses those people and communities considered irrelevant to and/or "left behind" our modern American society, and their nostalgic memories, in which to posit this critique. In Russo's fiction, working-class rural communities are not bumbling, unconscious dupes waiting to be defined by our mainstream purview; instead, these communities are actors in their own

[38] *Empire Falls*, 482.

[39] *Empire Falls*, 462.

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fates, even as circumstances may weigh heavily upon one's available choices. In some ways it is absolutely necessary to use fiction in order to bring out working-class rural voices in this fashion, for the hidden assumptions we live by in our everyday life ignore the relevance and, in fact, the potential of these communities to criticize the taken-for-granted assumptions ruling mainstream America. Perhaps it takes a work of fiction to expand the reader's own assumptions regarding larger society, and those deemed unfit to be part of it.

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