

A Cultural Geography of Lake Wobegon

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This study, a cultural analysis of Lake Wobegon monologues recorded from public radio between October, 1993, and February, 1995, shows how Garrison Keillor's vision of the characters, values, and landscape of this small Midwestern town can be examined within a broader cultural/political context to show how it is subsumed within the larger, more pervasive myth of the Agrarian Midwest in national discourse. An examination of the mythic Agrarian Midwest as reconstructed in these narratives reveals deep historically maintained power relations—particularly along the lines of race and religion—that are inherent to the myth, generally, and taken for granted in the Lake Wobegon tales specifically. The myth, actively disseminated in many cultural forms, distinguishes the Midwest and reinforces regional distinction which ultimately serves the dominant national identity of Eurocentric, Christian heritage.

KEYWORDS: *cultural geography, Agrarian Midwest myth, national identity, racism, regional identity*

In his humorous weekly syndicated radio monologues, *The News From Lake Wobegon*, Garrison Keillor revisits, through storytelling, a small town in Minnesota where residents live pastoral lives. They are in touch with nature and share values associated with family and community. As a blueprint for living, Lake Wobegon inhabitants acknowledge, if not always abide by, the tenets of Christianity. Scandinavian and German immigrants, their predecessors, originally came to the midwest from their respective old countries to farm and log, and eventually to settle small towns like Lake Wobegon. Keillor calls Lake Wobegon an invention, but regards Minnesota an invention as well (see Larson & Oravec, 1987). Lake Wobegon is, in fact, a geographic place, as is Minnesota. But it exists in the representational form of storytelling, not on a map. Because of the themes Keillor draws upon to create this place, he engages a wide range of listeners who visit regularly. I will show that Lake Wobegon is a pastoral ideal which, though spun out in a way that is humorous and sometimes veers toward parody or irony,¹ is clearly situated within the more widespread Midwest Agrarian myth, a historically relevant, nationally shared, set of representations and conceptions of the nation's heartland resonating

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nationwide, though concentrated in one region. I argue that the myth belies a dominant racial and religious social order which is reflected in, yet extends far beyond, the Lake Wobegon tales.

This essay explores themes prevalent in the Wobegon monologues recorded between October, 1993, and February, 1995, from Keillor's weekly musical/variety program, *A Prairie Home Companion*, syndicated on Public Radio International (PRI). The thematic analysis reveals consonance with the ideological master narrative of U.S. heritage: the story of how European immigrants, mostly Christian, left their repressive and populous home countries and "settled" the purported uncultivated and wilderness lands, first in the East, then moving westward. Lake Wobegon is situated in the Midwest, the heart of the country. The 12 states which now comprise the nation's Midwest—and particularly Minnesota—were settled by a large number of Scandinavian and German farmers in the nineteenth century, though French and English explorers, trappers, and traders came before. Today the region as a whole has retained an identity largely connected to those nineteenth century agrarian immigrants (see Atkins, 1988). The European settlement patterns of the Midwest states, and the farming in which they engaged, are reflected in some of the activities and issues of the present-day Midwest. So, too, are their effects, including tensions among native tribes, migrant farm laborers, farm owners and government. These historic tensions are broadly ignored in the cultivated master narrative of U.S. heritage, and particularly in the Agrarian Midwest myth as the geographic repository of white European agrarian heritage. In such instances, emphasis is placed on nostalgic agrarianism and its accompanying value system.

Exploring the master narrative themes as they exist in Keillor's monologues, especially as regionally relegated, is consistent with a cultural geographical approach to culture analysis. Cultural geographer Edward Soja (1989) argues that place is as much a socially constructed phenomenon as it is a physical, material entity. Social place constructions center on the meanings attached to them and the types of relations operating within them. These are the substance of their identities. Soja contends that space has largely been ignored in social and cultural theory, and that it must be recognized that space and place are socially produced at the same time they are the parameters around and within which social life takes place. Both Soja and geographer David Harvey (1996) explore this dialectic of space and place, as socially produced and producing, in practices of everyday life. Soja's work has centered on the way formations of geographic space are actually shaped by relations of domination and subordination. Harvey emphasizes the importance of examining how nature or environment is also constructed as part of place, with a similar interest in relations of domination and subordination. It is crucial, they argue, to focus on the tensions and economic, social, cultural and racial disparities that exist on various spatial levels.

In this article I explore how one U.S. region is reproduced as a spatial repository of the nation's agrarian heritage—and its accompanying value system—and how racial and religious tensions, in one popular culture form and through one storyteller, are in various ways glossed over entirely, or when addressed, done so in humorous fashion so as to defuse the tension. With regard to religious and racial tensions specifically, I argue that they are not necessarily separable. In other words, my explication of the Christianity infused in Keillor's tales implies whiteness. Whereas, on occasion,

Keillor makes explicit reference to nonwhites in his monologues, more often it is implicit. His mention of other religions (e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, etc.) are on occasion veiled references to other ethnicities which, in particular contexts, I include under the rubric racial tension. The subtleties of racial subordination often work through veiled reference in just such a manner.

I also include here a brief discussion of how Keillor himself has changed his tone and the intentions of his monologues, and how other scholars have variously interpreted them. I include these because I wish to demonstrate that, though Keillor and scholars who have studied his work necessarily differ in their approaches and emphases, they are still situated within the Agrarian myth in that they accept the larger implications of the ideal regional agrarian setting, as well as the humorous tone, both of which tend to “forgive” the characters and the tales. And while other scholars have analyzed Keillor’s Lake Wobegon tales and discussed the appeal they have for a wide national audience, none has looked specifically at their racial/religious implications, particularly within the framework of the politics of place meaning as I have attempted here. This new lens for critical analysis of the Lake Wobegon tales is meant to offer a different perspective from which to examine how popular cultural forms contribute to our understanding of place meanings and the tensions reproduced therein.

Agrarian Myth

In his scholarly analysis of Keillor’s books and radio monologues, Peter Scholl (1993) defines the pastoral as a wide set of themes and motifs involving a simple human society living close to nature and set in some historic and ambiguous Golden Age. More specifically, Scholl draws on Leo Marx’s definition of complex pastoral to describe the effect of Keillor’s tales. The complex pastoral, a powerful force in American culture, is a tendency to indulge in an irrational affirmation of the natural in response to industrialism. It is sentimental pastoralism, which can be traced back at least as far as Jeffersonian agrarianism; yet, Marx argues, it encourages infantilism and nostalgia.² Scholl claims that Keillor consistently draws on the pastoral theme which has recurred in American literature since the nineteenth century. My use of the term Agrarian myth is based on the notion of complex pastoral as Scholl uses it, but with a critical difference. Myth here is defined in the sense that Barthes (1972) uses the term, as ideological, partial truths which draw on history yet mask the historic and ongoing struggles between dominant and subordinate groups.

Mythologies reside in various cultural forms, and certainly in representations of place (see Burgess & Gold, 1985). A critical examination of the mythic Agrarian Midwest reveals historically maintained power inequities. The politics of Keillor’s humorous, occasionally nostalgic narratives lies in an assumed superior ancestry. I will show that the myth, as reconstructed in Keillor’s monologues, distinguishes the Midwest within the nation as the geographic repository of the Agrarian myth. I acknowledge that the complex pastoral is, indeed, a *national* ideal, and wish to emphasize that the myth of the Midwest is a powerful geographic constant wherein the complex pastoral concentrates in the American imagination. The myth emphasizes the land and equates life close to nature with virtue, and by implication Christianity and European heritage, and also by implication nonwhite and urban as

outside this preferred vision. I argue that Midwest distinction in its mythic form is crucial to the dominant national identity or master narrative of national heritage. Yet the narrative distorts, inverts, and sometimes masks the struggles and variety of race, ethnic and religious differences that mark the nation's past and present, and the redistribution and near elimination of indigenous people that took place during a period when it served the political and economic interests of the growing nation.³

Dominant national identity is reconstructed in many cultural forms, including history texts, theme parks, museums, and the mass media. Regions such as the Midwest, the South and the West are often portrayed as having unique identities that coincide, nevertheless, with the dominant national identity. Keillor's own reconstructions of the Midwest draw on the Agrarian myth and obscure power struggles while reinforcing, implicitly and explicitly, white, Christian heritage.

Communication and Cultural Geography

The theoretical frame for this study includes work from critical communication study and cultural geography. With the same critical insight as cultural geographers Soja and Harvey, James Duncan and David Ley have become interested in examining place formation in the era of late capitalism with its pervasive consumerism and electronic media. The main objective of their book *Place/Cultural Representation* (1993) is to explore representations of place as ongoing cultural practices which reflect power struggles. The questions of place asked by the "new" cultural geographer are not unlike those pursued by cultural studies scholars. The implications of meaning, power relations, and representation have increasingly become the foci of place analysis. From a cultural geographic perspective, Lake Wobegon is a mediated geography, as worthy of cultural geographic analysis as any other physical geography.

Interest in the intersection of place and power is found in critical media study as well. Grossberg (1992) calls for a spatial model of culture and power. Discussions of these, he argues, usually center on metaphors of time and history and ignore the fact that histories are deployed in space. Hoping to overcome finally what he calls this bias of modernity, Grossberg implores cultural studies theorists, particularly within the communication field, to develop geographies of power, and particularly to see culture as an active agent in the production of places and spaces. Burgess and Gold (1985), who examine geography and media, emphasize ideological place construction, and particularly the role of media institutions in hegemony maintenance through place representations. Similarly, Hay (1992) analyzes the power of the mass media to create perspectives on place which "result from, generate and gradually transform relations of power and status" (p. 32). In response to recent theoretical emphases on reasserting the spatial in examinations of social practices and culture, and in an effort to make concrete the significance of place, this research offers a cultural perspective on the U.S. Midwest, focusing on relations of power as articulated by differences of race and religion.

The electronic media are capable of collapsing distance between places, but can also create unique place realities. The reality of cities such as Lake Wobegon, New York, Minneapolis or Birmingham, and of regions such as the West, East, South or Midwest depends in large part on meanings and interpretations. The mass media are

implicated in creating, circulating and interpreting those meanings. They do so in controlled ways which oftentimes work to preserve dominant perspectives. For example, the New York City of NBC's weekly television series *Mad About You* and *Friends*, or the *Mary Tyler Moore* show's Minneapolis are not realistic or holistic depictions of those cities, as any resident of Harlem or North Minneapolis can attest.⁴ They are idealized, partial depictions, created a certain way for the benefit of advertisers who wish to capture the attention of the right consuming audience. In a similar way, Lake Wobegon is a partial idealized depiction of a part of the Midwest. Midwestern Lake Wobegon is a place visited by a large and nationally dispersed listenership, primarily via radio broadcast. The reach and acceptance of the tales beyond the Midwest is a testament to the resonance of the Agrarian myth nationwide.

Regionalism and the Nation

Before closely examining Keillor's narratives as myth-maintaining, it is important to discuss U.S. regionalism. Regions are ambiguous geographic spaces, the boundaries of which shift and change depending upon who is defining them, and for what purpose.⁵ Despite disagreements about actual physical boundaries and the states which comprise them, vernacular regions are nationally distinguished (Jensen, 1951; Mather, 1986). Each has an identity that is shared both within the region and outside (Norton, 1989; Zelinsky, 1973). Regionalism emphasizes distinct parts while suggesting a whole, the nation. A number of historians have traced the development of vernacular regions and the concept of regionalism within the United States. Simkins (1951) argues that regional distinctions first became apparent in the eighteenth century, and grew stronger into the nineteenth century in reaction to U.S. government economic and political attempts to centralize and unify the states.⁶ Zelinsky (1973) has argued that the most strongly identified regions in the country include the West, South, Middle West and Northeast. One could argue that the Southwest and New England could easily be added to that list of regions with distinct meaning. A region's meaning is tied to its physical characteristics, history, speech patterns, mannerisms, nicknames, symbols or iconography, industries and inhabitants' attitudes, to name a few (see Jensen, 1951; Shaw, 1965). The focus here is regional meaning continually constructed in mass mediated representations which draw on all of these distinguishing elements.

A significant feature of a region's identity is that it is necessarily dependent upon the identity of other regions. The meaning of one depends on the meaning of others. Much regional distinction derives from such interregional comparison. Sometimes that comparison takes the form of antagonism. For example, the South derives a good deal of its distinction from continued reference—via speech, literature, film and television—to the Civil War era. References to "Confederacy," "Yankees," and "Union" imply the oppositional North. The West, too, is often constructed in competitive opposition to the East. East Coast-West Coast distinctions are made when describing styles and patterns of behavior. In such instances the cities of Los Angeles and New York often come to stand for the region or portion thereof. The Midwest is

the ambiguous center, without the sorts of clearly defined or extreme characteristics often identified with the West, East or South. Inhabitants on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts have been known to regard the middle of the country with indifference, calling it the “great in-between” or “the space between the coasts.” Since Midwestern distinction includes no clear diametric oppositions, it is left oftentimes to distinguish itself in popular culture through self-conscious comparison (see Motz, 1981). For example, travel brochures and magazine articles about places in the Midwest might describe them as having “delis like New York,” or “Rugged riding trails like in the West” (see Fry, 1994b). Minneapolis, Minnesota calls itself the Minneapple, a name which implies an identity to be compared with New York City.

Yet the Midwest is not just defined through self-conscious comparison. It is also characterized as complex pastoral, embodying rural values and a connection to nature, land which is not wilderness, as it is in the West, but is cultivated and subdued. The complex pastoral is the Agrarian Midwest myth which has as its central representations the farm, prairie and small town. Other components are virtue, innocence, wholesomeness and the Puritan ethic. Implicit to these representations is whiteness and Christianity. Such conceptions and representations have come to naturalize the mythic Agrarian Midwest and its preferred race and religion in the national imaginary. The myth is dispersed in various mass media forms, including television news and regional consumer magazines (Fry, 1994a; 1994b). Despite arguments that certain regional distinctions in the United States are declining because of an increased shared television culture (see Morgan, 1986), I contend that mediated practices of representation continuously draw regional boundaries and sustain distinctions, rendering regions separate cultural geographies, but, in reference to the national whole, the logic of mythic regionalism requires a shared dominant national vision.

Other regional myths include the Frontier West and the Old South.⁷ The Frontier West and Old South, like the Agrarian Midwest—with their own physical and cultural identifying features, their own historic relations of domination and subordination, including slavery and capture of lands from Natives—are also dependent upon each other and are necessary to the overall national identity. They, too, are partially retained in, and rely on, mediated representations. An interesting example of the interplay of three regions in television sitcom can be observed on *Golden Girls*, now in syndication, which features regional distinction in the three white main characters.⁸ Blanche is clearly the Southern belle, Dorothy the outspoken, somewhat brusque New Yorker, and Rose the kind, yet simple Minnesotan. Gender implications notwithstanding, these three women, in their personalities, physical characteristics and posture embody regional distinction. The ways the three characters relate to each other on this program indicates relationships among the three regions understood and accepted nationally. This television example points out that oftentimes regional difference is not necessarily made explicit, yet it is clearly present. When vernacular regions are examined in relationship to each other and in the context of the whole, one can fully examine the dispersed yet ongoing dynamic of regionalism in the nation. Homi Bhabha (1990) argues that the nation is constructed in narration. That is, the nation is continually reified in discourses which include popular culture narratives. Vernacular regions such as the Agrarian Midwest embody this and reinforce for the nation a dominant discourse of Eurocentric heritage.

Other geographic concepts besides region have been used in analyzing how American national identity is constructed in mass media. Himmelstein (1994) examines mythic urban-, suburban-, and rural-middle landscapes which amplify different ideological values and are specifically constructed across a range of television genres. They serve, he argues, to perpetuate the Great American Dream. Himmelstein refers to the entire apparatus of television as mythmaker, "at work, constructing the endless flow of program material we see and hear. These mythmakers are bound to our culture's mythologies, reciting our myths to us, in television time and space, throughout the day and night" (p. 19). In a similar though narrower vein, Short (1992), in his analysis of Paul Harvey's syndicated radio news program, argues that Harvey appeals to the values of a nationally shared, ideal rural culture. The values of tradition, pastoralism, small towns, the common man and nurturing families are those of an ideal rural culture, and are shared by all Harvey listeners: rural, suburban and urban. Clearly, there is nationally shared meaning to such geographies as the country, the suburb and the city; and as metaphors they work to reinforce ideological conceptions of the nation as a whole. I wish to extend the scholarly discourse of geographic meaning by arguing in this analysis that the nationally shared ideal rural culture is concentrated in the idyllic Agrarian Midwest. What we can gain from examining the ideal rural culture through the framework of Midwest regionalism is an understanding of the political power vested in regional mythology.

The Midwest of Lake Wobegon

Lake Wobegon narratives participate in fulfilling the complex pastoral vision of the mythic Agrarian Midwest largely because Keillor uses nature, equated here to closeness to the land, the weather, and animals, as a predominant theme to overtly delineate insiders and outsiders by geography, religion and values, and covertly delineate them by race. Common representations interwoven throughout the tales are the prairie, cold weather, farms and farm animals, Protestantism, western European descent, hard work, community and the values of simplicity, frugality and self-restraint. The past is the ambiguous yet ever-present Golden Age; it is celebrated as the ideal. Outsiders are urbanities, nonmidwesterners, nonChristians and nonwhites. They are those whose backgrounds and supposed values lie outside of the mythic agrarian ethos. Insiders are God-fearing farmers and small town residents able to remove, even isolate, themselves from that which is perceived to be a profane, worldly, urban (and by implication nonwhite) sensibility. Each week Keillor revisits Lake Wobegon with his audience. He spins out the latest episode in the ongoing story of the fictional town of his youth so familiar to all who tune in.

The farm and, more generally, working the land are important concepts in Agrarian Midwest mythology. In Keillor's monologues, cultivating and reaping from the land are sacred activities, associated with hard work and simplicity. Many of the monologues include the storyteller's nostalgic trips back to the early days of Norwegian immigrants to Minnesota and especially Lake Wobegon. The July 19, 1994, monologue includes the story of a man who left Norway and came to work in a lumber camp in Northern Minnesota in order to begin fulfilling his American Dream. While there, he learned English and worked constantly to save enough

money to buy the lumber company. In another monologue (January 15, 1994) Keillor talks about his great grandfather who came over from Norway, cleared land, worked in lumber camps, slept in straw and regularly read from his Bible. In both these monologues Keillor makes clear the values of hard work, simplicity and faith—in God, the land and hard work—components of the Protestant ethic that is so important to the myth. The virtue of farms and farming are also referred to in contemporary Lake Wobegon. In the June 11, 1994, monologue, Keillor describes the last day of high school before summer vacation. Most of the students are hanging around outside the school when a tractor with a hay rack pulls up. Standing on the rack are the local Future Farmers of America (FFA) members. FFA members were considered uncool by the rest of the town-dwelling high schoolers who proceeded to join together in making fun of them. That lasted until the FFA members blasted them with liquid manure from a hose hooked up to an air compressor. According to Keillor, the moral of the tale is that one ought to be careful of whom one looks down upon because they may have powerful inner resources. Here farmers are revered because they have the closest relationship with the earth.

The noble heritage and reverence for farmers that Keillor perpetuates here “naturalizes” their relationship to the land, whereas it ignores historic tensions between native tribes and the immigrant farmers and government land policies working in favor of those immigrants. The nineteenth century settlement and sale of Minnesota lands for farming and logging displaced many native Minnesota Indian tribes, including the Dakota, the Sioux and the Ojibway. Natives had roamed free and hunted on the lands for a very long time before those lands were “discovered” by Europeans and eventually reined in for their own economic uses. Indian tribes were herded onto reservations, forced to learn agricultural methods, and made numerous promises in government treaties, many of which were never fulfilled (and remain unfulfilled today⁹). Not long after their placement on reservations many became angry and eventually led an uprising against the government in what is today referred to as the Minnesota Indian War of 1862 (see Anderson & Woolworth, 1988). Conflicts pertaining to land use and original treaties have preoccupied Native American tribes not only in Minnesota but all over the Midwest since those early days, but they are not generally grist for the nostalgia mill because Native Americans are not representative of the preferred heritage connected to the land in the master narrative of the Agrarian myth.

In his July 2, 1994, monologue, Keillor talks not about farmers, *per se*, but about the fruits of farming, and, most important, about the current weather which is so good for growing corn. The weather, in all of Keillor’s Lake Wobegon tales is primal nature, the element that most distinguishes Minnesota. It is so important that he begins each monologue with a discussion about recent temperatures and weather conditions. By doing so he highlights the importance of weather to farmers and townsfolk alike, but he also uses it to comment on the characteristics of the people who live there, on how they relate to each other and what is important to them. The ability to withstand harsh winter weather is a sign of heartiness, virtue and morality. Norwegians who came to lake Wobegon, he says (February 19, 1994), came because it was cold and snowy and they prefer winter: “It’s genetic, I think.” The cold, he says, is a good stimulant to work. In another monologue he talks about the weather being the main entertainment (April 16, 1994). Since the people who live in Lake

Wobegon are not known for their sense of humor, the weather is more interesting than they are. Dramatic weather is the very best. He begins the monologue talking about what a relief it is when a thunderstorm rolls in across the prairie from "Somewhere in the Old Testament." Thunderstorms are good for Norwegians, he goes on, because it makes them pay attention. Here he makes one of many overt connections to religiosity. The weather is used over and over in these monologues as a powerful agent of the deity and cause of virtue. In the May 5, 1994, monologue he begins by talking about how the weather is warming up now, but Lake Wobegon had a surprise snowstorm at the end of April. It was, he says, "God's little joke; God is a great humorist." The coldest winter weather is most virtuous of all. In a monologue broadcast in January, 1994, Keillor begins by saying it was 30 degrees below zero the other night in Lake Wobegon. "Winter applies to all of us," he explained. And it simplifies everything. It is in the wintertime that people in the Midwest become better because they can set aside their manners and complain without reprisal. In his February 12, 1994, monologue he links cold weather with the virtues of innocence and self-restraint. Children, he says, thrive on cold weather and the outdoors, but, for grown-ups, winter is the time to spend indoors, especially at the Chatterbox cafe where gossip about each other is endless. Winter allows for all: innocence, complaint and gossip. It is the gossip, he goes on to say, that make you realize people are watching you. Therefore, ultimately it keeps people in line. In all of the Lake Wobegon tales there is a clear thematic thread connecting nature, equated with virtue, to rural culture.

Described above are ways in which Lake Wobegonian insiders are identified. Outsiders are identified via geographic placement and race or ethnicity. One frequent story line includes distinguishing between people who live in The Cities, as Minneapolis and St. Paul are disparagingly referred to, and residents of Lake Wobegon, which is not far away. In the December 11, 1993, narrative, Lake Wobegon residents Aunt Flo and Uncle Al decide to venture to The Cities to go shopping. They are perplexed and disappointed with their trip to the shopping mall which is full of useless things and is designed to get people to lose their principles of economy and frugality. In another narrative (September, 1993) Wobegon resident Bernice Johnson is forced to put her son's dog, Bruno, in her car at the end of his summer stay, and return him home to Minneapolis. While there Bernice attends her newborn grandchild's baptism party in her son's expensive home and feels completely left out because she isn't needed in the kitchen; the son and daughter-in-law have hired a caterer to prepare and serve the meal. She finds the conversation of the urbanites meaningless and superficial. In these and many other tales, urban outsiders are distinguished from residents of Lake Wobegon by their lack of shared values and meaningful interaction. While the Midwest certainly has urban areas, and large ones at that, the preferred community of the Agrarian myth remains the small town. And while there can be antagonism between townfolk and farmers, as illustrated in an earlier monologue, and which occasionally exists in the Midwest, the two domains share more in common than not and in fact rely on each other for economic and social survival (see Atkins, 1988).

Outsiders in the Wobegon tales are not only urban, but also nonwhite. One of the most significant elements of Agrarian Midwest discourse is continual reconstruction of white European heritage, ignoring the populations of Native Americans,

African Americans, Hispanics and Asian Americans who increasingly make their homes in both the urban and rural areas of Midwest. In his monologues, Keillor continually reflects on Scandinavian and German settlers in Minnesota. He mentions one or both groups and their characteristics almost every week. It may be argued that Keillor is showing pride in the European immigration to this part of the country, and certainly this is an admirable endeavor. However, it must be pointed out that oftentimes in the monologues that pride comes at the expense of other ethnicities; whether or not those ethnicities are explicitly referred to. The December 18, 1993, monologue was about one family, somber Norwegians, who spent one horrible Christmas not in their home town of Lake Wobegon, but at their relatives' "showcase" home in Minneapolis. These relatives, the McDonalds, were considered odd at best because they were having a Mexican Christmas which featured turkey tacos. Not only were they not having the right kind of Christmas food, they didn't have the right kind of dog; they owned a Chihuahua. Rudy and Margie's family from Lake Wobegon brought their black Lab to the Christmas celebration. Unfortunately, their dog did not get along with the McDonalds' Chihuahua and wound up killing it right before dinner was to be served. Although Keillor humorously described the horrible situation and the emotions aroused, the implication was that the McDonalds and their ways weren't the correct, traditional ways. Humor here masks undertones of ethnic correctness as projected onto animals and types of food. The insiders, white and of Western European descent, are associated with a Christian holiday. Outsiders—represented in the Mexican food, urbanites, and Chihuahua—are ridiculed if not punished. This covert delineation of outsiders coincides with racial tension that has existed, particularly against Mexican immigrants and migrant farm workers, in the upper Midwest and specifically in Minnesota. Many of the seasonal workers for the Green Giant corn pack each summer, for example, were Mexicans who traveled from place to place looking for work, some wishing to stay in the area. Some have settled in ghettoized areas of Minneapolis and St. Paul, whereas others have settled in rural farming towns. They have been kept quite separate from the white mainstream. As Atkins (1988) points out in her essay on historic and contemporary Minnesota, racial divisiveness is prominent in a state which pays lip service to social and, especially, racial progressiveness.

In many of his monologues, Keillor gives human-like characteristics to animals by projecting onto them preferred race or ethnicity as well as human values and shortcomings. In one monologue (May 7, 1994) Keillor discusses the thoughts and the fate of Holsteins. Holsteins, he says, know that as long as they produce enough milk they will have jobs, but as soon as that changes, they will be sent off to slaughter. Holsteins don't suck up to farmers like dogs and cats do, and they don't form lasting friendships with each other. They're German, Keillor explains, so they accept their fate. Here he projects onto Holsteins a characteristic of one ethnic group. In the story about Bernice Johnson, Bruno the dog is her emotional compatriot. Bruno loved staying summers in Lake Wobegon because he loved to fish and was completely loyal to Bernice. He had freedom to roam the small town, but home in Minneapolis he was shut away from the family and the outdoors so as not to disturb anyone. At the end of that monologue, Bernice lets Bruno out of the confines of the porch; he bounds into the room, interrupts the baptism party, and completely devours the catered smoked salmon sitting on the dining room table. Bernice and Bruno both get

their revenge on the superficial urbanites. In the narrative about the Tollefsons' Christmas in Minneapolis, their black Lab kills the McDonalds' Chihuahua. Black Labs are the heartier outdoor species, one imagines, roaming on the farm or in the small town, befriending family and neighbors alike. The Chihuahua in this tale is a yipping, annoying housebound urban creature who cannot tolerate rural visitors and who, Keillor implies, deserves his fate. All of these monologues are constructed in such a way that the listener identifies with the black Lab, the dog Bruno, and the Holsteins. They represent the attitudes, behaviors and places associated with Western European ethnicity and rural culture.

In keeping with the identification of regions through comparison, as well as further delineating insiders and outsiders, Keillor often compares Minnesota with the South and the East in his monologues. In one story (December 11, 1993), he begins by talking about the dangers of ice fishing on Minnesota lakes when the weather gets too warm in early spring. "We lose a few people every year," he explains and goes on to describe this as a process of natural selection, because those who go down are not the best and the brightest. He continues, "They are missing this down South." At this point in the monologue the audience laughs and applauds Keillor's explanation of the north-south distinction. Another reference to the South is made in his February 12, 1994, monologue. He begins in a slight mocking tone as he describes the difference in weather between Minnesota and the South, saying that the definition of cold in each region is different—that cold for Southerners is the low 20s.¹⁰ Later in that same monologue he talks about a relative of his from Lake Wobegon who fought the Confederates while in the Second Minnesota regiment at Gettysburg. The regiment found no resistance from the Confederates, he explained, and the weather was nice. So, when they wound up in Greenville, South Carolina, they decided to stay. The family back home changed their name from Turner to Keillor because they were ashamed. He added, feigning disapproval, that he hoped those renegades stayed warm down there. Here again ability to withstand cold weather is a mark of strong character. Interestingly, however, the more mean-spirited reference to the South in the ice fishing monologue was part of a program broadcast from New York, while the second, slightly less antagonistic reference to the South in the December 12, 1994, monologue was broadcast from Greenville, South Carolina. While it is interesting to note how Keillor changes his tone in different regions, more significant is that, in these instances as in many others, he overtly uses comparison as a way of constructing the region, and in each region the audience understands the language of comparison that he employs.

Keillor also distinguishes the Midwest from the East by making frequent reference to New York City. Garrison Keillor has a unique relationship with New York because he has published his work in *The New Yorker* magazine and continues to broadcast occasionally from New York.¹¹ He often compares his fictional hometown to the Big Apple to highlight tremendous regional differences. In his broadcast of April 16, 1994, he talks about the fact that in Lake Wobegon there are too many peacemakers because Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers . . ." he asks, "What do you do when there are so many peacemakers and no persecutors?" He goes on to say, "This is not a problem in New York City," implying that there are not enough Christians in New York. In all of these examples, the Lake Wobegon narratives distinguish Midwestern insiders from the outsiders of two other vernacular regions.

Easterners are outsiders based on a lack of Christianity, and Southerners because they lack the virtue of extreme weather conditions.

The value system Keillor constructs in his narratives coincides with the values implied in all Agrarian Midwest myth discourse. However, they are more blatant in his stories than in most other mediated practices. The stories about Lake Wobegon residents past and present—the way they live, the situations they encounter, and the lessons they learn—all point toward the specific virtues of hard work, frugality, humility and self-control. The justification is Christian religion. In the earlier monologue, Flo and Al are disappointed with the shopping mall because they feel it is designed to rid people of their sense of frugality. A simple and humble life is held in very high regard in Lake Wobegon. Bernice Johnson felt Minneapoltians, her son and daughter-in-law in particular, were too economically successful, therefore too full of themselves. She didn't approve of their way of living. Lack of humility is something many Wobegonians actually fear. The monologue of July 7, 1994, goes on at length about the prevailing belief that if one has good luck, one must think about possible disaster. Farmers, Keillor says, are afraid God may hear them "stand around talking" about how good things are, then punish them with any number of disasters, natural or otherwise. The power of that way of thinking about the land as connected to the deity was borne out in television news coverage of the Midwest flood of 1993. On any number of occasions, flood victims interviewed before the camera, many of them farmers, referred to the flood as God's revenge for something they did to displease him.¹² The unspoken rule, Keillor says, is that if you have good fortune, you don't talk about it. Keillor then proceeds to describe one family, the Tollefsons, whose son turned out too well. Embarrassment was attached to their son's success, so townsfolk avoided asking about him to spare the Tollefsons from having to say how well he was doing. This mindset is borne of what Keillor calls the religion of, "Everything you get, you're gonna pay for."

Another virtue that coincides with humility is self-restraint. This virtue is, judging from Keillor's descriptions, a defining feature of Norwegian ethnicity. Norwegians are somber people, he says in one December, 1993, monologue about Christmas lights. He describes one Lake Wobegon citizen who got carried away with the lights in his yard; he met with the disapproval of others who thought he was being frivolous and wasteful. Self-restraint in matters of the heart is especially important in this small town. The monologue of February 25, 1995, was about Clarence and Arlene Bunson who were celebrating their 20th wedding anniversary. Clarence expressed to Arlene his desire to go against tradition and, in celebration of their years together and symbolizing their love, drink red Spanish wine, pass out abundant fruit baskets, and throw a huge outdoor barbecue. His wife, however, contradicted his romantic idea; she thought the anniversary ought to be more sedate, like other celebrations. So, instead, they served tuna sandwiches and angel food cake in the church basement. In another monologue of February, 1995, Keillor links the weather and romance with self-restraint. Romance in Lake Wobegon, Keillor says, is repressed except in the winter when couples on the skating rink are allowed to glide passionately, arms locked together, across the ice. And in another tale (April 16, 1994) Keillor explains that because of so much self-restraint, the weather is the main entertainment in Lake Wobegon. When it storms, the drama provides catharsis.

Organized religion is the justification and the necessary institutional guardian of virtuous living in Lake Wobegon. But it is Christian religion, and specifically Lutheranism, that is held in high regard. The Lutheran church is the preferred organized faith from Keillor's stance as narrator. The tension between Lutheran and Roman Catholic faiths is often a source of the monologue's humor. One narrative (January 15, 1994) is about storm families, residents in town who are assigned children from the country. Storm homes were places country children stayed in case school let out early because the weather was too severe for them to attempt to travel home. His storm family happened to be Catholic (he was Protestant). Keillor jokes that perhaps there was a conspiracy to place Protestant children with Catholic storm families in an attempt to convert them. In another monologue (April 16, 1994), Keillor explains that one man decided to leave the Lutheran church in Lake Wobegon because the minister said that Catholics were going to heaven. In the Christmas tale about the McDonalds from Minneapolis, Elaine McDonald's crucial failing, besides moving to Minneapolis, was marrying a Unitarian. She had been raised Catholic in Lake Wobegon, and, Keillor remarks, one had to go out of town to find a Unitarian. Though Catholics are rated beneath Protestants in the grand scheme of righteousness, Unitarians are completely mistrusted. They do not share similar theology with Protestants and Catholics, so it is perceived that they do not have the same values.

Other religions are also mistrusted. In the monologue about too many peace-makers in Lake Wobegon, Keillor talks about how it is not a problem in New York City because there the Christian faith is more like it was in Jesus' time, which is to say it is more scarce and challenging to be Christian. He then proceeds to explain that in New York there are many Jews, Muslims and Hindus. The implication is that New York City is less virtuous, and that one of the reasons may be because of the plethora of non-Christian religious groups. Here Keillor makes it clear that, connected with the Agrarian myth, is a preferred religion—Christianity—along with a preferred race or ethnicity—white, European—though it is subtly implied in this context. The underlying attitude of both Protestant superiority and racism in this statement is obscured in Keillor's humorous tone which sometimes barely masks disapproval.

Keillor's Lake Wobegon narratives have been described as showing an appreciation of both the virtues and the darker side of small town life (Miller, 1987). The dual stance he takes towards this small town rests on the standard of an idealized past. Keillor's attitude coincides with one scholar's contention that the Midwest, of all the regions, is the most critical of itself (Mather, 1986). Keillor frequently spins out nostalgic tales of Lake Wobegon as he describes life for the early Norwegian settlers who had to work very hard to make their home in Minnesota. It seems contemporary citizens of the town, on the other hand, are sometimes prone to gossip and intolerance. There is much to be learned from our ancestors, Keillor explains over and over. Yet, while Keillor suggests that contemporary Lake Wobegon has its shortcomings, he implies that bigger shortcomings are found in outsiders. On the surface, outsiders are those separated from Lake Wobegon geographically and otherwise. Separation here is essentially separation from the ideological Midwest Heartland.

Interpreting Lake Wobegon

The Lake Wobegon tales do not have one fixed meaning. In fact, there are many meanings, and they vary depending upon who is listening and analyzing or both, as well as on the critical frame of interpretation.¹³ The previous discussion of themes is one critical interpretation of a select group of monologues from the perspective of cultural geography, and specifically through the lens of the Midwest Agrarian myth. However, by itself the textual analysis does not completely explain the full discourse of Lake Wobegon in the popular imagination, particularly among those who regularly listen to Keillor and who actively engage in using, creating and perpetuating meanings they gain. Because Keillor's work is humorous, some have argued that it should not be examined within a broader political perspective. They say that it is parody, or irony, or satire, and should only be interpreted as such. Others argue that his work, though humorous, is nostalgic and sentimental and therefore not intended to be taken as political.¹⁴ The fact is that all of these arguments have some truth to them, but only partially. With regard to the intention of a humorous message, Vidmar and Rokeach (1974) demonstrated that Norman Lear's intentions as the producer of *All In the Family*—to prove Archie's buffoonery and the ridiculousness of bigotry in general—did not necessarily coincide with the way some listeners interpreted it, particularly if they shared Archie's bigoted conservative views. Similarly, Powell (1977) showed that the evaluation of any humorous message is related to the receiver's attitude toward the topic and his or her personality variables. Certainly humorous messages are not the only ones with varied interpretations. The theory of potential disparity between intention and interpretation applies to all media messages as Hall (1980) points out in his seminal work. This essay does not include a discussion of varied reception among regular listeners to *A Prairie Home Companion*. No doubt it would be eminently useful to follow up the discussion of themes pertaining to the Agrarian myth as constructed by Keillor with data from depth interviews or focus groups of listeners and nonlisteners alike in order to discern how the myth resonates by region, race, and religious affiliation. Nevertheless, the discussion of Lake Wobegon interpretations here does include a look at scholarly analyses and Keillor's own comments on the meaning of his own work. It is instructive to compare meanings from these varied sources, because it allows for some limited discussion of variation in interpretation, albeit, as I argue, from inside the confines of ideological Agrarian Midwest mythology.

Various scholars have examined Keillor and the Lake Wobegon monologues, some focusing on the text, others making inferences about the text and audience. Despite differences in approach and emphasis, scholarly discourse on Keillor and Lake Wobegon overwhelmingly connects the program with nationwide listenership and appeal. Larson and Oravec (1987) argue that Keillor addresses largely an audience of baby boomers, giving them a means to accept their earlier failed attempts to change society by offering his messages of resignation and acceptance for what cannot be changed. The fabricated community of Lake Wobegon, they argue, represents the communities from which they have become disconnected, but to which they would like to return on occasion in order to feel reconnected. Larson and Oravec contend that "Keillor's authorial voice unifies and channels the audience's false memory in a common direction" (p. 239), thus constructing a national, fabricated audience of

listeners. According to Wilbers (1989), mythic Lake Wobegon captures the country's imagination because it addresses a long-standing need for a sense of community. He, like Larson and Oravec, implies an alienated urban listening audience and an idealized rural venue. Fine (1986) also suggests an urban audience when she explains that Lake Wobegon is the place to which everyone wants to return. Other scholars do not necessarily imply an urban listening audience, but do nationalize Keillor's messages. For example, Stelling (1985) calls Keillor the voice of small-town America; Laroche and Fouillade (1989) say Keillor's renditions are a warm celebration of rural Middle America; and Miller (1987) argues that Keillor's view of small-town life is an appreciation of its virtues and an acknowledgment of its darker side. Finally, Schreffler (1990) concludes that Keillor's rhetoric appeals to four types of readers, ranging from Christian fundamentalists to secularists. Clearly there is scholarly consensus that the Lake Wobegon tales are meaningful outside the confines of the physical Midwest, and, while there may be differences in the reasons for it, most analyses conclude that there is a nationally shared conception of rural culture and small towns, or both, and a specific corresponding iconography and value system. I argue that the reason it resonates nationally is because the preferred Christian European heritage these monologues assumes—or parodies, whichever interpretative stance one takes—is shared nationally, and accepted most readily from the place of the mythic Agrarian Midwest. That place remains the safe, cultural geographic setting wherein the ideology may reside.

In another work, Larson (1992) further develops his analysis of Keillor's national appeal when he explains that the Lake Wobegon tales work as a master narrative, serving the rhetorical needs of a constructed community by drawing on archetypes of human development. He uses fantasy theme analysis to show how shared meanings surround certain themes, words, anecdotes, values and images, especially in narrative.¹⁵ A fantasy theme converges and reinforces communal interpretation of the master narrative spun out from a particular source. According to Larson, Keillor successfully serves the psychological and rhetorical needs of a baby boom audience that is essentially alienated from community. Larson's discussion of fantasy theme analysis is helpful as a means to explain how certain themes and images in the Lake Wobegon monologues reinforce a master narrative. I argue that the master narrative is the Agrarian Midwest myth. Its correspondent themes, values and images fill the monologues and fulfill a national vision not just for baby boomers. The myth serves the rhetorical needs of the dominant national identity.

Some scholars have discussed the meaning and significance of the popular Wobegon tales by including their own assessments as well as Keillor's. In his book, *The Man From Lake Wobegon*, Fedo (1987) argues that there is wide appeal to the tales, but a mostly urban audience:

He [Keillor] touches nearly a universal response, a longing for a place where our faces and names are known, where we are respected and loved, and most of us, having grown up in urban centers in relative anonymity, doubtless have desired to live in a community where one's word is one's bond, and where people who do indeed watch out for us and know what we are about also look after our general welfare (p. 193).

Although he claims a large urban appeal, and provides his own assessment why, Fedo acknowledges elsewhere in the book that Keillor's work ultimately "can and does mean what his audience chooses it to mean" (p. 205). With regard to Keillor's own assessment, Fedo claims that Keillor realizes that his tales are sometimes described as nostalgic, but he loathes the characterization. What Keillor is trying to convey, he says, is that he detests the small-mindedness that can accompany small-town life. While Fedo's analysis includes the variety of interpretations possible, he does not provide a connecting thread to understand the reasons for such variety.

Scholl, in his book *Garrison Keillor* (1993), perhaps paints the most comprehensive picture of Wobegon meaning. He traces changes in the tales and in Keillor's intentions as the author of those tales from the beginning—the mid 1970s—to the early 1990s. He shows that in the earliest days Keillor did mean to parody and satirize small-town Midwestern life, but that changed. On his 10th anniversary show Keillor said that the current monologues were less ironic and more sentimental than they were in the earliest days. In 1982, Keillor told the *New York Times* that he was not talking about the simple and pure rural life; he was not being nostalgic. By 1985, he claimed that he used to be a satirist, but was no longer. And in 1990, Keillor agreed in an interview that his radio monologues could be conceived of as crackerbarrel humor, though he was trying to find a balance between irony and elegy. Keillor noted that the *Prairie Home Companion* audience, he thought, was not an arts audience, so he changed his approach, therefore his intent:

The audience that would have enjoyed sharper satiric humor, I think, was an audience more like me—but also a fickle audience. The longevity of the show . . . is really due to the sort of audience that finds storytelling appealing. An audience that has more experiences, older people, but at the same time is more innocent, and can sit, unlike me, and be appealed to directly, by the guy on the stage.¹⁶

Despite difference in scholarly textual analysis and audience speculations and Keillor's own stated intentions and audience speculations, listeners are situated in a variety of age and geographic positions with respect to the Lake Wobegon narrative. Listeners are not, as Larson and Oravec argue, nearly all baby boomers. As noted here, Keillor conceives of them as an older crowd, and Fedo argues that they are both young and old. In fact, Keillor's audience members represent a wide range of the population, geographically, economically and age-wise. They are urban, suburban and rural, and situated throughout the country.¹⁷ Some are displaced Midwesterners residing in other regions, some are native outside the Midwest and have never lived there, and others are native to and residing in the Midwest. Physically they are dispersed, but culturally, via the electronic medium of radio, they are situated firmly within the boundaries of a national mythology.

Keillor's audience, Keillor himself, and the scholars who have analyzed his narratives share in the mythology of the Agrarian Midwest because the depictions of Lake Wobegon are naturalized for them. None has questioned the dominant heritage implied in depicting the inhabitants of this small town in this place, though they have conjectured at length as to why listeners need to hear the story over and over. More importantly, none has questioned who is constructed as outsider to this place. The power in the Lake Wobegon tales lies not only in what is included, but what, or

rather who, is excluded. Keillor is sometimes explicit in his religious intolerance, and veils some of the racism which, as I argue throughout, is not inseparable from religion in many instances. But more importantly, he leaves much unsaid. My aim here is to begin to unveil the rest.

As a cultural geography, the Lake Wobegon tales define physical boundaries of a town and a region at the same time they define ideological boundaries of dominant regional and national identity. Examination of the narratives reveals that what some consider touching renditions of one Midwestern town are, on closer analysis, ideological representations of national scope. By placing Keillor's popular monologues in a larger political context, one can better understand the riffs and contradictions within the Agrarian myth. The struggles inherent in this regional mythology, and in other regional mythologies, imply that, indeed, the nation is contested terrain. Yet, while battles over U.S. national identity are sometimes overtly waged, they seem merely suggested, and in a humorous way at that, when Keillor spins tales of Lake Wobegon on the PRI network. When deconstructing the discursive ideological work accomplished there, Lake Wobegon and the politics of geography become real.

As David Harvey argues, the goal of a cultural geographic analysis of place ought to be justice. Opening the way for those left out of the dominant narrative of national heritage, to include their own stories, is perhaps only the first step. Seeking justice, culturally, politically and economically, is an ongoing project, and progress begins only when systematic exclusion is made clear in a range of forms and in many places.

Notes

¹ The Lake Wobegon narratives are interpreted in a number of ways, as will be discussed later in this essay. Some consider them ironic or parodic; others do not.

² See Marx (1964).

³ For discussions and many historical examples of how natives and white settlers confronted each other, and especially how the fate of Native Americans has been obscured in history, see Limerick (1987) Josephy, (1991); and Slotkin (1992).

⁴ While Harlem is better known nationally for its African American and Hispanic populations and cultural traditions as well as its current economic disadvantages and hardships, North Minneapolis, though smaller, claims a similar socioeconomy.

⁵ Regions have been differentiated in the United States since the eighteenth century. See Jensen (1951), for a history of the use and changing definition of the concept. Specifically, regions are distinguished for a variety of purposes, including the U.S. Census, marketing forecasts and data, topographical and climate surveys, dialect and language division, and many others. Each system tends to draw its own regional boundaries.

⁶ See Francis Butler Simpkins' essay, "The South," in Jensen (1951) for a discussion of how and why distinct regions, particularly the south, worked to retain their identities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

⁷ For an analysis of the iconography of the West and the South and of how images work together to perpetuate myths of these regions in regional consumer magazines, see Fry (1994b).

⁸ The show, produced by Witt, Thomas, Harris Productions, ran on the ABC network before going into syndication. Regional distinctions apparent in these three characters are proof of popular, national acceptance of the regional differences as deflected onto gender.

⁹ Particularly in the past decade, native tribes on reservations in Minnesota have been battling in state government to keep their rights to build and maintain gambling casinos, citing land treaties signed long ago. They have been faced with fierce opposition from various groups who cite economic unfairness.

¹⁰ To best appreciate Keillor's tone of sarcasm, one must understand that in Minnesota and surrounding states it is not unusual for winter temperatures to dip well below zero with even colder wind chill factors for weeks on end, especially during the months of January and February.

¹¹ Garrison Keillor's career as a writer and performer spans a couple of decades and includes several different places. He became known as a writer through his contributions to the *New Yorker*, began broadcasting *A Prairie Home Companion* from St. Paul, Minneapolis in 1974, then left the Twin Cities in 1987, intent on retiring from public radio. He returned to broadcasting several years later, where he made a go of it in New York City. Currently he is back broadcasting mostly from the Fitzgerald Theater (former World Theater) in downtown St. Paul, though he travels to other theaters nationally on occasion.

¹² See Fry (1994a).

¹³ For example, this study does not address gender construction in the Lake Wobegon narratives. For a feminist reading, see Hanley (1995).

¹⁴ Comments of this sort, both written and verbal, were personally made to the author by a number of colleagues, early reviewers and others who were engaged in discussion of this essay.

¹⁵ In his analysis of the Lake Wobegon tales, Larson details E. G. Bormann's fantasy theme methodology as outlined in his book, *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream* (1985).

¹⁶ This quote taken from Scholl (1993, p. 107–108), who reprinted part of an interview with Keillor.

¹⁷ Based on the author's own observations of those attending Keillor broadcasts in St. Paul, and, in discussion with regular listeners, would appear that Keillor fans come from a wide range of places. For more discussion of the range of *Prairie Home Companion* listenership (see Larson & Oravec, 1987).

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