

The Fabrication of Place in America: The Fictions and Traditions of the New England Village

B.D. WORTHAM-GALVIN

One of the enduring origin myths of America is the idea of the New England village. As a symbol of how to make place, the story of New England represents the story of the nation, with the former being smoothed over and whitewashed to relieve the tensions of the latter. The mythology of New England reveals the necessity of fabricating heritage as a means to convey truth — the world, not as it is, but as it should be. It is the process of constructing America as a cultural landscape, and its relation to the enduring ideal of the New England village, from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, that this article addresses.

Imaginative story telling consists of telling a number of lies in order to convey a truth; it is a rearrangement of falsehoods which, if it is done honestly, results in verity.

— Thornton Wilder¹

If we don't tell the story or control the telling, then it's no longer about us.

— David Dennis²

After protagonist Robert Neville sacrifices himself to save humankind, the 2007 film *I Am Legend* ends with Anna and Ethan escaping from New York City in search of a rumored sanctuary of survivors. Transporting Neville's antidote serum to safety, Anna and Ethan are seen driving through an autumnal New England countryside. The leaves on the trees are bright red-orange, and there is no sign of the Infected. They arrive at a large steel door set into a concrete wall. When the door opens, the camera pans upward and reveals a tall white steeple, a bucolic lane, and a landscape dotted with trees and wood-frame buildings.³ While actor Will Smith, as Neville, dominates the screen as the film's sole hero for the nearly 101 minutes of running time (albeit sharing that status with a German shepherd dog), the final minutes turn from the image of the heroic

B.D. Wortham-Galvin, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation at the University of Maryland and Director of the nonprofit Urban Dialogues, Inc.

American to that of symbolic America. In this sci-fi/thriller/horror film set in 2012, the survival of humankind is secured in New York City via Neville's antidote, but its salvation and sustenance is associated with the New England village.

America is as much an idea as it is a place.⁴ And the creation of the American cultural landscape has been a primary means of building the idea of America and mapping it onto a territory. The idea of the New England village that Americans cling to at the start of the twenty-first century has been carefully crafted (both as idea and reality) since the nineteenth century. This does not mean that the New England village is a false fiction — just that its inventions and realities are inextricably intertwined (FIG. 1). In fact,



FIGURE 1. The New England village, a mixture of fact and fiction, is one of America's enduring mythological cultural landscapes. *Cosmopolitan* ad from July 1942. Source: John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History. Reprinted by permission.

what Americans have done, and continue to do, in the making of New England is to fabricate their heritage. David Lowenthal has provided the following distinction between heritage and history:

*History seeks to convince by truth. . . . Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error. Time and hindsight alter history, too. But historians' revisions must conform with accepted tenets of evidence. Heritage is more flexibly emended.*⁵

The persistence of the idea of the New England village thus represents an effort to fabricate a culturally and physically coherent idea of America.

Because America was constructed *tabula rasa* as part of the Enlightenment project (if one ignores, as the colonists did, the displacement of millions of Native Americans), its creation myths are a critical part of its civil religion. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserted in *The Social Contract*, civil religion is a form of social cement, helping to unify the state by providing it with sacred authority.⁶ Thus, America's creation myths have established archetypes that have become sacred or semi-divine in a context where democracy has been upheld as the only shared national religion.

America's mythologies have been used to affirm and reaffirm the values it upholds, even as those values change. While America's founding mythologies focus upon such figures as Christopher Columbus, the Pilgrims, and George Washington, they have been complemented and expanded by a whole host of other figures, events and ideas.⁷ These now include, to name a few, Betsy Ross, Johnny Appleseed, Pocahontas, the pioneers, cowboys, the California gold rush, Geronimo, Paul Revere, Rosie the Riveter, Harriet Tubman, the "greatest generation," Martin Luther King, hippies, and the American dream. And the myths of America involve not only such significant figures and events but also constructed cultural landscapes. In addition to Ellis Island, Main Street, and the frontier, one of the most enduring of these is the New England village.

In addition to the founding mythologies, America's myths have often been generated by and about immigrants and their misunderstanding of each other and the new land (and existing peoples) they conquered. These stories have contributed to the shaping of American belief systems. What is significant is not their veracity, but their purpose. The founding of Thanksgiving is one such mythology.⁸

The celebration of Thanksgiving is said to have begun with the Pilgrims in 1621. As the story goes, they had come to America to escape religious persecution but might have starved to death in the unfamiliar land if not for some friendly Native Americans who helped them survive the first winter. In fact, Thanksgiving was not established until 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln declared it a national holiday. But the construction of Thanksgiving was only part of the colonial

revival that lasted from the nineteenth century through World War II. Far more than an aesthetic fad, it was a socio-political movement that sought to inculcate the democratic ideal among growing numbers of foreign immigrants. Its aim was to use the events, heroes and aesthetics of the American Revolution to establish a common national ideology.⁹

As the perceived necessity to cohere the nation into a cultural polity gained momentum, so too did the codification of an American narrative. In addition to the Thanksgiving holiday, this included the establishment of the Fourth of July and Memorial Day celebrations (1868). In dedicating these days to common ceremonial purpose, America's leaders were attempting to create a view of the past with which to soothe the discontents of the present. Paying homage to a joint Pilgrim and Native American feast was one way to highlight to a contemporary audience the value of unity overcoming disparity. In the case of the Fourth, the message was one of unity overcoming oppression; in that of Memorial Day, it was of reconciliation overcoming sacrifice.

American origin myths were, thus, a mid-nineteenth-century cultural invention meant to stabilize and homogenize a socially uncertain present — one threatened by ethnic and socioeconomic heterogeneity. The creation of a common past was a logical step, and the legends of the founding of the country provided socially useful myths to help adhere new citizens culturally and politically to one another. Establishing tradition, therefore, was not merely a matter of nostalgia or entertainment; it was a device to cement the politics of the United States to its culture. This, not aesthetics or stylistic preferences, was the real project of the colonial revival. It was a willful, if sometimes incoherent, attempt to create a common American heritage and a singular collective memory.

As contemporary historian Donna Merwick has observed, "To tamper with the received story of any people's past is dangerous because it disturbs the sanctified version that makes the present bearable."¹⁰ Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski made a similar observation when discussing the necessity for origins, pointing out that such myths justify the present and therefore contribute to social stability. Lowenthal has also asserted that "heritage mandates misreadings of the past" in order to exalt not what is true but what ought to be true.¹¹ The continued tenacity of the New England landscape as a primary site for the construction of America's myths can be attributed to its role in legitimizing a version of history (or heritage) that is constantly renewed as useful to the present.¹²

AN AMERICAN MIDDLE LANDSCAPE¹³

Geographer D.W. Meinig has affirmed New England's status as one of the seminal symbolic American landscapes, specifically citing the New England village as pregnant with meaning in the construction of American identity. To

Meinig, the collective memory of America is built upon its landscapes and buildings: "Every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together."¹⁴ In this regard, the New England village has symbolized how to make community in a new nation. In part, it has succeeded at this symbolic task because it is firmly anchored to the pastoral idyll.

Pastoralism represents one of the earliest origin myths of America, and it remains a strong and recurrent trope in American literary and visual culture.¹⁵ In Western culture, the significance of the pastoral dates to ancient Rome, and particularly to the poems of Virgil, which idealized the Roman countryside as a middle landscape.¹⁶ To Virgil, this countryside was a place of retreat both from urban civilization and primitive nature. And while notions of what a pastoral landscape is and should contain have been argued over ever since, there has never been controversy about its relevance to the American cultural scene.

It was in this vein that Thomas Jefferson authored his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (written 1782, published 1784). Presented as a positivistic account of the Commonwealth of Virginia, its scope was broader than mere scientific quantification. And while its focus was ostensibly only one state, its true scope of inquiry was America. Thus, while offering descriptions of the geography, animals, and plant life of the state and nation, Jefferson also expounded on the social and moral aspects of such topics as slavery, Indians, the government, the Revolution, law, education, and the land and its cultivation. Within these descriptions, Jefferson animated and personified the natural material world as a way to establish an autonomous American identity. He could not do so by using the society and culture of the new republic, because its citizens were of European cultural heritage. However, he could establish the American in nature — in the physical, non-human-made world (both) extant (and under improvement) in the young nation. American authority lay in its natural history. Its future was in the nascent manifest destiny of its cultivators, who would build and then follow the road to "an infinite distance in the plain country."¹⁷

A member of Jefferson's agrarian nation, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, considered himself an inside observer of this ideal position. As a farmer in a country where the land was apparently boundless and available, Crèvecoeur packaged his book *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782) as representing the true and authentic experience of eighteenth-century America.¹⁸ In fact, Crèvecoeur produced an idealizing and emotional work on what it meant to be American — or, rather, what it should mean. And he wrapped this in an idea of what nature is and should be. As the English writer D.H. Lawrence later noted, ". . . Crèvecoeur was not a mere cultivator of the earth. . . . He himself was more concerned with a perfect society and his own manipulations thereof, than with growing carrots."¹⁹

The ideal society which Crèvecoeur described existed in an ideal setting: cultivated nature. Nature provided a place for shaping the morality and character of the American people; but progress, the beautiful, and the good resided on cultivated land, where humans were in control and could manipulate physical nature. A distinction thus was made in the natural environment, preferencing the cultivated ideal over the wild real — a distinction crucial to defining the American pastoral.²⁰ The inference, then, was that the American shepherd (a.k.a. the yeoman farmer) was withdrawn from society — outside culture and civilization, one with the land. Therefore, the pastoral could be pristine because men did not reside therein; only Man, reified, did.

Attempts to answer Crèvecoeur's question, "What, then, is the American, this new man?" have been tied since the eighteenth century to situating the American in a pastoral environment. And this pastoral environment has been most often embodied by (variations on) the New England village.²¹ New England, in the eyes of colonial revivalists, however, was not a site bounded by historical record, but an imaginary ripe for the construction of an American exceptionalism. Thus, as historian Joseph Conforti noted, antebellum revivalists "revised narratives that redefined New England as a distinctive place with a peculiar people and a sacred past." This narrative linked "the Yankee character and the white village to New England's religious and republican origins."²² The fictions of New England resisted fact in order to stabilize the socially uncertain present. It was the teeming influx of immigrants from Western and Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century that drove the desire to culturally and physical reinvent New England. In response to these pressures, it was necessary to control the story, as David Dennis might phrase it, of what it meant to be American.²³

New England was further chosen as the region within which to locate the American past because it was "presumed to be a continuous past, a repository of ideas and values that [had] endured, unbroken, for . . . centuries."²⁴ The story of New England was thus the story of the nation — with the former being smoothed over and whitewashed to relieve the tensions of the latter. Because of the colonial revival's geographical fixation, to be a New Englander or a Yankee was conflated with being an American. In the nineteenth-century conflict between the North and the South, the North not only won the war between the states, but also the cultural war implicit in the construction of the "American" past. The myth-making would start in New England and travel to the Midwest, as both high and popular American cultures sought to legitimize a useable past for the uncertainties of the present.

A variety of journalists and disappointed tourists would notice the schism between the facts and fictions of nineteenth-century New England, however. William Dean Howells, for example, commented on this fissure after he traveled to New England in 1860 and became disconcerted by the lack of a pastoral landscape.²⁵ At the time, the urban-

ization of the region had combined with the abandonment of more than ten thousand farms in Massachusetts and Rhode Island alone. By 1870 more than half of Massachusetts's residents lived in cities, and the region contained more immigrants than the rest of the country.²⁶ Looking for more fertile soils, many of those New Englanders who still wanted to pursue farming as a vocation had already headed west in migrations to the Ohio Valley and beyond.

As the small towns of New England entered a eighty-year decline starting in the 1830s, what Howells and others witnessed was the reclamation of the initial seventeenth-century clearing of New England by "the wild."²⁷ Despite its second-growth forest, however, visitors to postwar New England still imagined it as an open landscape of meadows and villages dotted with trees. And they desired a smallness of scale to contrast against the wide-open, almost scaleless landscapes of the west (FIG. 2). Indeed, many Americans looked to New England for their cultural patrimony, while they sought their natural patrimony in the landscapes of the west. Others, however, made no such distinction. They simply lauded the unique cultural and natural heritage of New England by citing its Virgilian qualities (no matter how prevalent these actually were).²⁸



FIGURE 2. *The bucolic New England pastoral of both imagination and reality.* Source: Y. Joel, "New England Stone Walls," *Life*, July 7, 1949. Reprinted by permission.



FIGURE 3. *The image of New England as an intimate democracy in Monroe, Connecticut. Source: A. Eisenstaedt, "Committee Meeting Outside on Green in Front of Monroe Town Hall," Life, 1945. Reprinted by permission.*

This image of a Virgilian New England actually did move more toward being a reality as a by-product of economic change brought on in part by the Civil War. An urgent need for cloth for uniforms meant many New England farmers reverted to raising sheep. Later, the burgeoning urban industrial economy — and concomitant workforce, who needed to be fed — also created demand for a renewed farming culture. By the late nineteenth century, this and an increase in dairy cattle grazing, eventually changed the “disappointing” reality of a declining pastoral New England and revived the vistas that Midwesterners (and others) so desperately wanted to see: a place where grass fields were in abundance and park-like against the edges of the forest.

These partly invented, partly real, Elysian Fields also became the foundation for the design of American parks and suburbs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Landscape architects like Olmsted, Copeland and Eliot took the lead in laying claim to the New England heritage as precedent for the development of a coherent American park movement, one which would quickly turn into a paradigm for the design of America’s ideal garden cities-cum-suburbs.

However, it was the gap between the idyll of New England and its physical reality that J.B. Jackson and others exposed — and that, in turn, revealed the colonial revival to be more than

mere aesthetic style. The revival, as a holistic movement, aligned (while not explicitly) more on the side of heritage, in favor of defining and asserting an American way of life that had specific associated values and notions of domestic and gender relations. According to Meinig: “Taken as a whole, the image of the New England village is widely assumed to symbolize for many people the best we have known of an intimate, family-centered, Godfearing, morally conscious, industrious, thrifty, democratic community” (FIG. 3).²⁹

Such ingrained values have, however, made it difficult to penetrate the movement and its concomitant representations. Its generalizations and clichés claim to embody the American experience. Yet in the process they have obliterated the multitudes of experiences actually lived by Americans during the eighteenth century. Within the New Englandization of the colonial revival one needs not only to understand New England as an invention representing *the* American experience, but also to acknowledge the multiple experiences left out of this construction.

HENRY FORD’S VILLAGE INDUSTRIES

The obsession with all things New England would continue in intensity at the start of the twentieth century, and one of the most obsessed would come in the unlikely figure of automobile magnate Henry Ford. Ford’s work went beyond the modernization of industry to explore how the invention of a bucolic New England past might help America in the present and future.

How could the modern technologies Ford was involved in inventing not obliterate the bucolic landscape he loved so dearly? Nineteenth-century writer Henry Adams, gave voice to this dilemma. Writing about the 1900 Paris Exposition, Adams contemplated the moral and material power of the Virgin Mary at the medieval cathedral in Chartres alongside a forty-foot-high dynamo, wondering how the past and present could be so physically close and yet so intellectually apart.³⁰ Ford, however, was not only interested in preserving the past (in projects such as Greenfield Village), but obsessed with creating examples of how to live it in the present. Above all, he sought a model in which one could simultaneously look forward and backward without any contradiction (FIG. 4). Influenced in his childhood by the growth of nostalgic literature extolling rural New England simplicity, Ford explored that myth in the creation of village industries in Michigan. As *Life* magazine speculated:

Henry Ford would be less than the man he is if, walking by the River Rouge, he did not thrill at the sight of his huge plant growing huger and huger by the day. But the old man’s dearest dream is no longer of piling building on building in metropolitan congestion. A farm boy who has kept his love of the land, Ford now visions the “little factory in a

FIGURE 4. Henry Ford celebrates the opening of his history park, Greenfield Village, in Dearborn, Michigan. Source: W. Vandivert, "Henry Ford/Orville Wright, Greenfield Village," *Life*, June 1938. Reprinted by permission.



meadow" as the future shape of American industry. . . . Ford will furnish land for use by those who do not have farms or gardens. Henry Ford is convinced that, for happiness and security, the worker of the future must divide his time between factory and farm.³¹

Ford's engagement with the New England landscape seems perplexing when set against the principal narrative of his life's accomplishment: the invention of centralized industrial production through the auto assembly line. Indeed, Ford's mechanical prowess led to the Ford Motor Company's complexes at Highland Park and River Rouge becoming symbols of American technological might. Ford's operation was gigantic and involved the vertical integration of every step in the process from which finished automobiles emerged — including the production and shipment of coal, iron, lime-

stone, timber and silica from Ford-owned mines, quarries and forests. Such a large-scale operation required large numbers of people. Ford's technological innovations also meant increased urbanization, as people flocked to the Northeast and Midwest to service the growing industrial economy.

But after the initial successes of the Model T, Ford shifted his attention to a different problem. He would concentrate not just on how to make cars, but on the context within which they would be made. In particular, he aspired to create an industrial economy that would allow the depopulation of Detroit and other cities and their replacement by small towns. Ford proclaimed to journalist Drew Pearson, "The modern city has done its work and a change is coming."³² His idea for village industries was, thus, less a commentary on economic and business models than a philosophical engagement with socio-cultural values about how to live in America (FIG. 5).



FIGURE 5. Henry Ford continually celebrated farming and sought to incorporate it in daily life. Source: W. Kirkland, "Henry Ford and Wheat Demonstration," *Life*, 1944. Reprinted by permission.

Ford's proposed villages were part of the culture of nature in America and its pastoral traditions and aspirations. When Jefferson envisioned a thousand-year expansion of American prosperity led by yeomen farmers in a pastoral landscape, he feared the counter-influence of mills and factories — not just for their potential to urbanize America, but also for what they might mean for the polity of the nation. Jefferson's vision for America was thus expansive in geography, but static in spatial form and cultural implication. As historian Jeffrey Meikle has noted, "When the machine finally entered the American garden, so too did the fact of continuous material and social change, the idea of infinite progress, and, ultimately, history itself."³³

Ford's response to the problem of the machine and the garden borrowed, but also diverged, from his predecessors. He, too, sought cultural and social salvation in America's middle landscape. But Ford did not posit a dialectic of the farmer versus the industrial capitalist, wherein one lived on the land and the other skinned it. He believed modernity and natural harmony could coexist, and he crafted his modernized middle landscape in the form of village industries.

Not obscure experiments, but rather widely publicized between the two world wars, Ford's village industries were small-scale factories, pastoral alternatives to the urban industrial complex. They coupled rural settings and values with contemporary tools and technological processes.³⁴ His overall vision was to manufacture one or two parts for the company's vehicles in each of a network of decentralized plants. Ford believed this rural alternative would allow his factory workers to become part-time farmers. He was not seeking a return to preindustrial technologies; rather, he wanted to synthesize modernization with rural living and employ technological advances at a small scale. As William Simonds, a Ford publicist, declared in 1927:

Industrialism does not necessarily mean hideous factories of dirty brick, belching smoke stacks and grimy workmen crowded into ramshackle hovels . . . the little Ford plants are placed in leafy bowers and surrounded with a flowering shrubs, green pushes and trees. The spots you would select for a picnic Henry Ford has picked for factory sites.³⁵

Like the railroad train and tracks weaving through the middle landscape of the Hudson River Valley in the George Inness painting *Lackawanna Valley* (1855), Ford sought a synthesis and peaceful coexistence of the Elysian Fields of America with American technological prowess. The machine and the garden did not need to be at odds; they could complement each other.³⁶

Ford's New Englandization of industry embraced the myth of community as harmonious, homogenous, and living lightly on the land. But physically, it ignored the fact that the pastoral landscape was just as manipulated and controlled as the urban one. And socially, it denied the heterogeneous pop-

ulations involved in and necessary to the modernization of the American economy. It also did not explain how a pastoral place apart from industrial civilization could simultaneously function as a center for industry. One of the nineteenth-century writers who inspired Ford's quest found it necessary to separate the two. As Sarah Orne Jewett performed a literary transformation of New England into an Elysian paradise, she did so only by rendering the cacophony of the nearby Portsmouth Manufacturing Company mute in order to construct her tales of rural isolation for the *Atlantic Monthly*.³⁷

The investment by Ford in the village industries might have been politically motivated to create environments that preempted the unionization of his company. But, more importantly, it represented the desire for a synthesis of tradition and modernity in the cultural landscapes of early-twentieth-century America. Ford saw the mythos of a self-consciously antiquated New England as a means to establish a past useable and useful for assuaging the strains of a modern present.

THIS TOWN IS OUR TOWN

As Ford's quest to establish the village as a prototype for industry demonstrates, the cultural currency of the New England Village grew with and strained against the other predominant tropes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: progress and modernity. While the New England village would continue to appear in art, advertising and literature as a representation of "the quest . . . for a bucolic simplicity, for a return to an earlier American innocence . . .," modernity consistently pushed the myth into a dialogue between the past and the present-future.³⁸

However, modernity and tradition would interweave in a manner altogether different from Ford's village industries a decade later in the dramatic work of Thornton Wilder. While teaching at the University of Chicago, Wilder published his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Our Town* in 1938. Reputed to be the most performed play in the United States, its fictional community of Grover's Corners is modeled after New Hampshire towns in the Mount Monadnock region.³⁹ Ostensibly set in 1901 (although shifting back and forth in time), the play detailed the everyday lives and interactions of the town's residents.

As it became ubiquitous in American popular culture, *Our Town* was reduced in status from high art to common nostalgia — even to an adolescent rite of passage. Fodder for endless secondary-school drama productions, the play was dismissed later in the twentieth century "as a corny relic of Americana and relegated Thornton Wilder to the kitsch bin along with Norman Rockwell and Frank Capra."⁴⁰ But, as Americana, *Our Town* represents the tenacity with which American culture has embraced an unquestioning and uncontested New Englandization.

Yet this is the play's trajectory, not its origins. Wilder began Act I with the directions: "No curtain. No scenery.

FIGURE 6. This spare stage set, without overt visualization of the New England pastoral, is typical of *Our Town* productions.

Source: Theater UAB (2005).

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The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light” (FIG. 6).⁴¹ With its shifting sense of time, no scenery, and the overt use of a stage manager and direction, Wilder defied the illusions and conventions of stage drama (much as his contemporary, James Joyce, had done for the novel, and Picasso and Braque had done in painting). There is no representation of a pastoral idyll in either the stage direction or set of the play. In other words, the audience does not *see* New England. Wilder does not offer an idealized representation of America in physical form. However, in the absence of explicit directions to show a New England village, *Our Town* becomes any town — and, therefore, all towns. To wit: the setting of *Our Town* was imagined as a multiracial (sub)urban ghetto when it was produced by high school students in 2002 in the crime-ridden Compton neighborhood of Los Angeles — the first play staged at the school in twenty years. A film about that production captured one student, Ebony (who took the role of stage manager), as saying: “We broke down a lot of the thoughts people had about Compton. . . . We kinda made it a universal message. People who live in Idaho can relate to it. We’re not that different.”⁴²

Earlier versions of the play, however, did invoke an explicit New England pastoral. A 1935 hand-written draft shows the original first line from the stage manager to be “You are to imagine before you an American village.”⁴³ And Wilder claimed his inspiration for the play “sprang from a deep admiration of those little white towns in the hills. . . .”⁴⁴ In the end, however, he forewent the New England imagery in order to “record a village’s life on the stage, with realism and with generality . . . [and] tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery.”⁴⁵ Yet while he may have removed the physical likeness of New England, he kept the references to the archetypes of that vision: Main

Street, the town hall, the churches, the school, the grocery store, and the drug-store counter.

Wilder’s minimalist modernism did not hold out for long against the overwhelming urge to conjure the tropes of a mythological New England with which to represent the fictional Grover’s Corners. Despite the bleak, Depression-era imagery used to illustrate the New England of the initial playbill designed by Adolf Dehn, future playbills and posters (including Dehn’s own revisions) would feature iconic renderings of New England.⁴⁶ And these would become ever-present across America. Just two years after winning the Pulitzer, the play had already been performed on almost 800 amateur stages, in every state of the union except Rhode Island.⁴⁷ That same year, a film version was released, wherein director Sam Wood’s *Grover’s Corners* employed backgrounds shot in Fort Bragg, California; Mendocino, California; and Peterborough, New Hampshire (where Wilder lived while writing the play). The locations allowed the 1940 film to invoke a town of white church steeples, rolling hills, and a Main Street of porches and Victorian wood-frame houses (FIG. 7). The tenacity of this image of *Our Town* would endure for more than half a century and include the imagery memorializing Wilder on a U.S. postage stamp in 1997. There, Wilder’s pensive portrait is balanced by a background illustration of “old” New England.⁴⁸ This trenchant New Englandization of small-town America was clearly a means of registering “the present in terms of an old-fashioned rural past.”⁴⁹ As the *New York Sun* wrote in its initial review of the play, “*Our Town* reaches into the past of America and evokes movingly a way of life which is lost in our present turmoil.”⁵⁰

In Depression-era America the need for socioeconomic stability was just as important as during the Civil War. The



FIGURE 7. The main street of Peterborough, New Hampshire, where Thornton Wilder stayed while writing *Our Town*. Source: Y. Joel, "Main Street in Small New England Town," *Life*, 1950. Reprinted by permission.

circumstances were different, yet in both cases the desire was to revert to an invented New England past for stability. The socioeconomics of Grover's Corners, while briefly rendered diverse in the introduction, are left behind in the body of the play for something more homogeneous and comfortable. That the original play, or even some contemporary productions, eschewed the representation of Elysian New England does not belie their engagement with the representation of a pastoral past as an American one. It is no coincidence that Wilder "set" the play in preautomobile America. In addition, the temporal slippage between past, present and future in the dialogue of the stage manager allows Wilder to imply that the past "continues to unfold in the present."³¹ While Wilder's play presented a microcosm of everyday life that included impieties and hypocrisies, any dissonance or tension in Grover's Corners faded behind the scrim of mythologies of pastoral bliss. Writers like Edith Wharton may have challenged the New England idyll, instead of ignoring the contestations as Jewett did, but the Virgilian New England resonated more strongly. *Our Town* became known as a bucolic fable regardless of Wilder's purposeful ambiguities.

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE NEW OLD NEW ENGLAND

As *Our Town* looked to the New England village for "an allegorical representation of life," so too have the late-twentieth-century architects Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-

Zyberk, through the pastoral mythology implicit in the contemporary design approach known as the New Urbanism.³² While the twentieth century began with the idyllic vision of the Garden City movement, which focused on the natural types of the New England pastoral, the century was bookended by the New Urbanism, a design movement focused on the cultural typologies prevalent in the New England narrative. Both movements have addressed a diversity of issues — including transportation, health, urban morphology, building typology, and socioeconomics. But it is the imagery of the New Urbanism that has provoked the most ardent discussion, since its built forms and spaces serve up one more version of the New England village.

Along with such built representations, the turn of the twenty-first century has also brought a collision between the fabrication of architectural and television products that illustrates two ways of making and perpetuating place-based heritage in contemporary America. In this regard, the film *The Truman Show* (1998) perhaps best illustrated the conceit of the New Urbanism. Meanwhile, television shows such as *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007), *Ed* (2000–2004), and *Everwood* (2002–2006) have furthered the simulation of the reinvented New England that New Urbanist developments popularized.

Both the neotraditional urban developments and their visual counterparts rely on the mythology of pastoral New England — a place where people use the physical capital of close proximity and small-town morphology to reinforce the social capital and mores of an imagined America. Viewers and consumers (from the living room of a trailer in the Arizona desert to a three-story walk-up on the south side of Chicago) thus can all share the experience of what it should mean to live in America, both physically and socially, reinforcing the mythos of a common American landscape.

In *The Truman Show*, Truman Burbank's quaint hometown of Seahaven — filmed on the Gulf Coast of Florida at the ur-site of New Urbanism, Seaside — is really a stage set wherein Truman (played by Jim Carrey) is unaware that his family, friends, and the residents of Seaside are all actors. In the opening voiceover, as Truman bicycles past the town green, his best friend, Marlon, declares, "It's all true. It's all real. Nothing here is fake. Nothing you see on the show is fake. It's merely controlled."³³ Critics have seized on the blurring of boundaries between the real and the fake in their attacks on New Urbanism. They claim the line between Truman's faux cinematic community of Seahaven and the hyperreality of developer Robert Davis's Seaside is nearly invisible. Such ambiguity has roused the ire of critics like Ada Louise Huxtable, who believe that Americans have become too comfortable with real fakes (or authentic reproductions). Huxtable wrote that the ubiquity of real fakes, whether in neotraditional developments or tourist sites, threatens the viability of lived experience in America in favor of consumable spectacles.³⁴

Huxtable's concerns about Americans' fixation with the real fake are similar to those expressed by German philoso-

pher Walter Benjamin in his influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin began by acknowledging that art production in the premodern world also included reproduction. But he pointed out that it is really the means that separates the premodern and modern replications — not an intent toward authenticity. The Greeks reproduced via founding and stamping; the Middle Ages used engraving and etching; the nineteenth century adopted lithography and photography; and the twentieth century added films. The distinction for Benjamin, in discussing the status of an object, was its “aura.” It is the “aura” that has been compromised by the modernization of replication, because modern reproduction techniques detach “the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.”⁵⁵ It is historical processes, the presence of an object in a specific time and place, that is unique to each object and therefore manifests itself as that object’s “aura.” As Benjamin noted:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.⁵⁶

Benjamin asserted that reproductions lack this historical dimension because they lack “aura” in their imagistic simulation of the original. Huxtable’s real fakes fall into the same category.

Understanding the New England village, however, as a part of “the domain of tradition” prompts several questions: What is special about the “real” thing as opposed to a “reproduction”? With the advent of new technology that can duplicate with ease — and in some cases, can make things better — has authenticity become more, or less, important? Can things still be considered authentic when they are removed from their original setting/context? Can places be authentic when they originated in a merging of fiction and fact to begin within? Under Huxtable’s schema, the New England village as neotraditional development might walk the line between real fake and fake fake, but it has nothing to do with authentic placemaking.

By contrast, Jean Baudrillard has written that America has invented a place that is more real than reality (i.e., hyperreality).⁵⁷ In his America, what are most real are the illusions. Indeed, he argues that places such as Celebration, Florida (another New Urbanist development), represent the real America. In this conception of place, simulation is the creation of the real through mythological models. Homes, relationships, fashion, art and music are all dictated by ideal models presented through the media. Thus the boundary between the image, or the simulation, and reality breaks down, creating a world of hyperreality.

Lowenthal’s view of heritage echoes Baudrillard’s conception in its assertion that “heritage’s gravest supposed sin — fabrication — is no vice, but a virtue.” As he then added, “Heritage is not a testable or even plausible version of our past; it is a *declaration of faith* in that past.”⁵⁸ In doing so, he could also be talking about the ethos driving both the founders and consumers of New Urbanist developments. In other words, why is it a problem that neotraditional development represents a real fake (or fake fake) New England village? Isn’t the New England village a fake to begin with? Why quibble about a reproduction of a fabrication in the first place? If the “domain of tradition” for the New England village is, in effect, invented, then aren’t contemporary neotraditional developments actually following within that tradition? If mythology is the foundation of an “aura,” then contributing to the mythology should be an authentic act. The New Englandization of the American landscape is about an idea as manifest in a place, not about archeological verisimilitude.

A BETTER LIFE, OR THE GOOD LIFE?

The tenacity and ubiquity of the New Englandization of the American pastoral permeates all aspects of American culture. While the media used to represent the New England village has changed, the myth continues to affirm an exclusive set of values, despite the changing faces of America. It has been, and continues to be, found in the most unlikely of places.

Given its radical message and stature as catalyst to the contemporary environmental movement, one might expect Rachel Carson’s 1960s *Silent Spring* to have been unequivocally ecocentric and focused on the destruction of the Earth by human beings.⁵⁹ Indeed, an eschatological theme does thread its way through the work. Yet ambivalence also imbues Carson’s narrative, particularly in its opening chapter, titled “Fable for Tomorrow.” This illustrative tale exemplifies a vision of agrarian bliss amidst towns whose activities tread lightly on the land. Carson admitted that this town, set within bucolic farms, was a fiction, representative of a type of balanced order — a site into which human hands intervene so as to produce an idyllic Virgilian pastoralism. But her fable of nature also offered a model of the mythic New England village, in which people work in concert with each other and nature to ensure the prosperity of their community. Loaded with pastoral mythology, Carson implicitly asks: What is more moral, according to America’s Jeffersonian roots, than engagement in cultivation? In *Silent Spring*, Carson appropriated American reverence for the cultivated landscape in the hope that it would soften her scientific research and further her environmental message. Thus her environmental call to action reverberated with the continuing re-creation of the New England-laden American pastoral vision.

More than forty years later, the pastoral image continues to loom large over the twenty-first-century cultural landscape



FIGURE 8. Contemporary development, often pejoratively termed *sprawl*, continues to transform the pastoral tradition. This “village” in Burlington, Vermont, is a far cry from its nineteenth-century antecedent. Source: *New England Futures, Inc.* Reprinted by permission.

of America. Yet the replication of ideal America has been transformed into one of McMansions in the suburbs (FIG. 8). The invented villages that inspired the nineteenth-century park movement (and, in turn, the early-twentieth-century Garden Cities) have now morphed into isolated development islands (be they neotraditional or not) that gobble up the agrarian landscape within which they seek to live. The bliss of living in the twenty-first-century suburbs involves neither living lightly on the land nor cultivating both public discourse and nature to ensure the prosperity of the community. Furthermore, the pastoral desire to live in a Jeffersonian rural isolation rarely encompasses all of the architectural archetypes of the New England village meant to sustain a community ensconced in nature. Even in neotraditional developments, living now occurs from within an SUV and requires driving to the few civic and social institutions not available within one’s own home. In other words, the home, the automobile, and the computer are the only physical types needed in the new privatized version of an ideal community.

Today, the New England village is for sale outside of both major metropolitan areas and small towns — but it is not a village, and it is not New England. It is, however, a lesser version of the New Englandization of the American Dream. It is without the smallness of scale; it is not dotted with trees (except when the unlikely developer who does budget for them). But it is homogeneous and comfortable. It does lay claim to the symbols of how to make community in America (in spite of its obvious omission of the many American classes, races, and rituals present in inner suburbs). And it is the place where, at least in common representations, contemporary American culture has placed its salvation and its sustenance.

The New England village as a physical and social construct has been commodified from its inception. In the nineteenth century what was for sale was the promise of a place where one could experience relief from the ills of urban industrialization. Today one need only go to the website of Ben and Jerry’s, where one can buy not only ice cream (from

a pastoral Vermont location), but also one’s own New England village (FIG. 9). Visitors to the website can view and download a series of flattened-out buildings (both in color and black and white) that, when printed out and folded, replicate the New England village. Thus, from the safety and comfort of a neotraditional house, one can download the *Gilmore Girls* on iTunes and then download, print, and make a miniature version of what one is viewing and where one is living — without leaving the state of Maryland or ever setting foot in New England. The New England village as a cultural production has moved away from the institutions and ideas embedded within it during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is no longer a reified model for living a better life; it has

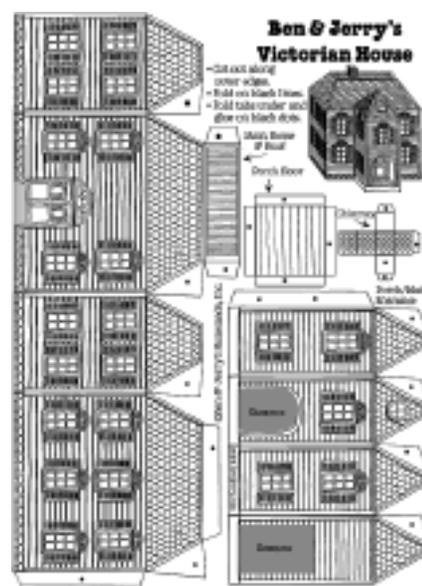


FIGURE 9. You can make your own New England cultural landscape with cut-outs available from Ben & Jerry’s. Source: *Ben & Jerry’s Homemade, Inc.* Reprinted by permission.

become a theme for branding products in whose consumption lies the promise of the good life.

Both fabrication and myth carry pejorative connotations in contemporary Western usage; they are primarily used in reference to a falsehood, a story that is not true. When Lowenthal claimed that “fiction is not the opposite of fact, but its complement,” he was affirming that mythology or fabrication as a cultural process has contributed to the shaping of the nation’s values and belief systems; what is significant is not their veracity but their purpose, which derives its power from being believed and deeply held as true.⁶⁰ The lament of the myth of the New England village lies not in the

veracity of the physical object itself; it is that over time the myth has become bereft of the complex layers of conflict between meaning and memory. Its lack of “aura” is not embedded in its status as a reproduction, but in the fact that the fictions and facts have not continued to transform and reveal an environment richer than thin morphological mimesis or consumable object. As Lowenthal noted, “Only a heritage ever reanimated stays relevant.”⁶¹

The tradition of the New England village was made in America. Americans created it and still cling to it. But can the myth continue to reinvigorate a suburban cultural landscape in crisis?

REFERENCE NOTES

1. T. Wilder, *Our Town*, D. Margulies, ed. (New York: Perennial Classics, 2003), p.151. This quote comes from an interview Wilder did for the *New York World-Telegram* on December 7, 1937.
2. As quoted in R. Smothers, “Issue behind King Memorial: Who Owns History?” *New York Times*, January 16, 1995, p.A1.
3. The film location for this scene was not Vermont, as the story indicates, but West Amwell, New Jersey.
4. The term “America” is used here to refer not only to the political-geographical area known as the United States of America, but also to establish an ideological construct.
5. D. Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” *History & Memory*, Vol.10 No.1 (Spring 1998), p.7.
6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1913), book 4, ch.8.
7. Though Christopher Columbus did not participate in the founding of the American government, he has been cited as a “founder” of the nation. The reasoning is that the American nation is descended from European immigrants who would not have moved to the New World if Columbus had not sailed across the Atlantic to prove the world was round. Like most legendary “founders,” Columbus’s mission is then rendered as entirely noble and rational. And since he helped dispel the inaccurate beliefs of his time, the nation he helped found is construed as one of intellect and logic. Washington Irving is the first source for this belief.
8. Sources that reexamine the myth of Thanksgiving include J. Seelye, *Memory’s Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Chpt. 16; M. Bruchac and C. O’Neill Grace, *1621: A New Look at Thanksgiving* (National Geographic Society: 2004); E. Pleck, “The Making of the Domestic Occasion: The History of Thanksgiving in the United States,” *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1999); and A. Uhry Abrams, *The Pilgrims and Pocahontas: Rival Myths of American Origin* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999) Ch.1.
9. Ideology is used here in its common definition as a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class or culture. During the nineteenth century the colonial revival grew with and strained against another great American trope, that of progress and modernity.
10. D. Merwick, “Comment” on J. Hijawa, “Why the West Is Lost,” *William & Mary Quarterly*, Vol.51 (1994), pp.736–39.
11. Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” 9.
12. Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss expanded this theory by establishing “that myths may be activated or reactivated in order to legitimize a version of history that is useful. . . .” See M.G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), p.17.
13. “Middle landscape” is a term coined by Leo Marx in his seminal study of the relationship between technology and nature in nineteenth-century America. L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
14. D.W. Meinig, “Symbolic landscapes: Models of American Community,” in D.W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.164.
15. The OED breaks down the use of pastoral as an adjective into the following definitions: “of or pertaining to shepherds or their occupation; of the nature of a shepherd; of land or country used for pasture; hence the scenery or its features; having the simplicity or natural charm associated with such country; of literature, music, or works of art portraying the life of shepherds or the country; expressed in pastorals; of or pertaining to a pastor or shepherd of souls; having relation to the spiritual care or guidance of a ‘flock’ or body of Christians; of or pertaining to the care or responsibility of a teacher for a pupil’s general well-being.” As a noun, the OED provides the following definitions for pastoral: “a person of pastoral occupation (shepherd or herdsman); pastoral games or pastimes; a poem or play, or the like, in which the life of shepherds is portrayed, often in an artificial and conventional manner; also extended to works dealing with simple rural and open-air life; a pastoral picture or scene in art; pastoral poetry as a form or mode of literary composition; and, a letter from a spiritual pastor to his flock.” Under the term pastoralism, the OED lists the following: “pastoral quality or

character; the action or practice of dealing with pastoral or rural life; the pastoral style in literature; a pastoral trait or affectation.”

16. One of the most famous poets of ancient Rome, Virgil (70–19 BCE) wrote the *Aeneid*, an epic poem that tells the story of the heroism of Aeneas and the founding of Rome. The long poem is often compared to Homer’s *Illiad* and *Odyssey*, Greek epics combining history and mythology. His other well-known collections of poems are *Eclogues* (39 BCE) and *Georgics* (29 BCE).
17. T. Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in A. Koch and W. Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 1993), p.182.
18. H. St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986, first published 1782), pp.66–67.
19. D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, Inc., 1923), p.28.
20. For a concise explanation of the medieval European conceptions of wilderness, the woods, and their influence and transformation in America, see the chapter “Landscape” in J. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
21. Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer*, p.69.
22. J. Conforti, *Imagining New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p.123.
23. This characterizes the immigration to the Atlantic Coast during the nineteenth century. The West Coast of the United States had a significant Chinese immigrant population; the Southwest (still contested territory) contained populations of Spanish and Latin American descent. The presence of the Native Americans should also be included in this cultural project even though they were not immigrating to America, but were already living here.
24. W. Truettner, ed., *Picturing Old New England* (National Museum of American Art, 1999), p.xi.
25. William Dean Howells: “With its wood built farms and villages, it looked newer than the coal smoked brick of southern Ohio. I had prefigured the New England

- landscape bare of forests, relieved here and there with the trees of orchards or plantations; but I found apparently as much woods as at home.” As quoted in J.B. Jackson, *American Space: The Centennial Years, 1865–1876* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), pp.87–88.
26. D. Brown and S. Nissenbaum “Changing New England: 1865–1945,” in Truettner, ed., *Picturing Old New England* (1999), pp.2–3. According to geologist Nathaniel Shaler in 1869: “There is something sad about the look of the land. One never sees an acre gained from the forest; around the pasture lands there is often a belt where the wood marks its gain upon the cultivated tract.” As quoted in Jackson, *American Space*, pp.88–89.
27. Jackson, *American Space*, p.106.
28. *Ibid.*, Chapter x.
29. Meinig, “Symbolic landscapes,” p.165.
30. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971, first privately published in 1906), pp.379–90.
31. “America’s Ruggedest Individual,” *Life*, May 30, 1938, p.13.
32. Drew Pearson, “Ford Predicts the Passing of Big Cities and Decentralizing of Industry,” *Motor World*, Vol.80 (August 28, 1924), p.9. More on Ford’s antiurbanism can be found in Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: New American Library, 1964); and John R. Mullin, “Henry Ford and Field and Factory: An Analysis of the Ford Sponsored Village Industries Experiment in Michigan, 1918–1941,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* Vol.48 (Autumn 1982), pp.426–27.
33. Jeffrey L. Meikle, “Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden,” *Technology and Culture*, Vol.44 No.1 (2003), p.151.
34. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*; and Howard P. Segal, “The ‘Middle Landscape’: A Critique, a Revision, and an Appreciation,” in Segal, *Future Imperfect: The Mixed Blessings of Technology in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp.13–26.
35. William A. Simonds, “Rural Factories along Little Streams,” *Stone and Webster Journal*, Vol.41 (November 1927), p.653.

36. This represents Leo Marx’s original reading of the painting in his 1964 edition of *The Machine in the Garden*. As Meikle notes, this interpretation was changed and virtually reversed in a description written by Marx of the painting for a 1988 exhibition catalogue on the railway in America art. Meikle says of Marx, “He no longer regarded the painting as an unapologetic symbol of the technological sublime but instead concluded that it ‘transcends the limits of the conventionally bland landscape of reconciliation’ by conveying a ‘poignant dissonance, a distinctive note of foreboding intermixed with the idyllic.’ Ultimately it represented ‘the deep moral ambiguity of material progress.’” Meikle, “Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden,” p.154.
37. Jewett’s stories of country life for the magazine in the 1870s and 1880s were collected in several volumes including *The King of Folly Island and Other People* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1888), and *Tales of New England* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1890).
38. Jackson, *American Space*, p.104.
39. Wilder lived in the region at the McDowell Colony, in Peterborough, NH, starting in 1924, and including the summer of 1937 while writing the play.
40. D. Margulies, “Foreword,” in Wilder, *Our Town*, Margulies, ed.
41. Wilder, *Our Town*, Margulies, ed., p.3.
42. Scott Kennedy, dir., *OT: Our Town*, documentary (2002).
43. Wilder, *Our Town*, Margulies, ed., p.138.
44. *Ibid.*, p.156. Wilder originally published these thoughts in “A Preface for Our Town,” *New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1938.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Dehn himself would alter the implicit pathos of his original Grover’s Corners for a more bucolic one once the play became a hit and a critical success. W.H. Truettner, “Small Town America,” in Truettner, ed., *Picturing Old New England*, pp.111–12.
47. Wilder, *Our Town*, Margulies, ed., p.125. Since 1960 it has been professionally produced in at least 22 languages in 27 countries.
48. Michael Deas of New Orleans created the stamp illustration.
49. Truettner, “Small Town America,” p.112.
50. Kennedy, dir., *OT: Our Town*. A still shown in the film attributes the quote to the *New York Sun*, 1938.

51. Truettner, "Small Town America," p.114.
52. Wilder, *Our Town*, Margulies, ed., p.152.
53. P. Weir, dir., *The Truman Show*, feature film (1998).
54. A.L. Huxtable, *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion* (New York: The New Press, 1997).
55. W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, H. Arendt, intro. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), p.217.
56. Ibid., pp.218–19.
57. Baudrillard pioneered the popular use of the terms "simulacrum" and "hyperreality" in their postmodern context. See his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and *America* (1986). Novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco should also be acknowledged for his contributions to the concept of hyperreality in postmodern literature.
58. Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage," pp.7–8.
59. R. Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).
60. R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, A. Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). Quote from Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage," p.18.
61. Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage," p.19.
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