

lake wobegon

mythical place and the american imagination

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“When I was a boy the storyteller in our family was my uncle Lew Powell, who was my great uncle, my grandma’s brother, who died only a couple of years ago, at the age of 93. In a family that tended to be a little withdrawn, taciturn, my uncle Lew was the friendliest. He had been a salesman, and he liked to drive around and drop in on people. He would converse, ask how we were doing in school, but there would be a point when he would get launched, and we would try to launch him. . . . The period he talked about so well was about ten years on either side of the turn of the century. A beautiful time, I still think so. And I just wanted him to tell more and more and more. I wanted to know everything. What it looked and smelled like, what they ate and what they wore.

“I remember Uncle Lew’s stories not as coming to a point, really, but to a point of rest, a point of contemplation. As I got older, of course, life was becoming strange. I just looked to those stories of his, and to the history of the family, as giving a person some sense of place, that we were not just chips floating on the waves, that in some way we were meant to be here, and had a history. That we had standing.”¹

At a time when live radio programs are an anomaly and there seems little time for all the things we busy Americans have to do, much less for listening to slow-moving tales of small-town life in rural America, the phenomenal popularity of Garrison Keillor's weekly radio program and the remarkable success of his bestselling books seem baffling. How can one account for this unexpected popularity? And what does America's enthusiastic response to Keillor's imaginary world tell us about ourselves as Americans?

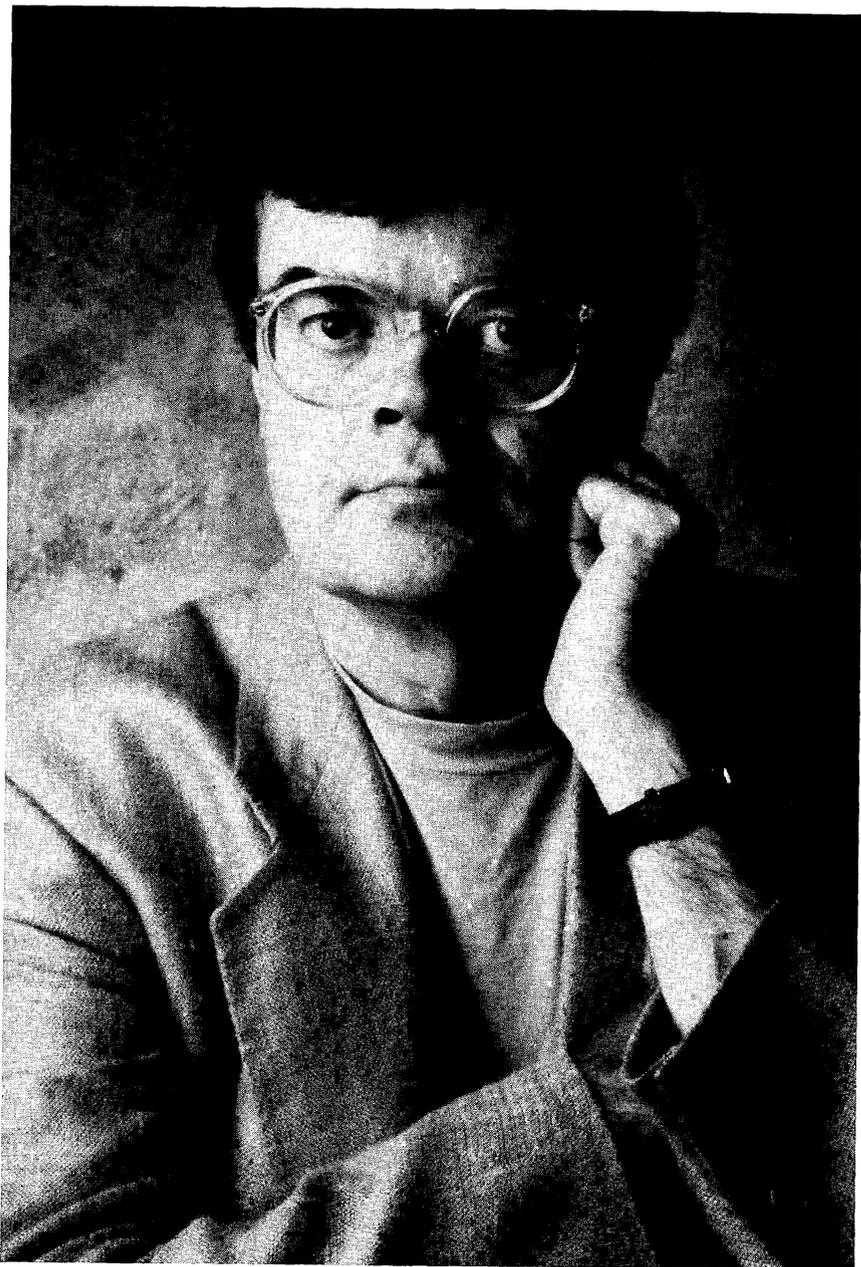
When "The Prairie Home Companion" was broadcast live from the World Theater in St. Paul for the last time on June 13, 1987, it was the nation's most popular radio show. Two hundred seventy-nine United States public radio stations carried it, as did the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. According to estimates from Minnesota Public Radio, between 3 and 4 million of us were tuning in for our weekly dose of entertainment and companionship.

Lake Wobegon Days, Keillor's book comprised largely of vignettes and anecdotes from the show's monologues, won acclaim in its own right as a work of fiction. Considered "the publishing sleeper of the year," the hardcover edition was on the New York Times best-seller list for 48 weeks, making it the top selling hardcover fiction of 1985. The paperback edition appeared on the list for sixteen weeks. Altogether the book sold over 1.2 million copies. Its sequel, *Leaving Home*, appeared on the *Times* best-seller list for twenty weeks following its release in October, 1987.

Since he first got the idea to do a live radio show after traveling to Nashville in 1974 to write a piece for *The New Yorker* on the Grand Ole Opry, Garrison Keillor has become something of a national cult hero. He was featured in a cover profile in *Time* magazine, made TV appearances with David Letterman and Ted Koppel, led the singing of the national anthem at the 1988 Democratic national convention in Atlanta, and, to his only faintly disguised gratification, was designated as one of the ten sexiest men in America by *Playgirl* magazine.

Champion of the shy person and spokesperson for the small-town hick, Keillor has been described as exuding Minnesotan normalcy; yet beneath this folksy exterior one senses an unusually keen intellect and rare talent. In spinning his fanciful and gently satiric tales of life in Lake Wobegon, "the town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve," Keillor invites comparison with an earlier Midwesterner, James Thurber, and with the late E. B. White, whose stories evoke life in rural Maine so convincingly. Some find his spell-binding wit and humor reminiscent of Will Rogers. Others even compare him to America's greatest humorist, Mark Twain, a link that is perhaps invited by Keillor's propensity for wearing white suits.

One might argue that "The Prairie Home Companion" was simply a product of a particular historical period, that it was popular because it cap-



Garrison Keillor. Photo credit William Coupon: Courtesy of Minnesota Public Radio.

tured and gave voice to the animating spirit of its time. A more interesting and finally more revealing approach, however, is to examine the show's remarkable popularity in a broader historical context, one that raises fundamental questions relating to national identity and the collective American experience. The argument presented in this article is that Keillor's creation of a mythical place captivated the imagination of American audiences because it addressed a long-standing cultural need, one that has existed since the settling of the North American continent by western Europeans. That need is for a sense of community and belonging, for reassurance against social disruption and the threat of loss—the need, in short, for a sense of place.

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Myth and legend are, by their nature, timeless. In depicting the town “that time forgot and the decades cannot improve,” Keillor plays with the notion of timelessness. This is especially apparent in his rendering of character. Like most writers, Keillor defines and delineates his characters in relation to place. But what sets Keillor apart is that his characters seem not to respond to time.

A good example of an unchanging character wedded to timeless place is Myrtle, who “is seventy but looks like a thirty-four-year-old who led a very hard life.” She is

Carl Krebsbach's mother . . . who, they say, enjoys two pink Daiquiris every Friday night and between the first and second hums “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” and does a turn that won her First Prize in a Knights of Columbus talent show in 1936 at the Alhambra Ballroom. It burned to the ground in 1955. “Myrtle has a natural talent, you know,” people have always told her, she says. “She had a chance to go on to Minneapolis.” Perhaps she is still considering the offer.²

Not only do Keillor's characters live in a town “that time forgot,” but also they themselves are timeless. On the one hand they are representations of unchanging human nature, which partly explains their appeal, and on the other they are more or less exempt from the vicissitudes of time, which partly explains why it feels comforting and secure to be around them. By their timelessness, they offer us a promise of permanence and an assurance against loss. It is the promise of never-never land that only a mythical place can offer.

Myrtle's husband Florian provides an even more striking example of Keillor's use of timelessness in rendering character:

Her husband Florian pulls his '66 Chevy into a space between two pickups in front of the Clinic. To look at his car, you'd think it was 1966 now, not 1985; it's so new, especially the back seat, which looks as if nobody ever sat there unless they were gift-wrapped. He is coming to see Dr. DeHaven about stomach pains that he thinks could be cancer, which he believes he has a tendency toward. Still, though he may be dying, he takes a minute to get a clean rag out of the trunk, soak it with gasoline, lift the hood, and wipe off the engine. He says she runs cooler when she's clean, and it's better if you don't let the dirt get baked on. Nineteen years old, she has only 42,000 miles on her, as he will tell you if you admire how new she looks. "Got her in '66. Just 42,000 miles on her." It may be odd that a man should be so proud of having not gone far, but not so odd in this town. Under his Trojan Seed Corn cap pulled down tight on this head is the face of a boy, and when he talks his voice breaks, as if he hasn't talked enough to get over adolescence completely. He has lived here all his life, time hardly exists for him, and when he looks at this street and when he sees his wife, he sees them brand-new, like this car. Later, driving the four blocks home at about trolling speed, having forgotten the misery of a rectal examination, he will notice a slight arrhythmic imperfection when the car idles, which he will spend an hour happily correcting.³

What we have here is the ultimate statement of traditional values, those that don't change at all. For the Lake Wobegonian, time is simply not an issue.

This thinking is epitomized by the town's prevailing attitude toward progress and technology:

Since arriving in the New World, the good people of Lake Wobegon have been skeptical of progress. When the first automobile chugged into town, driven by the Ingqvist twins, the crowd's interest was muted, less whole-hearted than if there had been a good fire. When the first strains of music wafted from a radio, people said, 'I don't know.' Of course, the skeptics gave in and got one themselves. But the truth is, we still don't know.⁴

This same fundamental skepticism is wonderfully apparent in the townspeople's reaction to a visiting university professor who offers them a glimpse of the future:

Every spring, the Thanatopsis Society sponsored a lecture in keeping with the will of the late Mrs. Bjornson, who founded the society as a *literary* society, and though they had long since evolved into a conversational society, the Thanatopsians were bound by the terms of her bequest to hire a lecturer once a year and listen. One year it was World Federalism (including a demonstration of conversational Esperanto), and then it was the benefits of a unicameral legislature, and in 1955, a man from the University came and gave us "The World of 1980" with slides of bubble-top houses, picture-phones, autogyro copter-cars, and floating factories harvesting tasty plankton from the sea. We sat and listened and clapped, but when the chairlady called for questions from the audience, what most of us wanted to know we didn't dare ask: "How much are you getting paid for this?"⁵

The professor's futuristic vision of a world of technological wonder is clearly one that the townspeople do not believe or care to see. The reason for their aversion is that technology represents change, and change, as we all know, is unsettling. As Rip Van Winkle discovered upon waking from his twenty-year slumber, to confront a familiar place that has been transformed nearly beyond recognition is frightening. And as Leonard Lutwack and others have pointed out, Rip Van Winkle's experience has become a central metaphor of our time.⁶ Faced with change at an alarming and ever increasing pace, we are left with a sense of placelessness, "a peculiarly modern malaise" that the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan calls "spatial segmentation."⁷

At its most rudimentary, myth-making is simply story-telling, and Keillor is a consummate story-teller. His technique is to construct an imagined milieu by building layer upon layer of convincing detail. As with William Faulkner and his mythical Yoknapatawpha County, Keillor coaxes his listeners into his created world by luring and hypnotizing them with the "authenticity and authority of experience" (to use Wendell Berry's phrase) and by presenting them with an array of characters who seem somehow truer than real life.⁸

In the passage that follows, Keillor evokes a vivid sense of place by presenting a catalogue of objective visual detail, subjectively perceived. The narrator knows that most people think that tall or big is beautiful and that small or short is unremarkable. This awareness leads the narrator to

present his home town to the outside world in terms of a comically absurd hierarchy of people and buildings based on relative height, as though height were tantamount to virtue or importance:

A town with few scenic wonders such as towering pines or high mountains but with some fine people of whom some are over six feet tall, its highest point is the gold ball on the flagpole atop the Norge Co-op grain elevator south of town on the Great Northern spur, from which Mr. Tollefson can see all of Mist County when he climbs up to raise the flag on national holidays. . . . Next highest is the water tower, then the boulder on the hill, followed by the cross on the spire of Our Lady, then the spire of Lake Wobegon Lutheran (Christian Synod), the Central Building (three stories), the high school flagpole, the high school, the top row of bleachers at Wally ("Old Hard Hands") Bunsen Memorial Field, the First Ingqvist State Bank, Bunsen Motors, the Hjalmar Ingqvist home, etc.⁹

It is the tension between the concreteness of the visual detail and the comic misapplication of someone else's notion of grandeur that generates a sense of recognizable place. Implicit in the narrator's description of his home town is a way of thinking, an inherent sense of inferiority that many have used to characterize small-town America.

In the act of myth-making, Keillor succeeds in making us feel a sense of belonging by calling on our shared experience. He does this in many ways, but perhaps the most important is his use of language. He appeals to our collective experience and our collective identity as Americans by expressing himself in a particular kind of language. Wendell Berry calls it "community speech," a certain "precision in the speech of people who share the same knowledge of place and history and work." It is a "precision of direct reference or designation . . . in which words live in the presence of their objects." Its effect is to force us "out of the confines of 'objective' thought and into action, out of solitude and into community."¹⁰ Taking its meaning and sources from locale and place, this particular language creates connections among people, land and community.

Similar to Berry's notion of "standing by words" is Jerome Bruner's concept of "the language of education," a value-laden language "revealing one's stance toward matters of human pith and substance." To use this language is to set aside the "so-called uncontaminated language of fact and 'objectivity'" and to invite reflection.¹¹ To use language in this way, as Keillor knows so well, is to make certain connections that contribute to a sense of common identity and to the creation of culture. According to Tuan, this culture-creating is related to the concept of mythical space,

which is rooted in “localized value” and used as a frame to interpret our day-to-day experience.¹² The process of culture-creating is interactive, one in which speaker and listener alike become myth-makers.¹³

This use of a particular language is evident in Keillor’s brand of democratic humor. Like Mark Twain, he operates in the comic tradition of self-depreciation and false humility. Take for example the following scene, in which the thin veneer of sophistication affected by the narrator as a first-quarter university freshman is challenged by the traditional values of common sense and practical knowledge. Significantly, the humor comes at the narrator’s expense:

I went home for Christmas and gave books for presents, Mother got Walden, Dad got Dostoevsky. I smoked a cigarette in my bedroom, exhaling into an electric fan in the open window. I smoked another at the Chatterbox. I wore a corduroy sportcoat with leather patches on the elbows. Mr. Thorvaldson sat down by me. “So. What is it they teach you down there?” he said. I ticked off the courses I took that fall. “No, I mean what are you learning?” he said. “Now, ‘Humanities in the Modern World,’ for example? What’s that about?” I said, “Well, it covers a lot of ground, I don’t think I could explain it in a couple of minutes.” “That’s okay,” he said, “I got all afternoon.”

I told him about work instead.¹⁴

The language in this passage is a perfect example of Keillor’s skillful and evocative use of “community speech.” A whole lifestyle, for instance, is suggested by Mr. Thorvaldson’s value-laden response. Although we in the audience may not “have all afternoon,” we understand the language and feel a natural kinship toward someone who does.

What we have here and throughout Keillor’s work is a leveling process and an attack on pretense. (Consider what the narrator likes about his dog Buster and what he dislikes about Minneapolis.) As revealed by the town’s motto, “*Sumus quod sumus*” (“We are what we are”), Keillor’s humor reflects a fundamentally democratic spirit. He invites us to laugh with him on equal terms.

In his vision of a mythical place, Keillor delights in walking that thin line between imagination and reality. These days when asked where he’s from, he says, without hesitation, Lake Wobegon. When asked if Lake Wobegon exists, his usual response goes something like this:

I don't mean to be cute when I say, "this is not an easy yes-or-no question." No, there is no town in Minnesota named Lake Wobegon that I could show you, at least I'm not aware of one. But I would also have a hard time showing you the Ninth Federal Reserve District, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the Big Ten, or the upper middle class. Most people deal very comfortably with abstractions much more far-fetched than Lake Wobegon, e.g. the Moral Majority, secular humanists, Hollywood, etc. Compared to any of those, Lake Wobegon is as real as my hands on this typewriter and sometimes more real than *that*.¹⁵

In the same way, he seems to blur imagined and real space when he describes the mistake made by the Coleman Survey of 1866, a mistake "which omitted fifty square miles of central Minnesota (including Lake Wobegon)." This supposed error explains why no one today seems able to locate the town in real life, but it becomes more than a convenient fiction when he goes on to assert that the error "lives on in the F.A.A.'s Coleman Course Correction, a sudden lurch felt by airline passengers as they descend into Minnesota air space on flights from New York or Boston."¹⁶ Here the imagined intrudes on the real.¹⁷

This blurring of imagined and real space makes it difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality, subjective perception from objective truth and mythical place from actual place. In fact, this lack of clear boundaries, many have argued, is a fundamental characteristic of human experience.

In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan addresses this phenomenon. Tuan identifies two principal kinds of mythical space. The first is "hazy" knowledge or "a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known," which "frames pragmatic space." The second is "the spatial component of a world view, a conception of localized values within which people carry on their practical activities."¹⁸ It is the second type of mythical space, the ordinary, day-to-day mythologizing that we all do in interpreting our daily experience, that Keillor exploits so effectively. He appeals, in this sense, to the Lake Wobegon within each of us. In rendering his mythical construct, Keillor brings into play all the tools of the regionalist: particular detail, sharply pronounced personality types, local manners, speech, folklore and history. In the process of mythologizing both his experience and ours, his subjective view of reality begins to take on literal truth and meaning. As Tuan defines it, mythical place is "a response of feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs."¹⁹ This makes it, as Keillor understands so well, as real as a real place, and in some ways more useful.

Mythical place as we have examined it, then, seems to possess the following attributes. It is timeless in the sense that it is not subject to the forces of change. This in turn makes it a comforting and reassuring place to be. It is subjective in the sense that it reflects the commonly held values and beliefs of a particular locale, as illustrated and embodied by “community speech.” And it is real in the sense that it reflects the “inner truth” of reality. Because we believe that it exists, it does exist, and its existence influences our perception, our world view and our behavior.

There is at least one other important attribute of mythical place, however, and that is the prominent role given to chance and improbability. In the case of Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, this is illustrated by the curious happenstance of the town’s founding. Its first white settlers were Unitarian missionaries and Yankee promoters who named the area “New Albion,” thinking it would become the Boston of the west. Next came Norwegian Lutherans “who straggled in from the west” and German Catholics “who, bound for Clay County, had stopped a little short, having misread their map, but refused to admit it.”²⁰ Like America’s first white visitors, these settlers arrived at the new land under a misconception of where they were.

One wonders if Keillor isn’t suggesting that we modern-day immigrants to the New World even now aren’t too sure of where we are or how we got here—and that perhaps we too refuse to admit it. It could be that in attempting to help us mythologize our collective experience, Keillor, while poking fun, is seeking to help us deepen our relationship with the land, to help us feel more at home.

Whatever Keillor’s intent, that the town was founded on a mapping error seems, in the mythical scheme of things, perfectly natural. That Lake Wobegon was established by settlers who came there by accident suggests a particular notion of history as something unpredictable, uncontrolled, and problematic—history as chance.²¹ The irony (no doubt intended by our gentle satirist) is that Lake Wobegon itself, the symbol of permanence in a world of change, is there only by accident, and that the people are permanent there only because their ancestors didn’t know what they were doing.

With mythical place, we have entered the realm of the improbable and the unlikely. We are surprised by what we find there only because the bias of our Western (rationalistic and mechanistic) mind often prevents us from recognizing the obvious: chance happenings are, in fact, commonplace, in both real and imagined landscapes. Keillor’s incorporation of chance into mythical place reminds us that chance and uncertainty are, to paraphrase William Beatty Warner, just as real as being and certitude.²²

While it may be too early to determine the ultimate significance of the Lake Wobegon phenomenon, one might begin an assessment with a few basic questions. One might ask, for example, whether Wobegon should be interpreted as an exploration of a regional phenomenon, and hence part of the discovery of subcultures that began in the 1960s and continued into the 1970s and the 1980s?²³ Or, one might ask, should Keillor's creation of mythical place be interpreted as an effort to establish a framework that transcends subcultures and binds all Americans?²⁴

That "The Prairie Home Companion" was a product of a particular historical period is undeniable. To appreciate the extent to which the program was in keeping with the spirit of its time, one need only consider some of the important cultural trends of the last decade or so. The 1970s, for example, witnessed a search for roots and community, as evidenced by the mid-1970s genealogy boom and the enormous popularity of the TV miniseries, "Roots." The period was also characterized by a general hostility toward technology and science, by a revival of Jeffersonian simplicity, as promoted by Wendell Berry and others, and by a renewed interest in what David Shi calls "homesteading simplicity."²⁵ The book that may best capture the spirit of the times was E. F. Schumacher's extremely popular *Small is Beautiful* (1973), a treatise on simple living.²⁶ Though it is doubtful that Keillor would approve, one might even compare the anti-pretense dimension of "The Prairie Home Companion" to the punk-rock movement's search for an authentic rock 'n' roll.

Be that as it may, it is important to recognize the program's significance in a historical context that goes far beyond what was happening in the 1970s. In *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, David Shi chronicles "a rich tradition of enlightened material restraint in the American experience dating back to the colonial era."²⁷ It is a tradition that takes its origins from two societies, the Puritans and the Quakers, both of which "promoted a 'Christianity writ plain.'"²⁸ While this tradition of "plain living and high thinking" may no longer serve as "a dominant standard of behavior," Shi provides ample evidence to show that it has persisted "both as an attainable ideal on an individual basis and as a sustaining myth of national purpose."²⁹

In other ways as well, Keillor's vision of the simple life in small-town, rural America isn't new. It is, in fact, the latest manifestation of a long and well established literary tradition that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks, whose bucolic poets often used Arcadia as a setting epitomizing rustic contentment and simplicity. As Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* reminds us, American writers have used the pastoral ideal to define the meaning of our country "since the age of discovery."³⁰ An early and prominent example is Washington Irving, who in 1820 described

a “peaceful spot with all possible laud.” Irving’s words foreshadow a latter-day Sleepy Hollow that time likewise forgot:

. . . for it is in such little retired . . . valleys . . . that population, manners, and customs, remain fixed; while the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant change in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved.³¹

Here in these sleepy valleys rural peace and repose stand in sharp contrast to a “great torrent” of change, and this change implies dislocation, conflict and anxiety. Marx goes on to point out that “the theme of withdrawal from society into an idealized landscape is central to a remarkably large number of . . . the American books admired most.” Citing Cooper, Thoreau, Melville, Faulkner, Frost and Hemingway, he argues that “the imagination of our most respected writers . . . has been set in motion by this impulse.”³² Clearly, Garrison Keillor is solidly within this tradition. And in offering his own version of an idealized landscape, he is touching something deep within the American psyche.

There is still the question of whether the program appealed to minority cultures.³³ There seems to be no evidence that it did. It should be noted, however, that the music on the program was often off-beat, ranging from the throaty blue grass songs of Greg Brown to the Scottish ballads of Jean Redpath. And whenever Keillor took the show on the road (as when he broadcast from Alaska and Hawaii), he took care to include songs and tales from the indigenous cultures. Still, Keillor’s is a white middle-class vision of America depicting white middle-class concerns.

This is not to say, however, that Keillor lacks insight into the minority experience. As the following passage indicates, Keillor has a keen understanding of a very important dimension of the minority experience in America, and that is the immigrant experience:

Homesickness hit the old-timers hard, even after so many years, and it was not unusual, Hjalmar says, to see old people weep openly for Norway or hear about old men so sad they took a bottle of whiskey up to the cemetery and lay down on the family grave and talked to the dead about home, the home in Norway, heavenly Norway.

America was the land where they were old and sick, Norway where they were young and full of hopes—and much smarter, for you are never so smart again in a language learned in middle age nor so romantic or brave

or kind. All the best of you is in the old tongue, but when you speak your best in America you become a yokel, a dumb Norskie, and when you speak English, an idiot. No wonder the old-timers loved the places where the mother tongue was spoken, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Sons of Knute lodge, the tavern, where they could talk and cry and sing to their hearts' content.³⁴

Clearly, Keillor knows what it means to find oneself outside the dominant culture.

Despite the phenomenal popularity of his show, Garrison Keillor is not, of course, without his critics. There are many people who simply could do without him. Some Minnesotans would have preferred a less folksy image for what became the major symbol of their state in the eyes of the outside world. One local newspaper reviewer noted that Keillor's work has been accused of "being for Americans what *All Creatures Great and Small* has been for the English: a sweet picture of small-town life, misty around the edges, that panders to the nostalgic and escapist yearnings of a society alienated from the present and aware that it is on the skids."³⁵ Others are still more harsh. They are concerned that nostalgic yearning for a golden age might divert our attention and energies from addressing and solving today's real problems. They are repelled by the political implications of this sentimentality, which in their view supports the myth of "the good ol' days," a myth they claim has been used by conservatives to justify the do-nothing social policies of the Reagan administration.

But this last criticism allows political implications, probably unintended by Keillor, to overshadow the cultural significance of his accomplishment. It overlooks an important part of what Keillor is after as storyteller and myth-maker. His phenomenal popularity is surely more than an affirmation of fundamentally conservative values, just as his work is certainly more than the latest kitsch served up to exploit an untapped market.

Like many American writers before him, Garrison Keillor is taking part in the continuing formulation of America as an idea and an ideal. His creation of mythical place is tied to the creation and definition of the American experience. In the act of story-telling and myth-making, this "prairie home companion" offers security and solace to his fellow homesteaders. He invites them to explore with him and to create the legends of a new world. It is a world, both a real and imagined landscape, that evokes the conventional wisdom and traditional values that define the American experience and the American character, the values of perseverance and practicality and expedience. It is more than a nostalgic and sentimental look at the past, and it isn't exactly escapist.

By evoking a usable past and animating a recognizable common culture, Keillor invites his listeners to tell their own story, just as he invites them to speak when he reads their personal and usually humorous messages during his broadcast. This myth-making is a participative and interactive and dynamic process, one that, to use Jerome Bruner's word, calls on the "subjunctivizing" function of story or narrative art to elicit its many and various interpretations. The result is creation of culture and affirmation of community, a process that looks forward as much as backward. Though whimsical and often corny, Keillor's work is part of a serious and significant effort by Americans to come to grips with their physical and cultural landscape, to find a common thread in their increasingly fragmented experience and to put down roots in a shifting and ever changing society.

notes

This article is dedicated to the memory of John Schneeweis, friend and scholar.

1. Garrison Keillor quoted in John Skow and John E. White, "Lonesome Whistle Blowing," cover story, *Time*, 4 November 1985, 68.
2. Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, (New York, 1985), 5. From *Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor. Copyright © Garrison Keillor, 1985. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books, USA, Inc. All subsequent citations in this article are from this edition.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
6. Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse, New York, 1984), 183.
7. Tuan, *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness* (Minneapolis, 1982), 3.
8. Berry, *Standing by Words* (San Francisco, 1983), 107.
9. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 9.
10. Berry, *Standing by Words*, 33.
11. Jerome Seymour Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986), 129.
12. Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, 1977), 99.
13. By recognizing and reinforcing our common bonds, Keillor creates an instance of what Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte call "free space." Fundamental to the democratic process, "free spaces" are "the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue." (See Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* [New York, 1986], 17.) People learn this self-respect by being around and interacting with other people. What worries Evans and Boyte is that "free spaces," so important to the maintenance of a democratic society, are gradually disappearing.

The argument presented in this paper is that Garrison Keillor's live radio broadcasts, with his participatory story-telling and myth-making, offer a kind of substitute for our vanishing "free spaces" and our generally diminishing opportunities for social discourse. The assumption is that Keillor's electronically produced mythical space is essentially positive because it reinforces our sense of collective identity.

In *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York, 1985), Joshua Meyrowitz looks at the other side of the coin. Meyrowitz argues that the electronic media (particularly television but also radio) have changed the "situational geography" of social life in America by undermining the traditional rela-

tionship between physical setting and social situation. The result is a new social landscape: ". . . because electronic media merge formerly distinct public spheres, blur the dividing line between private and public behaviors, and sever the traditional link between physical place and social 'place,' we have witnessed a resulting diffusion of group identities, a merging of different stages of socialization, and a flattening of hierarchies" (8). He concludes that "one of the reasons many Americans may no longer seem to 'know their place' is that they no longer have a place in the traditional sense of a set of behaviors matched to physical locations and the audiences found in them" (7).

If Meyrowitz is right, then the electronic medium that Keillor uses to offer us companionship in a placeless society is, ironically, contributing to our sense of placelessness.

14. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 20.

15. Keillor, "Ten Questions Most Often Asked About 'A Prairie Home Companion' and Ten Answers Not Given Previously," included in promotional material distributed by Minnesota Public Radio.

16. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 90-91.

17. In the same spirit of merging imaginary and real worlds, Los Angeles in 1982 named Lake Wobegon a "sister city." Even the American Automobile Association has gotten into the act, listing Lake Wobegon in its tour book. Not to carry the joke too far and risk confusing real-life travelers, however, the AAA explains dutifully that Lake Wobegon is an imaginary community.

18. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 99.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 8-9.

21. For an analysis of the way individuals interpret chance into experience, and the way narrative serves as a "privileged site" for the "convergence of chance and the person," see William Beatty Warner's *Chance and the Text of Experience: Freud, Nietzsche, and Shakespeare's Hamlet* (Ithaca, 1986). Warner chooses these three men for his study not only because they are so influential but because chance figures so prominently in their "narratives of experience" and their "conceptual texts."

22. *Ibid.* It was Nietzsche, Warner reminds us, who suggested that "our (largely illusory) sense of conceptual mastery and self-mastery is constructed upon a subordination of chance carried out early in our tradition. According to this argument, all of Western philosophy and science is based upon an idealist false premise: that chance and change and uncertainty are less real than being and stasis and certitude. In turning away from those materialist philosophers who had made chance an integral part of their cosmology, the dominant current of Western philosophy, led by Plato and Aristotle, systematically factored chance out of reality so as to arrive at those identities and idealities with which we think reality: time, space, being, the event, causality, history, gender, the cogito, and character" (18).

23. There is also the exhaustively debated question, unexplored here, of the marginalizing effect of "regionalism." As one of the anonymous readers of this article observed, "Literary studies are acutely conscious these days of the way genre, particularly 'regionalism' and 'local color,' is used to marginalize and exclude values and discourse which challenge or undermine the dominant ideology. The rather vicious arguments that occur over whether Keillor's stories are nostalgic and sentimental reveal that they are packing a lot of ideological weight."

That Keillor has come to be associated with certain values was evident in Tom Brokaw's introduction of him before Keillor led the pledge of allegiance and the singing of the national anthem at the 1988 Democratic national convention. Brokaw described Keillor as an "American folk hero" who represented the "traditional middle American values that the Democrats hope to encompass during this campaign" (author's notes on HBC coverage of the Democratic national convention, July 18, 1988).

24. Whether there in fact exists such a thing as a "collective identity" that transcends race and ethnicity is one of the great unresolved questions in the American Studies discipline.

25. David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* (New York, 1985). Shi points out that Scott and Helen Nearing's *Living the Good Life* "had originally appeared in 1954 and had sold only a few hundred copies. Within a few years after its reprinting in 1970, however, a now eager public bought over 100,000 copies" (255).

26. *Ibid.*, 269. In the same spirit of "small is beautiful" is Keillor's oft repeated slogan for Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery: "Remember, if you can't find it at Ralph's Grocery, you can probably do without it."

To support his argument that the 1970s was a period of great interest in simple living, Shi comments on the following publications and periodicals as illustrative of a "new genus of publications": "*Mother Earth News, The Whole Earth Catalog, Green Revolution, Rain, and Organic Gardening* detailed the methods of plainer, more self-reliant living to millions of subscribers. Books on the subject of simple living also abounded. Their titles revealed their message: *The Freedom of Simplicity; Enough Is Enough; Living Poor with Style; Beyond the Rat Race; Human Scale; Muddling toward Frugality; No Bigger than Necessary; A Guide for the Perplexed; 99 Ways to a Simpler Lifestyle?*" (269).

27. Shi, *Simple Life*, 3.

28. *Ibid.*, 29.

29. *Ibid.*, 49.

30. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964), 3.

31. Washington Irving, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," *The Sketch-Book* (1819-1820); (New York, 1963), 335.

32. Marx, *Machine*, 10.

33. Other questions regarding audience suggest themselves. Was the program more popular in certain parts of the country than in others? Did it tend to attract certain age groups?

While a number of profiles of public radio audience have been conducted (the *NPR Audience Book*, the *American Public Radio National Demographics & Lifestyles* study, or the NDL study, and *Audience 88*, a major study released in April, 1988, analyzing the public radio audience by "psychographic" and "geodemographic" segmenting), there is little quantitative information on what types and groups of Americans actually listened to "The Prairie Home Companion."

Radio listenership is by its nature illusive, but there is strong circumstantial evidence suggesting that the program appealed to a broad range of Americans. Thousands of letters were received from all areas of the country, and Keillor's book-signings were attended by all ages of people (with only children and teenagers as under-represented groups). According to Alison Circle, Manager of National Program Communications for Minnesota Public Radio, the show sold out almost instantly when it went on the road and was broadcast from New York, Boston and Middlebury, Vermont. The same was true in 1985 when the World Theater was being remodelled and the program went all over the country. Audiences in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Laramie, Wyoming and Los Angeles, California, seemed equally enthusiastic.

34. Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 64-65.

35. Doug Hanson, "A Hometown Look at *Lake Wobegon Days*," *Minnesota Daily*, September 30, 1985, 28.