

**Defining the South: Exploring Southern Regional Identity and Self-Conception through the
Southern Agrarians**

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Introduction: Roots of Southern Regionalism

The United States may be a single country, but it does not evoke any one picture. In the public mind, different areas of the United States exist as distinct regions—the East Coast evokes a different image than the West Coast, which evokes a different one from the Midwest. In the context of historical scholarship, the field of regionalism refers to the study of these different regions: how they emerged, how they interact, and how they have impacted the history of the United States. In recent years, ideas of American regionalism have emerged in the public sphere: in 2011, established journalist Colin Woodward published a book titled, “American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America,” where he argued that, based on his research on voting patterns, demographics and public opinion polls, the United States can be neatly divided into 11 separate sub-nations that have political, cultural, and demographic roots in colonial America.¹ The idea of American regionalism, therefore, is not only implicit in our understanding of the country, but has also become a popular way to understand the history, and current predicament, of the United States.

No region, however, occupies a more distinct place in the public mind than the American South. Historically, the South has existed as a distinct political, cultural, and economic unit since the founding of the American colonies—while the Northern colonies were established to escape religious persecution in England, Southern colonies were primarily entrepreneurial ventures. In fact, the Southern colonies were closely associated with the Caribbean; the colony of South

¹ “Forget The 50 States; The U.S. Is Really 11 Nations, Author Says,” NPR, published November 11, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/11/11/244527860/forget-the-50-states-u-s-is-really-11-nations-says-author>

Carolina was established by settlers from Barbados, who imported the plantation system already established in the West Indies.² The particularly fertile climate of the Southern colonies nurtured the existence of a plantation economy, which invited the proliferation of the Atlantic slave trade and resulted in the establishment of a societal structure completely distinct from that of the North. Thus, by the time of the Civil War, the American South was not only geographically different from the North, but was also culturally, economically, and politically unique. Due to its economic reliance on plantation slavery, one can even argue that the antebellum American South more closely resembled the Caribbean than the rest of the United States.

While the 20th century saw a cultural and economic integration of the region with the rest of the nation, particularly in its urban centers, the *idea* of the American South continues to evoke a vast range of images today, ranging from Confederate soldiers, cotton plantations, and Jim Crow to warm hospitality, recognizable accents and a distinct Southern cuisine. In addition to these distinct connotations, because the South has acted as a cultural, political, and economic unit throughout United States history, pointing to a specific “Southern identity” (as opposed to any other regional identity) is common. The South’s particular history and unique regional identity has resulted in historians and scholars becoming very interested in understanding what makes the South, and specifically Southern identity, unique.

Intellectual scholarship about the South and its peculiar regional identity can be traced back as early as Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*.³ However, the 20th century saw the emergence of substantial historical scholarship on Southern identity as intellectuals tried to characterize the region’s place in the national sphere, particularly as the larger United States

² “From Crape Myrtles To Long Houses, Charleston Is A 'Big Barbados,'” NPR, published July 21, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/07/21/423186974/from-crape-myrtles-to-long-houses-charleston-is-a-big-barbados>

³ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (New York, N.Y. : Penguin Books, 1999).

established itself as an international power. Most famously, Wilbur J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, published in 1941, explored the idea of "the South" and specifically contended that there were a certain set of regional characteristics, values, and attitudes, rooted in the events of the Civil War and Reconstruction, that remained entrenched in the Southern consciousness despite the increasing modernization and industrialization of the region.⁴ Celebrated from all sides, *The Mind of the South* was a monumental contribution to scholarship concerning the regional characterization of the South and Southern identity as it specifically grappled with the South's transition to the modern world. Following Cash, historians and scholars continued to explore questions of Southern identity and region: C. Vann Woodward, arguably the most distinguished Southern historian of the 20th century, wrote extensively about the peculiar regional status of the South, and John Shelton Reed's *Southerners*, a sociological study, is extensively cited as a critical work in understanding Southern self-identification and self-conceptualization. These themes have also been explored in fiction: novels such as Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*, or Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, also tackle questions of Southern identity and self-conception.

This thesis aims to contribute to this field of Southern history, specifically the history of Southern regional identification, by narrowing in on a particularly formative and defining moment in Southern history: the 1930s. For several political, economic, and cultural reasons that will be explored in depth, the 1930s were a major turning point for the region as they saw a major push for the industrialization and integration of the South with the now-modernized United States. In a parallel fashion, this period resulted in the development of new ideological lines of thought surrounding the South and its future directions. The Agrarians, the intellectual group of interest in this thesis, emerged during this period in response to cultural attacks on

⁴ Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, (New York, N.Y. : Vintage Books, 1941).

Southern society. Simply put, the Agrarians repudiated the industrialization of the South and instead called for the defense of its rural communities. However, due to their heavy reliance on romanticism, their emphasis on sectionalist government, and conception of the South as a continued victim of Northern exploits, the Agrarians were ultimately rejected, despite the fact that some aspects of their ideology provided legitimate solutions to the “Southern Problem.” Analyzing the intellectual argumentation of the Agrarians alongside contemporary and previous lines of Southern thought not only reveals patterns in Southern self-conceptualization, but also clarifies the role of Southern identity in shaping the region’s reputation and position in the greater nation.

Previous studies of the Agrarian ideology have relied heavily on their signature manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*. However, the Agrarians were active for approximately a decade after the initial publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930; therefore, grounding a study of the Agrarians solely in *I’ll Take My Stand* does not account for their intellectual activity at the end of the decade. Part of the originality of this thesis is based on its use of articles from *The Southern Review*, an Agrarian-run literary journal published in the late 1930s at Louisiana State University, in addition to *I’ll Take My Stand*. As a source base, *The Southern Review* is unique because it featured essays, concerned with Southern regional issues, by both Agrarian authors and non-Agrarian authors. In addition to representing the Agrarian stance later in the decade, the presence of opposing ideologies in *The Southern Review* allows for the comparison of contending Southern intellectual groups. As a method for characterizing the Agrarian ideology, employing a concurrent analysis of *I’ll Take My Stand* and *The Southern Review* allows for a unique contribution to the scholarly understanding of Southern regional identity.

The first chapter of this thesis illustrates the economic, political, and sociocultural landscape of the 1930s South in an effort to clarify the context in which the Agrarians emerged. The second chapter explores a primary tenet of the Agrarian ideology, the “Agrarian Society,” and, in addition to demonstrating the continuities of this argument with preceding lines of Southern intellectual thought, will analyze the efficacy of rural romanticism in the Agrarian ideology. The third chapter will compare the Agrarians to their most famous counterparts, the Southern Sociologists, so as to characterize the Agrarian approach to sectional government and explore the implications of this approach. The fourth and final chapter will explore the ways in which industrialization, in addition to cultural attacks on Southern institutions, contributed to the Agrarians’ conception of the South as a victim of a “colonizing relationship” with the North. Throughout, the reasons for the widespread rejection of the Agrarians, and the larger implications of this rejection, will be explored.

As a study of a study of both regional and intellectual history, this thesis aims to characterize the ideology of a widely controversial group, the Southern Agrarians, whose ideology was ultimately rejected due to its repeated use of romanticism, its emphasis on sectionalism, and conceptualization of the South as a victim of Northern colonization. A nuanced analysis of the Agrarian argumentation clarifies the motivation behind its rejected aspects, but also reveals the existence of legitimate suggestions to the “Southern Problem.” Grappling with this duality allows for a deeper understanding of Southern regional identity and the way in which Southern self-conceptualization has shaped the regional position of the South within the greater United States.

Chapter 1: Defining the “Southern Problem”

Regional self-conceptualization is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be understood in the absence of the historical, economic, political, and cultural contexts of the region in question. The 20th century saw the transition of the American South into the modern world through economic integration with the rest of the nation. However, Southern integration was an uneven process, with segments of the region seeing rapid modernization while others remained rural and poor. This tension between the rural and modernized sections of the region became present in 1930s Southern politics as politicians used rural dissatisfaction to challenge the status quo of the Southern Democrats. At the same time, this widespread rural poverty in the South, in addition to other regional characteristics such as religious fundamentalism and racial inequality, were criticized by Northern media outlets as backwards and raised the question of whether the South, in its current sociocultural state, was fit to enter the modern world. The combination of economic tension, political instability, and Northern criticism resulted in a reawakened regional consciousness as Southern intellectuals defended their home and explored this so-called “Southern Problem,” expressing varying opinions on what solutions (or lack thereof) the South should implement as it progressed through the 20th century. It was directly in response to this context that the Southern Agrarians, a conservative group of Southern intellectual and literary figures, emerged. A thorough analysis of the economic, political, and cultural landscape of the 1930s South provides the necessary background for understanding the Southern Agrarians and the way in which their emergence was a direct response to their historical context.

Economically, the 1930s South was at a crossroads, with parts of the region undergoing rapid economic development and others remaining in extreme poverty. During the 1920s and 30s, increased federal involvement in the South allowed for major economic and infrastructural changes that modernized the region and incorporated it into the rest of the United States. WWI stimulated the American economy and reoriented it towards wartime production. Through the issuance of government contracts, the South saw a significant expansion of its railroad, coal, oil, iron, lumber, hydroelectric, textile, and tobacco industries that continued into the 1920s.⁵ Then, in the 1930s, the New Deal further modernized and integrated the South, specifically through the construction of modern infrastructure. For example, the construction of new highways throughout the South connected the region to the rest of the nation; many projects, such as the Blue Ridge Parkway in Appalachia, were the first of their kind and connected previously isolated areas of the South.⁶ Through the expansion of industry and construction of infrastructure, increased government presence in the South transformed the region and fostered its integration into the rest of the nation.

At the same time, the South remained the poorest and most rural region of the United States. The primarily rural composition of the 1920s – 1930s South was highlighted by the statistic that 39% of people farmed for a living compared to 15% in the rest of the United States.⁷ The rural Southern scene was a particularly poor one: most farms did not have indoor plumbing, were not connected by functional roads, and, in 1930, less than 5% of the farms in the South had electricity compared to 14% of farms nationally, 45% in the Northeast, 33% in middle Atlantic

⁵ Thomas E. Terrill and William J. Cooper Jr., *The American South: A History*, Third., vol. 2, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 585.

⁶ Jack Irby Hayes, *South Carolina and the New Deal* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 71.

⁷ Terrill and Cooper, 653.

states, 22 percent in the Midwest, and 57% in the Pacific states.⁸ In addition, 60% of Southern farmers did not own their own farms and worked as tenant farmers or sharecroppers during this period.⁹ In the 1930s, the Great Depression only worsened rural poverty: sudden unemployment and financial distress forced thousands of individuals out of Southern cities and into rural areas, which oversaturated the region with farmers, overwhelmed the market with crops, and led to heavy reductions in farm prices and consequent reduction of farmer incomes.¹⁰ Overall, the poverty of the South, specifically in its large rural population, can be summed by the reflections of a Mississippi tenant farmer on the Great Depression: “Well, we didn’t know the difference in a Depression...except what we would hear. It just increased the fear a little bit of maybe not getting any food at all. We was just living on the bare necessities anyhow.”¹¹ Part of the “Southern Problem” therefore begged the question of how to grapple with rural poverty in the region: should the South continue to industrialize, thereby reducing the rural composition of the region, or should it find new ways of supporting its rural populations?

The 1930s South also faced political tensions as the major subset of Southerners, poor farmers, were not represented by the dominant political party, the Southern Democrats. The Southern Democrats had secured political hegemony in the 1890s through the process of disenfranchisement, which limited the electorate to their white, upper-middle class and conservative supporters. Through the establishment of literacy tests, the grandfather clause, selective gerrymandering against urban areas, and the poll tax, Southern Democrats made it effectively impossible for Black and poor white Southerners to vote.¹² The formalization of

⁸ Terrill and Cooper, 640.

⁹ Terrill and Cooper, 605.

¹⁰ Terrill and Cooper, 604.

¹¹ Terrill and Cooper, 642.

¹² Nicol C. Rae, “The Solid South at High Tide, 1896 – 1948,” in *Southern Democrats*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33 and Michael Perman, “Democrats and Demagogues in the Solid South,” in *Pursuit of Unity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 186.

Southern Democratic dominance into law essentially squashed all opposition to the party, rendering it even more powerful. Thus, since the late 1890s, the South was governed by a one-party system which, while it did not represent the entirety of the Southern demographic, maintained its dominance through legal action.

However, in the leadup to the 1930s, the Southern Democrats were challenged by the so-called “Southern Demagogues,” politicians who aimed to undermine the Southern Democrats through their mobilization of the white Southern rural electorate. Such Southern demagogues include well known Southern political names, such as Huey Long, Jeff Davis, and Gene Talmadge. Since rural poverty remained rampant, and the Southern Democrats were not inclined to ameliorate it, white rural Southerners were an easy demographic to target. These politicians utilized colorful language, emotional rhetoric, and performance to rally rural crowds, specifically employing the use of blatantly racist language and rhetoric to win support. However, because the “Southern Demagogues” failed to present any solid policies, they never succeeded in overthrowing Southern Democratic hegemony.¹³ Regardless, through their focus on rural poverty, the “Southern Demagogues” posed a real challenge to the political hegemony of the Southern Democrats. In so doing, the “Southern Demagogues” highlighted the economic tensions present within the region and emphasized the need for a solution to the economic contradiction of the 1930s South.

Though greatly admired by their rural constituents, these “Southern Demagogues” were viewed with contempt by the rest of the nation: specifically, their use of racist rhetoric to win support was considered emblematic of Southern backwardness.¹⁴ This negative coverage of Southern politicians reveals the way in which the whole South was perceived by the nation in the

¹³ Perman, “Democrats and Demagogues,” 198.

¹⁴ Perman, “Democrats and Demagogues,” 195.

1930s and the way in which that perception mobilized Southern intellectuals. On the national scale, Southern characteristics such as racial inequality, religious fundamentalism, and rural poverty were highlighted by Northern media outlets as backwards in nature. Henry Louis Mencken, a journalist and literary critic from Baltimore, led the charge in this critique and begged the question of whether the South, in its current sociocultural state, was ready to enter the modern world. Mencken's sharp critiques of Southern culture and institutions mobilized Southern intellectuals to reframe their understanding of their region and address the "Southern Problem"—first in small Southern newspapers, and more importantly, later in the emergence of the Southern Renaissance.¹⁵

Mencken's first attack on the South came in 1917 with the appearance of his essay, "Sahara of the Bozart," in the New York *Evening Mail* in 1917.¹⁶ The essay, which was later reprinted in his book, *Prejudices, Second Series* in 1920, addressed the state of Southern culture and art, which Mencken labeled as being, "...almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert."¹⁷ He argued that there was a complete lack of artistry in the South, but also of historians, theologians, sociologists, and scientists. Ironically, Mencken argued that the culturally dry predicament of the South was due to the control of the region by poor Southern whites, who, according to him, took control after the Civil War.¹⁸ In its vehement attack

¹⁵ William C. Havard, "The Journalist as Interpreter of the South," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 59, no. 1 (1983): 1–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26436559>.

¹⁶ "Bozart" is actually a play on the French word, "Beaux-Arts," thereby also critiquing the South's lack of culture and intellect.

¹⁷ Henry L. Mencken, "Sahara of the Bozart," in *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 1919).

¹⁸ I say ironic because we know that poor white Southerners held little to no political power (or any kind of power) after the Civil War—see political disenfranchisement on the part of the Southern Democrats.

on the state of Southern culture, “Sahara of the Bozart” infuriated many Southerners as they felt that their region was unfairly criticized in the Northern press.¹⁹

In addition to critiquing Southern culture, Mencken went on to attack the farmer as an individual in his essay, “The Husbandman,” describing him as a “...prehensile moron,” a “grasping, selfish, and dishonest mammal,” and, “a mundane laborer, scratching for the dollar, full of staphylococci, smelling heavily of sweat and dung.”²⁰ In his critique of farmers as inferior citizens to urban dwellers, he also critiqued the pervasive nature of fundamentalism in the United States, hinting specifically in the South. Mencken believed that, in their rural simplicity, farmers were increasingly susceptible to fundamentalist preaching and therefore perpetuated a “dung-hill” rural culture that fostered the development of backwards practices such as the KKK, child labor, and anti-evolution campaigns. While not always directly targeting the South, in heavily critiquing the intelligence of the farmer and the validity of religious fundamentalism, Mencken directly attacked several critical aspects of Southern life.²¹ Mencken’s critiques of religious fundamentalism present in “The Husbandman” provided the foundation for his critique of the Scopes Trial, a critical event in the formation of the Agrarians.

State of Tennessee vs John Thomas Scopes, commonly known as the Scopes trial, took place in 1925 in the town of Dayton, Tennessee and tackled the controversial question of teaching evolution in Tennessee public schools. The trial received a staggering amount of press coverage, specifically by Northern media outlets, who took the trial as an opportunity to highlight the provincial nature of the South and criticize its backwards, conservative, and

¹⁹ Fred Hobson, “Henry Louis Mencken, 1880-1956,” *Documenting the American South*, Accessed March 2022, Year. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/mencken/bio.html>.

²⁰ Henry L. Mencken, “The Husbandman,” in *Prejudices: Fourth Series* (New York: Library of America, 1924).

²¹ Edward S. Shapiro, “The Southern Agrarians, h. l. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity,” *American Studies* 13, no. 2 (1972): 75–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40641078>.) 77.

religious institutions. Among other media coverage, Mencken's review of the trial was perhaps his most pointed attack on the South and Southern people, as he denounced the Tennessee fundamentalists as "morons," "yokels," and "gaping primates." He wrote, "On the one side was bigotry, ignorance, hatred and superstition, every sort of blackness that the human mind is capable of...and on the other side was sense."²² Mencken's vehement attack on Southern fundamentalism in response to the trial infuriated many Southern intellectuals, including the soon-to-be Agrarians, as they received his critique of Southern institutions as a personal attack.²³ In this way, Northern attacks on Southern institutions influenced Southerners to respond in defense of their region, thereby stimulating the emergence of a broader regional Southern intellectual movement: the Southern Renaissance.

While the Southern Renaissance is often considered a literary movement, it also encompassed incredible intellectual output in sociology, cultural criticism, Southern history, and political analysis. Scholars tend to describe the emergence of the Southern Renaissance as a movement influenced by Southern institutions and as directly responding to the current historical period: for example, Allen Tate's "backward glance" thesis argues that the prolific nature of the Renaissance can be attributed to the existing tension between the Southern past and the modern world.²⁴ Similarly, Cleanth Brooks further argued that the shared Southern experience—one of hardship, community, religious wholeness, and a shared sense of the tragic—provided the fertile ground within which the literary actors of the Southern Renaissance were able to flourish.²⁵ As a

²² Ibid.

²³ Paul Conkin, "In Defense of the South" in *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 33.

²⁴ Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 4. Tate's "backward glance" thesis is often summed up by this quote: "With the war of 1914 – 1918, the South reentered the world — but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border; that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present."

²⁵ King, 8.

movement driven by its historical context, the Southern Renaissance encompassed Southern intellectual responses to the “Southern Problem” and addressed questions about Southern identity, culture, and regional distinctiveness.²⁶ Some of these intellectual movements, such as the Chapel Hill Sociologists, provided suggestions for fostering the economic development and integration of the South into the rest of the region—others, like the Agrarians, repudiated modernization altogether. Either way, the emergence of these intellectual responses demonstrated a renewal in Southern regional consciousness.

The Agrarians emerged during the Southern Renaissance as a direct response to the Scopes Trial; importantly, however, the founding of the Agrarian movement was actually a rebranding of the preceding “Fugitive” literary movement. This direct association with a literary movement resulted in the Agrarians being (correctly) identified as a literary group, despite the fact that the Agrarians dealt with regional questions much more directly than their predecessors. Intellectually, the Fugitives were strictly concerned with matters of poetry and language. In fact, the Fugitives actually felt a deep disdain for Southerners glorifying the “Lost Cause,” arguing that such regional agendas garnered negative views of the South (i.e., Mencken’s attacks on Southern backwardness) that impeded Southern poetry and letters from flourishing in the literary sphere.²⁷ The Fugitive movement fell apart in the first half of the 1920s as its major players left Vanderbilt, but came back together and rebranded as Agrarians in response to the Scopes Trial. The literary background of the Agrarians is important as much of their critique stemmed from the fact that they were literary figures, not social scientists, historians, or politicians. Further, in addition to defending the South and its institutions, part of the motivation behind the

²⁶ William C. Havard, “The Search for Identity,” in *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 417.

²⁷ Paul Conkin, “The Fugitive Prelude” in *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 24.

ex-Fugitives' decision to rebrand as the Agrarians and tackle regional questions was that they felt that the Northern attacks on the South made it difficult for Southern writing to flourish. Indeed, in response to the negative press surrounding the Scopes Trial, Donald Davidson, a member of the Fugitives, made the following statement:

“I can hardly speak for others, but for John Ransom and myself, surely, the Dayton episode dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner...also a writer. It was horrifying to see the cause of liberal education argued in a Tennessee court by a famous agnostic from Illinois named Clarence Darrow. It was still more horrifying—and frightening—to realize that the South was being exposed to large scale public detraction and did not know how to answer.”²⁸

The trial encouraged former members of the Fugitive movement, such as Allen Tate, Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren, to join with other literary figures and author a widely influential book titled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) which pushed back against the ridicule surrounding the Scopes trial and defended the existence of an agrarian, community-oriented Southern society.²⁹ The introductory chapter, titled “A Statement of Principles,” offers a critique of industrialism as being exploitative of the individual, inhibitory of unfiltered artmaking, and harmful for interpersonal relationships, manners, and human connection. The articles within *I'll Take My Stand* were introduced with the statement: “...all [the articles] tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial.”³⁰ Indeed, *I'll Take My Stand* serves as the clearest descriptor of the Agrarian agenda and directly addresses the “Southern

²⁸ Thomas Daniel Young, “The Agrarians,” in *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 429 – 430.

²⁹ Young, 430.

³⁰ Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1930), xxxvii.

Problem”—however, instead of providing suggestions for the continued integration and modernization of the South, it called for its cessation.

I'll Take My Stand was not the only avenue through which the Agrarians explored and voiced their ideas—in 1936, the founding of the literary journal *The Southern Review* provided another outlet for the Agrarians to explore their views surrounding the state of the South in the 1930s. The *Southern Review* was begun at Louisiana State University as part of a continued effort to achieve prominence for the new university.³¹ Charles Pipkin, a professor of international law at Louisiana State who was very interested in the intellectual and educational development of the South, solicited support from the President of the University, James Monroe Smith, to fund the creation of a journal for the University.³² With the financial support secured, Charles Pipkin was also able to pitch the founding of the *Review* to the four professors that would eventually make up the editorial board of the journal and who held close ties to the Agrarian movement: Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Charles Pipkin, and Albert Erskine.

Despite their alignment with the Agrarian movement, the four editors envisioned the *Review* as being representative of all stances towards the new position of the South. The Prospectus for the publication, published in the LSU student newspaper *The Daily Reveille* on April 16, 1935, stated that the magazine would consist of both fiction and nonfiction essays. In the realm of fiction, the *Review* would publish short stories, short novels, sections of forthcoming novels, poems, and literary criticisms that would present “significant artistic excellence” and showcase the works of young, up-and-coming Southern writers. On the nonfiction end, essays would cover politics, philosophy, economics, and regional issues pertaining to the “Southern condition,” with “no sectional bias” regarding the contributors of the essays. Overall, the claim

³¹ Montesi, 28.

³² Montesi, 25.

of the *Review* was that it aimed to “define large issues” and attempt “interpretation of the contemporary scene,” thereby proposing itself as an unbiased regional publication.³³ By publishing essays that represented all Southern intellectual camps, the *Review* reflected the greater intellectual conversations surrounding the new position of the South.

Thus, the birth of the Agrarian movement as a complete repudiation of Southern modernization and integration was in direct response to the economic and sociocultural conditions outlined by the “Southern Problem.” Through federally funded infrastructural and economic initiatives, the 1920s and 1930s South was beginning its integration into the greater United States; at the same time, it remained a poor and rural region. This economic contrast in the region was also represented in Southern politics, and at the same time, characteristically Southern institutions such as rural poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism were criticized on the national stage by Northern media outlets. The combination of economic discrepancy in the region and Northern critique fostered the emergence of a renewal in Southern consciousness, the Southern Renaissance; it was in this context that the Agrarians emerged and published their views in *I’ll Take My Stand* and the *Southern Review*. An objective understanding of the economic, political, and sociocultural state of the South in the 1930s provides a solid foundation for analyzing the validity, and shortcomings, of the Agrarian ideology.

³³ Montesi, 30.

Chapter 2: The “Agrarian Society”

Faced with the economic, cultural, and political components of the “Southern Problem,” the Agrarians responded by denouncing the industrialization and urbanization of the South and calling for the preservation of agricultural societies in their region. According to the Agrarians, the ability for Southern rural societies to center agriculture allowed for a more sustainable rhythm of life that nurtured manners, promoted social relationships, stimulated cultural and artistic production, and honored the land itself. Extensively explored in *I’ll Take My Stand* and *The Southern Review*, the Agrarians' characterization of the ideal "Agrarian Society" constituted the most significant and robust aspect of their ideology as it justified their repudiation of industrialization and underscored their defense of the South in the face of cultural attacks. Understanding the critical pillars of the "Agrarian Society"—namely, the inherent moral and intellectual superiority of the Southern farmer, the stimulation of cultural production, the nurturing of community, and a preoccupation with the well-being of the land itself—allows for critical analysis of the Agrarians through comparison of their beliefs with other Southern intellectual groups and historical contextualization of their time period. In addition, characterizing the "Agrarian Society" reveals the Agrarians’ deep reliance on the romanticization of Southern rural life which, although shared by other Southern intellectuals and therefore indicative of a recurrent theme in Southern identification, ultimately weakened the Agrarian argument due to its lack of objectivity.

The superiority of the “Agrarian society” was largely based on the glorification of the morality and intellect of the Southern farmer. In the opening pages of *I’ll Take My Stand*, this

ideal Agrarian lifestyle is characterized as being one, "...in which agriculture is the leading vocation...a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure..."³⁴ Important to note here is the way in which agriculture is painted as being an "intelligent," or honorable, profession; the Agrarians glorified the Southern farmer and represented him as not only proficient in agricultural practices but also intelligent, noble, and moral. The ideal Agrarian individual is best exemplified in *I'll Take My Stand* by John Donald Wade's essay, "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius."³⁵ Cousin Lucius, a fictional Southern farmer, is depicted as having a deep connection to the land:

"An instinct for the mastery of land was in his blood, and he knew few pleasures keener than that of roaming over his place, in the afternoons, when school was out, exulting in the brave world and shouting to the dogs that followed him."³⁶

In fact, Cousin Lucius was so deeply attached to his land that, even when offered a teaching position in the city at a time of financial distress, he declined the position, thereby resisting capitalistic temptations and instead prioritizing the wellbeing of his farm. At the same time, however, he is also described as a college-educated intellectual with a deep appreciation for classical literature. This dichotomy is further exemplified by the fact that Cousin Lucius holds three different professions during his lifetime: a banker, a teacher, and a farmer. Cousin Lucius therefore exemplifies the multifaceted nature of the Agrarians' idealized Southern farmer: by describing Cousin Lucius as equally well-versed in agriculture, economics, and intellectual pursuits, and therefore able to hold a variety of professional roles, Wade upholds the Agrarian

³⁴ Twelve Southerners, "A Statement of Principles," in *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1930), xlvii.

³⁵ John Donald Wade, "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius," in *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1930).

³⁶ Wade, "The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius," 277.

image of the Southern farmer as an intelligent, moral, and well-rounded individual with a quasi-spiritual relationship to the land.³⁷

The Agrarians' glorification of the morality and intellect of the Southern farmer draws on preceding lines of Southern intellectual thought ranging back to the years of the Jackson presidency. Indeed, the glorification of the Southern farmer is rooted in the Cavalier myth, or a belief in the superior nobility of the antebellum Southern plantation owner.³⁸ During the Jackson presidency, the Cavalier myth was used to quell anxieties surrounding increased democratization. While the North approached the increased democratization by instituting social reform programs, such as asylums and penitentiaries, the South was unable (and unwilling) to follow suit due to its primarily rural and spread-out composition. With Jacksonian democratization engendering fears of slave revolts and/or revolution in the poor white classes, the Cavalier myth helped convince Southerners that the Southern planter had complete control over his plantation and community and could ensure the stability of Southern society without social institutions.³⁹ In legitimizing the stability and overall structure of Southern society, the Cavalier myth set a precedent for the Agrarians' glorification of the Southern farmer, which served to defend Southern agricultural life in the 1930s.

The intellectual superiority of the Southern farmer was supported by the fact that "Agrarian Societies" nurtured "true" cultural production. According to the Agrarians, it was the pace of Agrarian life, in combination with the absence of capitalistic influence, that allowed for the spontaneous creation of pure, unfiltered art. In his essay, "A Mirror for Artists," Donald

³⁷ Lucinda H. Mackethan, "I'll Take My Stand': The Relevance of the Agrarian Vision." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 56, no. 4 (1980), 593.

³⁸ Orville Vernon Burton and Anderson R. Rouse, "Southern Identity," in *The Routledge History of the American South* (Abingdon: Routledge, 20 Jul 2017), 42.

³⁹ Daniel Joseph Singal, "Cavalier Myth and Victorian Culture: the Nineteenth Century Background," in *The war within: from Victorian to modernist thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 14-18.

Davidson critiques industrialism as inhibiting true cultural production: in the never-ending need for novelty and products, the industrial society transforms art into a commodity, therefore stripping it of its beauty and mystique.⁴⁰ According to Davidson, art making in the industrial society was further tainted by the existence of the industrial clock, which inhibited individuals from ever achieving “true leisure”: even when one was off work, one was either engaged in scheduled activities or was so drained from the excruciating industrial or corporate workday that any attempt at artmaking would have been futile.⁴¹

On the other hand, Davidson argued that, because the Agrarian lifestyle was regulated by agriculture and not a man-made industrial clock, it allowed for the leisure time necessary for the production of pure, untainted art. Important to Davidson is the patience with which one must expect art in an Agrarian society: the incessant expectation of production that the industrial society imposes on the artist inhibits artmaking, while on the other hand, the “South, as a provincial region, offers terms of life favorable to the arts...”⁴² Indeed, part of Davidson’s thesis, which is also exemplified by Cousin Lucius’ character, is that there is no such individual as the “artist” in the Agrarian society: men are always farmers first, then artists or professionals second.⁴³ As mentioned above, Cousin Lucius held three different professions, but always returned to farming in times of need. During his time as a professor, though, Cousin Lucius held a deep appreciation for the classics, which potentially serves as a metaphor for the Agrarian appreciation for “true” and traditional artmaking as opposed to commercialized artmaking in an industrial society. By emphasizing the ability for Agrarian society to stimulate and support

⁴⁰ Donald Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” in *I’ll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1930), 32.

⁴¹ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 34.

⁴² Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 57.

⁴³ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 59.

high-level intellectualism and art-making, the Agrarians further defended the honorability of rural life.

While superior cultural production supported the intellect of the Southern farmer, the community-oriented and mannered nature of Agrarian societies supported his morality. Cousin Caroline, Cousin Lucius's wife, exemplified the Agrarian ideal of the tight-knit rural community through her warmth and kindness: “She knew how to summon a group of people from the town and countryside, and how, on nothing, apparently, to provide them with enough food and enough merriment to bring back to all of them the tradition of generous living that seemed native to them.”⁴⁴ This emphasis on community, which was made possible by the moral nature of Southern rural folk, was revered by the Agrarians; however, they feared that the industrialization of the South would destroy this characteristic as the region became more profit-oriented. Indeed, this concern was illustrated in Cousin Lucius’ world, as the more industrialized his town became, “...many gentlemen whom he had recognized as persons of dignity were behaving themselves with a distressing lack of dignity.”⁴⁵

Similar to the glorification of the Southern farmer, the romanticized morality and community-oriented nature of Southern rural life was not unique to the Agrarians and can be traced back to Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In Query XIV, Jefferson discusses Southern manners while explaining the condition of beggars and the poor in Virginia; when in need, Jefferson claims the poor are aided by, “...the family of a good farmer, where every member is emulous to do them kind offices...”⁴⁶ Here, Jefferson is describing the community oriented and “mannered” characteristics of an average Southern agrarian family. Jefferson also specifically states that agricultural societies are morally superior to industrial ones: in Query

⁴⁴ Wade, “The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius,” 279.

⁴⁵ Wade, “The Life and Death of Cousin Lucius,” 286.

⁴⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, (New York, N.Y. : Penguin Books, 1999), 170.

XIX, “The present state of manufactures, commerce, interior and exterior trade?” Jefferson writes that, “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God,” and then goes on to write:

“While we have land to labor then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff. Carpenters, masons, smiths, are wanting in husbandry: but, for the general operations of manufacture, let our work-shops remain in Europe. It is better to carry provisions and materials to workmen there, than bring them to the provisions and materials, and with them their manners and principles.”⁴⁷

Here, Jefferson is not only denouncing industrialism, but is specifically pointing to a difference in “manners” between members of the two societies, highlighting the moral superiority of Southern rural people. Jefferson’s emphasis on Southern rural morality indicates that the romanticization of the rural South was a recurring theme in Southern intellectual thought not unique to the Agrarians.

The Agrarians therefore presented this idealized Southern agricultural life as proof that the 1930s South should not industrialize and urbanize but rather remain primarily rural and agrarian. However, their delineation of the superior morality and intellect of the Southern farmer heavily relied on a romanticization of Southern life which, although often rooted in preceding lines of Southern intellectual thought, ultimately weakened the Agrarian defense of the South as it rooted their ideology in subjective, as opposed to objective, arguments. The case of rural artmaking is a perfect example of the counterproductivity of this romanticization: the average Southern farmer at this time was incredibly poor and barely able to eat, let alone paint or compose. Thus, unless the Agrarians were specifically pointing to the art-making practices of a wealthy plantation owner—which, although possible, further delegitimizes the Agrarians by evoking images of the Confederacy and plantation slavery—their argument that the rural South

⁴⁷ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 170.

fostered the creation of unfiltered art did not correspond with the economic realities of their region and injured the validity of their argument.⁴⁸ Their decision to romanticize the cultural productivity of the rural South as a means of addressing the “Southern Problem”—as opposed to taking a more grounded route, such as depicting the proliferation of Southern universities such as Vanderbilt or University of Virginia, for example—points to the existence of a peculiar Southern instinct to romanticize their region in the face of outside critique.

Similarly, the glorification of rural Southern morality and manners also presents a lack of objectivity on the part of the Agrarians, specifically in their limited address of slavery and race in the South.⁴⁹ While individual Agrarians approached the issue of race in the South from progressive and racist standpoints later in life, at the time of *I’ll Take My Stand*, the Agrarians collectively termed it “the Negro Problem” and claimed that slavery was a moral institution that indeed improved the lives of slaves.⁵⁰ By falsely depicting slavery as a moral institution, the Agrarians were able to support their vision of a morally superior Southern society; however, this depiction completely ignored the objective violence and injustice associated with plantation slavery. Thus, by failing to engage objectively with this historical reality of Southern history, and instead romanticizing it to prove their idealized existence of a moral Agrarian Society, the Agrarians injured their reputation as intellectuals fit to provide solutions to the “Southern Problem.”

⁴⁸ Importantly, the Agrarians were already dismissed as serious contributors to addressing the “Southern Problem” because of their roots in literature. Thus, falsely emphasizing the cultural production of the South played into this pre-existing bias against the Agrarians and further delegitimized their ideology.

⁴⁹ Indeed, the topic of race in the South was largely ignored by the Agrarians, partially because the dominant members of the Agrarians (Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, and Frank Owsley) not only supported segregation, but viewed it as an integral aspect of Southern life that should not be questioned. This predominantly segregationist view resulted in a lack of Agrarian intellectual discourse on the issue of race.

⁵⁰ Idus A. Newby, “The Southern Agrarians: A View after Thirty Years.” *Agricultural History* 37, no. 3 (1963): 143–55.

The one aspect of the Agrarian argument that did *not* rely on heavy romanticization or glorified imagery was their description of Southern agrarian populations as deeply respectful of nature. This tenet was most clearly exemplified by John Crowe Ransom's essay, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," which argues that, as a region, the South is unique from the rest of the United States because it was the only region to have followed a European lifestyle, which, according to Ransom, emphasized a deep respect for and preservation of nature.

Ransom begins his essay by clarifying his definition of a, "European way of life." Using England as an example, Ransom argued that English peasants felt an affection or nostalgia for their land that led them to stay on the same plot of land for generations.⁵¹ On the other hand, Ransom argues that most of American civilization lacked this sense of affection and memory for their land and was instead infected by an instinctual need to expand, resulting in American society living in a perpetual state of pioneering. This perpetual pioneering, as opposed to the peace felt by the English towards their land, has led, "...latter day societies to have been seized—none quite so violently as our American one—with the strange idea that the human destiny is not to secure an honorable peace with nature, but to wage an unrelenting war on nature."⁵²

This American characteristic to be in a perpetual conflict with nature was caused and is currently compounded by the vast industrial system of the United States, particularly in the North. In requiring consistent innovation and discovery, the industrial system prohibits the existence of internal peace with the land and forces individuals to continue expanding. The modern industrial ideal of progress, a word which has a positive connotation, is reframed in Ransom's essay as representing the frantic need for Americans to expand and produce at the expense of nature. Ransom, however, argues that this perpetual state of pioneering is not only

⁵¹ John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," in *I'll Take My Stand* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1930), 3-4.

⁵² Ransom, "Reconstructed But Unregenerate," 7.

harmful to the natural world, but eventually detrimental to man himself:

“Nature wears out a man before man can wear out nature; only a city man, a laboratory man, a man cloistered from the normal contacts with the soil, will deny that. It seems wiser to be moderate in our expectations of nature, and respectful; and out of so simple a thing as respect for the physical earth and its teeming life comes a primary joy, which is an inexhaustible source of arts and religions and philosophies.”⁵³

In addition to exemplifying the way in which men in an industrialized society are at a perpetual war with nature, Ransom also addresses the classic Agrarian ideal of leisure: due to their need to be perpetually pioneering, Americans cannot live a leisurely life that allows them to engage with religion, philosophy, manners, grace, and intellect. He argues that Southerners adopted that European way of life, but through the process of Reconstruction and consequent industrialization, this superior way of life was inhibited. However, through the re-establishment of an Agrarian society, the care for agriculture and lack of pioneering frenzy caused by industrialism would lead to the preservation and care for land.

Ransom’s call for a respect of nature was unique in its novelty and its basis in objective fact. His call for an end to man’s, “unrelenting war on nature” is original; while previous Southern intellectuals, such as Jefferson, call for an agriculturally focused society, they don’t specifically argue for one that respects nature—perhaps because they did not yet need to. Air pollution, water pollution, and environmental decline began with the advent of the Industrial revolution and were perceptible in the first decades of the 20th century.⁵⁴ Importantly, Ransom’s claim that industrialism was destroying the ecology of the South did not center Southern morality but rather a tangible issue—environmentalism. While not directly providing a solution to the Southern Problem, his critique of environmental degradation provides a clear, unbiased

⁵³ Ransom, “Reconstructed But Unregenerate,” 9.

⁵⁴ “Water and Air Pollution,” History.com, accessed February 9th, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/natural-disasters-and-environment/water-and-air-pollution>

commentary on the negative effects of industrialism, thereby solidifying the Agrarian argument. However, because the rest of the Agrarian ideology was cloaked in rural mysticism and romanticism, this more objective aspect of their argument was largely ignored.

In addressing the entirety of the idealized “Agrarian Society,” one can identify the existence of rural romanticism in the Agrarian ideology and can point to the ways in which it hindered their success. While tempting to argue that the romanticization of Southern rural societies was specific to antebellum Southern intellectuals or supporters of the “Old South,” some scholars argue that progressive Southern intellectuals were also influenced by, and validated, the supposed moral superiority of Southern agrarian societies. For example, Howard Odum, a figurehead of the Southern Sociologists, is sometimes described as subscribing to the Cavalier myth and as defending plantation life as “the” symbol of superior American morality and culture—despite the fact that the Sociologists are considered a progressive intellectual group due to their sponsorship of modernizing and industrializing initiatives for the South.⁵⁵ This widespread belief in the superiority of Southern rural life is likely rooted in the historical context during which these 20th century thinkers were raised: most Southern intellectuals of the 1930s grew up with parents and grandparents who, because they had lived through the Civil War and Reconstruction, instilled their children and grandchildren with ideas of Southern superiority and a hatred for the North.⁵⁶ For this reason, a belief in the superiority of Southern rural societies was, to some degree, present in the writings of most Southern intellectuals active

⁵⁵ Daniel Joseph Singal, “Howard W. Odum and Social Science in the South,” in *The war within: from Victorian to modernist thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 137.

⁵⁶ Singal, “Howard W. Odum,” 118 ; Paul Conkin, “In Defense of the South” in *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 33. ; Michael O'Brien, “Odum: Sociology in the South,” in *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.)
[doi:10.1353/book.68483](https://doi.org/10.1353/book.68483).

during the 1930s, indicating that rural romanticism is perhaps a characteristic of Southern regional identity and self-conception.

That said, the Agrarians relied on the romanticization of Southern morality to defend their claims to a greater extent than any one of their contemporaries. Indeed, by romanticizing Southern rural life to justify the preservation of Southern rural societies, the Agrarians were interpreted as Southern fanatics and were ultimately rejected.⁵⁷ The rejection of the Agrarians due to their use of rural romanticization signals a potential mechanism through which the South was “other-ized” as a region: by utilizing romanticism to justify its societal structure, Southern intellectuals were written off by the rest of the nation as fanatics, thereby driving a deeper divide between the South and the rest of the United States. In this way, the rejection of the Agrarians is emblematic of a greater pattern of Southern regional identification, on the part of Southerners and non-Southerners alike.

Overall, the Agrarians painted a picture of their ideal Agrarian society through the essays compiled within *I'll Take My Stand*. The ideal Agrarian society emphasized the superior morality and intellect of the Southern farmer, enabled pure and unfiltered artistic production, fostered community-oriented relationships, and valued the importance of the natural land itself. The Agrarians' argument that industrialism destroyed the natural world was founded in facts and therefore provided a solid commentary on the state of the 1930s South. On the other hand, their romanticization of Southern rural life was seen as an endorsement of the antebellum or Confederate South and therefore weakened their argumentation. In observing the presence of rural romanticization in all camps of Southern intellectual thought, one can note that rural romanticization is perhaps a defining characteristic of Southern intellectual thought at large.

⁵⁷ Paul V. Murphy, “The Failure of a Political Faith,” in *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 64.

However, because the Agrarians relied on this romanticization as the primary justification for their beliefs, instead of drawing from the economic and cultural realities of their region, it resulted in their widespread rejection. It is interesting to note that, had the Agrarians limited romanticization of Southern ruralism, their ideas may have been more readily accepted—at the time, and today.

Chapter 3: Agrarian Sectionalism

Essays within the *Southern Review* reveal that the Agrarians and their contemporaries, the Southern Sociologists, had similar visions for preserving the rural South: both groups called for the rehabilitation of Southern soil, a reduction in tenancy rates, and the implementation of subsistence farming as the primary approach to agriculture. To resolve these issues, both the Agrarians and the Sociologists called for government intervention. The critical difference, however, lies in the nature of this intervention—while the Sociologists called for national economic integration, and were therefore open to federal intervention, the Agrarians opposed integration and called for a strictly sectional government. Parallel to how the Agrarians’ romanticization of the rural South weakened their argument, their call for sectional government evoked an image of the Confederacy and engendered similar critique. Thus, while the Agrarians and the Sociologists ultimately held similar views for the future of the rural South, the Agrarians were regarded as unable to provide legitimate solutions to the Southern Problem due to their political leanings. The Agrarians and Sociologists’ disagreeing views towards the governance of the South complicates the landscape of Southern regional identity by challenging the notion that there was only one single approach to the Southern Problem; at the same time, the similarities between the two ideologies highlights the role of sectionalism and romanticism in defining an “other-ized” Southern regional identity.

While the Agrarians heavily glorified the past, the Sociologists rejected a nostalgic view of Southern history and instead focused on the economic possibilities available to an integrated and modernized South. At large, the Sociologists believed that the ills of the South were based in

a lack of functional social institutions and were the first to confront that the root of these ills was not solely Reconstruction, but also a set of Southern histories, customs, and cultures that long preceded the Civil War.⁵⁸ As a result, the Sociologists argued that full modernization of the South—through the funding of industries but also social and governmental programs—would alleviate the South of its ills.

While it is tempting to categorize the Sociologists as “New Southerners,” the two groups are distinct. The New South ideology, which also called for the modernization and industrialization of the South, emerged after Reconstruction as an opposing outlook to the “Old South” ideology, which glorified antebellum Southern society and rejected Southern economic integration. Although both intellectual groups called for the development of industry in the South, the New Southerners wanted general and unspecific industrialization, while the Sociologists called for industrialization *in addition to* the rehabilitation of Southern social institutions. Even more significantly, the Sociologists pointed to Southern institutions, specifically the Southern social order, as defective. This ability for the Sociologists to criticize the South in this way is significant because it opposed the Agrarians’ tendency to romanticize the South—at no point in *I’ll Take My Stand*, or in the *Southern Review*, for that matter, do the Agrarians ever put the idea of “Southernness” into question. By pointing out critical issues in the South beyond the state of the Southern farmer, the Sociologists approached the “Southern Problem” with more objectivity and were more readily received. These differing approaches towards the state of the 1930s South—romanticist vs. objective—reveals inconsistencies in how different Southern intellectuals grappled with their regions’ past.

⁵⁸ Daniel Joseph Singal, “Howard W. Odum and Social Science in the South,” in *The war within: from Victorian to modernist thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 112.

The Agrarians and the Sociologists also differed in their understanding of the South's regional position within the nation; while the Agrarians envisioned a sectionalized, separate Southern culture and government, the Sociologists pictured a complete integration of their region into the United States. Howard Odum's essay, *Regionalism vs. Sectionalism* explains this distinction; Odum describes regionalism as a social policy whose final goal is national harmony, while sectionalism prioritizes cultural and political separateness. For example, he writes that:

“...regionalism envisages the Nation first, making the national culture and welfare the final arbiter. On the other hand, sectionalism sees the region first and the nation afterwards...sectionalism emphasized political boundaries and state sovereignties, technical legislation, local loyalties, and confederation of states with common interests, menaced by federal action. Where sectionalism features separateness, regionalism connotes components and constituent parts of the larger national culture.”⁵⁹

Odum's emphasis on regionalism circles back to the Sociologists' ability to criticize “Southernness”: by calling for regional integration with the rest of the nation, the Sociologists are implying a willingness for Southern institutions to change and for Southern identity to change in consequence. On the other hand, by emphasizing Southern sectionalism, the Agrarians demonstrate a rigidity in terms of Southernness and an unwillingness for change. The Agrarians specifically envisioned that their region would be governed by a sectional Southern government that protected the region from Northern interests and, most importantly, Northern industrial capitalism.⁶⁰ Thus, while the two groups held similar visions for the fate of the rural South, their conception of government intervention for achieving those goals were in opposition to each other.

⁵⁹ Howard W. Odum, “Regionalism vs. Sectionalism in the South's Place in the National Economy” in *Social Forces* 12, no. 3 (1934): 338.

⁶⁰ Idus A. Newby, “The Southern Agrarians: A View after Thirty Years.” *Agricultural History* 37, no. 3 (1963): 150.

“Is Agrarianism for Farmers?”, written by Sociologist Rupert Vance, provides a review of Troy Cauley’s book, *Agrarianism: a Program for Farmers*. The overarching aim of the essay was to discuss Agrarianism as an actual economic theory, as opposed to a theory of art in “defense of tradition.” Vance’s primary critique of Agrarianism was that it was unrealistic and self-contradictory—for example, he disagrees with the Agrarians’ belief that the South should decide between industrialism and agrarianism. Instead, Vance argues, the realistic goal should be to figure a way for the two ideologies to coexist such that farmers are not exploited. He argues that the Agrarian line of thought, at its core, is not unreasonable, but would be strengthened by the addition of concrete suggestions and program proposals.⁶¹ In setting himself up to provide these concrete solutions, Vance neatly defines Agrarianism as, “...an agricultural theory, which advocates for non-commercial or partly commercial farming as opposed to fully commercial...where farmers farm for a living rather than for profit.” In this definition, Vance is rephrasing the core of the Agrarian ideology with unromanticized, objective language that highlights its core argument—namely, the protection of the Southern farmer and rural life from rampant industrialism. In so doing, Vance is not only endorsing the Agrarian vision and highlighting its similarities with the Sociologist one, but is also setting himself up to provide concrete economic and political suggestions for making it a reality.

Vance, like his Sociologist and Agrarian colleagues alike, considered tenancy to be the most dire issue in the rural South and the main symptom of commercialized, or industry driven, farming. Tenancy refers to the scenario in which a farmer is not farming his own land; in other words, he is a tenant of someone else’s land (one may liken it to sharecropping). Indeed, all of Vance’s suggestions for implementing the Agrarian beliefs ultimately target this issue of farmer tenancy. His most direct solution to tenancy was encompassed by the Bankhead Bill, which

⁶¹ Rupert Vance, “Is Agrarianism for Farmers?” *The Southern Review* 1, no. 1 (1935), 43.

called for the creation of a Tenant Farms Corporation. The Corporation, through bonds and \$100,000,000 in capital, would be able to distribute landholdings to farmers. Farmers would be given reasonable mortgage rates such that the tenant would be able to pay back the money through subsistence farming instead of mass commercialized farming (and is not vulnerable to inhumane rent prices/crop shares from his landlord.)⁶² Through direct government intervention, Vance argued, the South would be able to take concrete actions to reduce rates of farmer tenancy and begin to tackle rural poverty in the region.

Vance also suggested a solid population policy as a means to reduce farmer tenancy and rehabilitate Southern soil. According to Vance, part of the issue with Southern agriculture was the lack of fertile land to support the South's growing population; as of 1936, the South held the country's highest birth rate, the highest proportion of children to child-bearing women, and the youngest population with most individuals of prime reproductive age.⁶³ This rapid increase in population, worsened by the fact that the Depression had rendered cities unable to absorb the population increase, led to an increase in tenancy and migration into Southern industrial jobs, both of which resulted in the financial exploitation of the Southern farmer (or ex-farmer, in the case of industry). To counteract this issue, Vance suggested a strict population policy that restricted the number of children for the rural Southern family; this way, Vance argued, it would be possible for children to inherit land as opposed to "sell themselves to industry" or resort to tenant farming. Vance's suggestion for a population policy not only supported the Agrarian goal to protect and preserve the Southern farmer, but also specifically targeted the effects of rapid industrialization of the South by ensuring that farmers could remain on their land as opposed to taking on industrial jobs. Vance's suggestion for a population policy was therefore another

⁶² Vance, "Is Agrarianism for Farmers?" 55.

⁶³ Vance, "Is Agrarianism for Farmers?" 45.

concrete suggestion for implementing the Agrarian desire to protect Southern rural life—with a nod to their disdain of industrialism—through the implementation of concrete, government-run intervention.

Lastly, Vance emphasized the implementation of subsistence farming, a sustainable mode of agriculture that provides increased financial stability and improves the economic condition of the Southern farmer. Profit farming encourages the farmer to specialize in one crop (Vance cleverly puts it as “treating the farm as capital”) to maximize profit and yield. However, this specialization renders the farmer extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in market prices; if the price of their crop goes down, they have no other crop to rely on. In addition, specializing in one crop is harmful for the soil, which eventually results in additional financial burden as farmers struggle to continue collecting profitable harvests. Subsistence farming, on the other hand, resulted in increased financial security for the farm family: because they are growing a variety of crops (as opposed to a cash crop), they are able to sell what they can to the market, but then are able to eat whatever they do not sell.⁶⁴ While subsistence farming provides a financially secure agricultural method for farmers, it cannot succeed unless the farmers have the security of owning their own land; if a farmer is a tenant, they *have* to engage in profit-farming in order to maximize profit and make rent payments. Thus, reducing farmer tenancy goes hand in hand with the implementation of sustainable farming practices.

Together, Vance’s suggestions for ending farmer tenancy, in combination with his endorsement of subsistence farming as a more sustainable mode of agriculture, all support the core goal of the Agrarians: the economic rehabilitation of the Southern farmer as a means to protect the existence of a Southern rural society. Vance’s suggestions all require government intervention, which the Agrarians also support. However, although Vance does not specify this in

⁶⁴ Vance, “Is Agrarianism for Farmers?” 48.

the essay, outside knowledge of the Sociologists reminds us that they are open (and actually encourage) federal government intervention and economic integration with the rest of the country. The Agrarians, on the other hand, call for a sectional government instead. This contrast between the Agrarians and the Sociologists reveals that their differing views towards government and economic integration, in addition to the use (or lack thereof) of Southern romanticization, is the primary differentiator between the two ideological groups. Thus, although both the Agrarians and the Sociologists wanted to protect the rural nature of the South, the Agrarians were ultimately rejected due to their call for sectional government. The Agrarians' use of sectionalism to define their understanding of the South "other-ized" the region, thereby solidifying its positionality as a distinct place within the United States.

The Agrarians' specific support of sectional government is further explored in *Pellagra Diet*, Frank Owsley's review of Charles Morrow Wilson's *Cornbread and Creek Water*. Through his analysis of the author's argumentation, Owsley endorsed the implementation of governmental programs as a means to rehabilitate the condition of the Southern soil, which he argued has been harmed by profit agriculture. In the first section of the book, Owsley agreed with Wilson's proposal to protect existing federal and state laws—such as the Soil Conservation Acts of 1936-1937—that provided financial assistance to farmers such that they could invest in soil-conserving practices such as applying lime, planting grasses and clovers, building up permanent pastures, and terracing.⁶⁵ Owsley also agreed with Wilson's point that these governmental acts could not fully succeed without the implementation of subsistence farming, which Owsley defined as being, "...careful, intensive farming which regards the soil as its working capital." Wilson made the point that subsistence farming and soil rehabilitation practices went hand in hand and that their simultaneous promotion would allow for a great improvement

⁶⁵ Frank Owsley, "Pellagra Diet" *The Southern Review* 6, no. 1 (1941), 751.

in the condition of the Southern farmer.⁶⁶ In this way, soil conservation, crucial for rehabilitating Southern soil and implementing subsistence farming, required federal assistance.

Despite his endorsement of Wilson's call for government intervention, Owsley goes on to specifically critique the *federal* government's previous efforts to promote subsistence farming and conserve soil, arguing that they were inhibited by class concerns. Subsistence farming, Owsley explains, is the style of farming that the European "peasant and yeoman" have engaged in for centuries and that has succeeded to preserving a rich soil capable of yielding a bountiful crop, year after year; in fact, the average European peasant obtains a higher income than the average American farmer, and is, "better housed, better clothed, better educated, and better fed."⁶⁷ Owsley claims that previous federal government programs to rehabilitate the Southern soil have failed because they refrained from utilizing strategies used by European peasants and yeoman. Owsley argues that they refrained from this because they were afraid of calling the American farmer a peasant or yeoman for fear of inciting class tensions. Therefore, while Owsley endorses government intervention in *Pellagra Diet*, he also voices dissatisfaction with the efficacy of the federal government in enacting successful agricultural reform. Remembering the Agrarian stance towards governance, one sees that Owsley's denunciation of federal government is also a call for a sectional, Southern government.

It is interesting to address Owsley's brief commentary on class in his critique of the federal government, as the Agrarians rarely address socio economic concerns in their vision for the South. Indeed, while class is mentioned here, Owsley fails to provide concrete evidence of his point that the federal government has failed to enact policies due to a fear of class revolt. This failure not only weakens Owsley's immediate argument, but points to a greater shortcoming of

⁶⁶ Owsley, "Pellagra Diet," 752.

⁶⁷ Owsley, "Pellagra Diet," 753.

the Agrarians in addressing socioeconomic status in the region. This oversight may be indicative of a greater trend in Southern regional identity; in his essay “Hillbilly Realism,” Southern historian C. Vann Woodward describes a phenomenon in regional thought whereby Southern intellectuals alternate between class and sectionalism as a modality for understanding their region.⁶⁸ The Agrarians fall into the latter category, failing to directly address class issues in the South and instead utilizing sectionalism as a framework for their ideology, glorifying the life of Southern farmers and neglecting to properly characterize rural poverty.

By endorsing Wilson’s call for government intervention in *Cornbread and Creek Water*, Owsley sponsors concrete methods for implementing the Agrarian vision. At the same time, Owsley also indirectly denounces the use of federal intervention to implement rural preservation programs, arguing that they have only failed up until this point. Thus, although Owsley demonstrates a rational understanding of which kinds of governmental programs might genuinely aid the Southern farmer, by continuing to call for a sectional government, he bolstered the connotation of the Agrarians with the Confederacy; this not only contributed to their overall rejection, but further solidified an image of the South as a distinct region within the greater nation. Compounding this issue was his lack of a proper analysis of class, which further weakened his argument by demonstrating an inability to grapple with the economic realities of the South.

The *Southern Review*, therefore, served as an environment where the Agrarians could explore concrete suggestions for implementing their ideal Agrarian society. At the same time, it also provided a platform for analyzing the Sociologist point of view. Simultaneous analysis of these two ideological groups reveals strikingly similar visions for the future of the rural South: both endorsed the use of governmental intervention as a means to economically stabilize the

⁶⁸ Comer Vann Woodward, “Hillbilly Realism,” *The Southern Review* 4, no. 4 (1937), 678.

Southern farmer and rehabilitate the quality of the Southern soil. The critical difference, however, was their vision for the kind of governmental intervention in the South: while the Sociologists were open to federal intervention, the Agrarians called for a strictly sectional, antebellum-esque Southern government. In a parallel fashion to their use of rural romanticism, the Agrarians' call for sectional government allowed for regional "other-ization" of the South and contributed to our understanding of the South holding a unique regional identity.

Understanding the similarities between the Agrarian and Sociologist vision for the modern South complicates our notion of Southern self-conception and further highlights the role of sectionalism and romanticism in defining an "other-ized" South.

Chapter 4: The Colonizing Relationship

In addition to their use of rural romanticism and political sectionalism to support their vision, the Agrarians also relied on a conceptualization of the South as a continued economic and cultural victim of the North, employing the image of a “colonial relationship” to illustrate this claim. This victimization complex demonstrates a direct tie to the “Old Southern” tradition, which tainted their assessment of economic disparities between the two regions and resulted in widespread ridicule. It is in this approach towards the South’s national position that the Agrarians most drastically depart from other ideologies of the time; while other ideological groups, such as the Sociologists and New Southerners, acknowledged the economic disparities between the regions—and even acknowledged the Civil War and Reconstruction as the roots of these disparities—they do not victimize the South through the image of a “colonizing relationship.” The existence of this romanticized understanding of the South exemplifies one way in which the South conceptualized itself in the 1920s/1930s—as a regional victim of the Civil War. While this victim complex was a crucial part of the Agrarians’ self-conceptualization, it inspired ridicule on the part of liberal and progressive groups, thereby deterring from the strength of their argumentation—despite the fact that some of their more concrete points, such as those of environmentalism and industrialism, posed legitimate, unbiased concerns. Exploring the ways in which the rapid industrialization of the South, in combination with public attacks on “Southern institutions,” inspired the Agrarian emphasis on the existence of a colonial relationship allows for a deeper understanding of Southern self-conception.

Prior to analyzing the significance of the “colonial relationship,” one must fully understand its roots—the first of which is the Agrarian’s complete repudiation of Southern

industrialization. Generally speaking, industrialism conflicted with the idealized Agrarian society because it came in direct opposition with its most crucial aspects. Where Agrarian societies champion close relationships within small communities, industrialism/capitalism emphasizes the large corporation, individualism, and profit. Where Agrarianism focuses on a deep connection to the land and small property ownership, capitalism urges industry to spread into other regions, even internationally, to outsource labor, reduce costs, and increase profit. Where Agrarianism allows for the production of art, capitalism interferes with the process of artmaking by applying a monetary value to art. Going in direct opposition to the Sociologists and the New Southerners, who argued that industrialism would “save” the South from its economic devastation, the Agrarians outline the ways in which industrialism, despite being positively painted as a bringer of “progress,” did the opposite and instead perpetuated the existence of a colonial relationship between the two regions.

The Great Depression served as the major piece of supporting evidence in the Agrarians’ argument against industrialism as it highlighted the inherent fragility in the capitalist system. Analyzing the Agrarian’s use of the word “industrialism,” one could effectively replace the word with capitalism—in their criticism of industry, the Agrarians were also criticizing mass capitalism, the growth of the corporation, and the loss of the “little man” in the new corporate, capitalistic American world. The Great Depression, which struck the United States a mere year before the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, revealed to the nation the flaws of capitalism and industrialism and served as partial inspiration for the Agrarians.⁶⁹ Specifically relevant to the Agrarians, the Great Depression hit the agricultural South particularly hard as it resulted in a drastic drop in crop prices. For example, in 1929, Southern farmers received approximately 16 cents per pound

⁶⁹ Idus A. Newby “The Southern Agrarians: A View after Thirty Years.” *Agricultural History* 37, no. 3 (1963), 151. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3740368>.

of cotton. Conversely, in 1930, a pound of cotton was valued between 9 and 10 cents, resulting in a near halving of profit from crop production. Overall, income from crop producing Southern states dropped from \$2.4 billion in 1929 to \$929 million in 1930. Furthermore, because of mass closing of Southern industrial and corporate jobs, the population of rural Southerners increased by 1.3 billion people at the onset of the Depression, which further strained the resources of the land. Large farm owners saw a loss of their property through mass foreclosures, and smaller tenant and yeoman farmers found themselves on the brink of starvation, with most having one day's supply of food or less.⁷⁰

“Expedients vs. Principles: Cross-Purposes in the South,” written for the *Southern Review* by the most conservative member of the Agrarians, Donald Davidson, clearly outlines the Agrarians’ critique of industrial capitalism as a threat to the financial stability of farmers. The Agrarian discussion of “progress” as a misleading justification for industrialism was discussed previously in the context of environmental preservation but is once again relevant in Davidson’s discussion of industry. Davidson primarily critiques the connotation of industrialism with “progress” and “high” standards of living, arguing that, in the long run, they do not actually improve the condition of the Southern farmer: instead, the arrival of industrial capitalism into the rural South lured the susceptible Southern farmer into the perpetual cycle of consumption that he cannot sustain financially. After the first engagement with the capitalist market, Davidson argues, the Southern farmer finds himself compelled to continue purchasing goods he “needs” under the guise that they improve his quality of life. With advertising compounding the problem, the individual will become completely entangled with the market and enter a cycle of perpetual purchasing. However, due to the very financial plights that industry was meant to fix, the

⁷⁰ Gilbert C. Fite, “The Great Depression Strikes,” in *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980*, 1st ed., (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 1984) 120-122.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130jr69.12>.

Southern farmer does not have the monetary capacity to become enmeshed into the system of consumer capitalism. Davidson agrees that the industrialization of the South provides more jobs and therefore more cash flow in the rural South. However, while the arrival of industry may allow him to make some extra money, it is not enough to offset the costs of participating in a capitalistic, industrial society, and the Southern farmer will remain an indebted individual—not to his or her landowner, perhaps, but to the more abstract system of consumer capitalism.⁷¹ Thus, under the guise of “progress,” the rapid industrialization of the South actually hindered the economic stability and development of Southern farmers.

Davidson continues his argument by describing the increased presence of the federal government in the South, which he argues is a “parallel” phenomena to the increased presence of industry. He describes the, “...sudden expansion of the functions of state and local governments throughout the South, and the correspondingly sudden and enormous increase of public expenditures thereby made necessary. Such expansion is everywhere a part of the cost of going modern.”⁷² However, while Northern states were able to pay for this increase in governmental institutions through the “surplus wealth accumulated through long years of imperializing,” in the South, the majority of the expenses fell on the farmers who were least equipped to pay the bill. This further harmed the condition of farmers by either leading them to take out more loans (rendering them even more indebted to the financial and capitalistic system) or engaging in the farming of cash crops in order to make the necessary tax payments, which led to, “agricultural disability, rapid exhaustion of Southern soil, a ravaging of Southern timber, and, most alarming of all, an increase in tenancy and a decrease in farm ownership.”⁷³ In the same way that the

⁷¹ Donald Davidson, “Expedients vs Principles: Cross Purposes in the South,” *The Southern Review* 2, no. 4 (1937), 652-653.

⁷² Davidson, “Expedients vs. Principles,” 653.

⁷³ Davidson, “Expedients vs. Principles,” 653.

expansion of industry in the South financially harmed Southern farmers, the expansion of governmental institutions caused similar harm despite being painted as positive developments in the name of “progress.”

The Agrarians repeatedly claimed that the industrialization of the South perpetuated a “colonial relationship” between the North and South, where the South did not exist as a self-sufficient and respected region but rather as an economic appendage of the North.⁷⁴ While never explicitly citing the term “colonial relationship,” Davidson’s critique of the industrialization of the South, and the infiltration of federal government in the South, is in line with this argument. According to Davidson and the Agrarians, this colonizing relationship was established in the aftermath of the Civil War and its existence resulted in the South’s inability to return to a position of complete self-sufficiency—that is, without losing its sense of regional identity. The New Southerners and the Sociologists, remember, believe that industrialism is precisely the method through which the South will be able to catch up with the rest of the nation. However, the Agrarians often criticize this argument, claiming that doing so would result in a loss of Southern identity. The mere concept of the “colonizing relationship” between the North and South is emblematic of the outstanding Southern bitterness regarding the outcome of the Civil War, which highlights the similarities of the Agrarians to Old Southerners and point to an Agrarian inability to cope with the past.

The Agrarians cite the Civil War and Reconstruction as the catalysts for the formation of this colonial relationship. The Civil War dealt a devastating blow to the South’s economic stability through the destruction of land, materials, crops, and human life. Indeed, at the advent of Reconstruction, the South’s per capita income was 51% of the national average, indicating the

⁷⁴ Paul Conkin, “The Book” in *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 85.

extent of the economic and social disruption caused by the war.⁷⁵ Reconstruction, especially the period of radical reconstruction following 1867, compounded the economic issue with personal humiliation for Southerners loyal to the Confederate cause: as the South was split up into 5 military districts, federal troops were deployed to the region, and the 14th and 15th amendments were forced to be ratified, all of which combined to make loyalist Southerners feel humiliated by the North.⁷⁶ Following Reconstruction, the North owned the majority of industry and resources in the South, which further removed autonomy from the region and increased feelings of shame amongst pro-Confederate Southerners. To gain political traction, Conservative Southern Democrats painted Reconstruction as a period where fraud was rampant, federal taxes were exorbitant, and the North engaged in sectional vindictiveness towards the South.⁷⁷ Doing so allowed the conservative Southern Democrats to unite Southerners under a common unifier—the glorification of the Old South, of the Confederate cause, and hatred of the North. Reconstruction was theoretically designed to re-integrate the South into the rest of the nation; however, because it established the North as the economic superpower over the South, it further sectionalized the region and increased feelings of tension and distrust among Southerners.

In addition to solidifying the South as an economic dependent of the North, Reconstruction also introduced an increased federal presence in the South that, according to the Agrarians, further compounded the “colonial relationship” by facilitating the forced cultural integration of the South with the rest of the nation. In “Expedients,” Davidson provides the institution of public education in the South as an example of how the colonial relationship was

⁷⁵ Dewey W. Grantham, “In The Shadow of Reconstruction,” in *The South in Modern America : A Region at Odds*. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 4.

⁷⁶ “Reconstruction,” History.com Editors, History.com, last modified January 11th, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/reconstruction>.

⁷⁷ Grantham, “In the Shadow of Reconstruction,” 4. ; These points are not false, per se—however, this depiction fails to include other positive aspects of Reconstruction, such as the establishment of the Freedmen’s Bureau, the election of Black men to political positions, etc.

perpetuated through cultural integration. While he admits that the institution of public schools allows for the education of more Southerners, at the same time, “The same brand of education, now highly standardized, through its general bias conditions Southerners from kindergarten on up to become obedient consumers of modernity in every marketable form.” He then goes on to say that, “All these things are items which, in economic and political history, have to do with an *imperializing* process, which has the Northeast on the imperial end and the South on the colonial end.” While the institution of public services such as public schools were disguised as “progress” by the North in that they would improve the living conditions of Southerners, according to Davidson, they harmed the region by resulting in the loss of regional identity. In this way, Davidson argued that increased federal presence was detrimental to the condition of the South because it perpetuated the existence of a colonial relationship through the forced cultural integration of the South with the rest of the nation.

It is important to note, however, that the Agrarians were not the only group to point out the discrepancy in economic self-sufficiency between the two regions. The New Southerners and the Sociologists both acknowledged the reality that the South was undeniably “behind” the North in terms of its productivity. However, the New Southerners and the Sociologists did not intertwine the issue with matters of regional identity: they outlined the issues and provided integration-oriented suggestions to solve them. On the other hand, the Agrarians are unique in specifically referring to the South as a “colony” of the North. Attributing the economic discrepancy between the two regions to the existence of a colonial relationship indicates an Agrarian tendency to victimize the South. The Agrarian tendency can be rationalized through the contextualization of the Agrarians in their historical period, which reveals the occurrence of

repeated attacks on Southern institutions that likely inspired the Agrarians' emphasis on the existence of a "colonial relationship."

In "Expeditents," Davidson argues that, beginning in the 1920s, the South became subject to a new wave of attacks on the part of the North—attacks that negatively painted the South as uncultured and backwards, thus directly targeting its sense of regional identity. Davidson argues that these attacks began with the Harding Administration, and one can confidently infer that he is pointing to the speech given by President Harding at the semi-centennial celebration of Birmingham, Alabama. Harding's speech celebrated the industrial progress of the South, specifically praising their industrial resourcefulness during WWI. What likely infuriated Davidson, however, wasn't the praise of industrialization, but rather Harding's denunciation of segregation in the South. In his speech, Harding stated:

"I can say to you people of the South, both white and black, that the time has passed when you are entitled to assume that this problem of races is particularly your problem.... It is the problem of democracy everywhere, if we mean the thing we say about democracy as the ideal political state...I would say let the black man vote when he is fit to vote: prohibit the white man voting when he is unfit to vote."⁷⁸

By denouncing segregation and the "race problem" on a national scale, Davidson argues that Harding made an, "...attack upon Southern life and its characteristic institutions. This attack has been more abusive and unrelenting than anything the Southern states have experienced since the last Federal soldier was withdrawn from their soil." Davidson argues that this speech paved the way for a whole set of Southern attacks—he lists the Scopes trial, H.L. Mencken's *Sahara of the Bozart*, a New York *World's* exposé of the Ku Klux Klan, the Scottsboro case, and others—that only served to discredit Southern opinion, prevent the region from achieving independence

⁷⁸ Warren Harding, "Address of the President of the United States at the Celebration of the Semicentennial founding of the city of Birmingham, Alabama," (speech, Birmingham, AL, October 26, 1921), Proquest Congressional Databases.

within the nation, and worst of all, “...indoctrinates the South...with a feeling of its own inferiority and so divides the South against itself.”⁷⁹ By denouncing the existence of segregation in the South, Harding directly pointed to a cultural disparity between the regions and in so doing angered the subset of Southerners—like the Agrarians—with strong ties to the idea of an “Old South.” Davidson’s response to this denunciation not only sheds light on the racist, conservative leanings of the Agrarians, but also points to the reality that many Southerners identified “Southernness” as encompassing segregation.

In the *Southern Review*, other Agrarians discuss the ways Southern institutions are “attacked” in books. Several authors point to the publication of harmful books or reportages; for example, in “Sweet are the Uses of Degeneracy,” John Donald Wade critiques Erskine Caldwell’s books, *Tobacco Road* and *American Earth*, for unfairly depicting the average Southern rural folk as “amusingly simple,” or, when enraged, “primitive” and “horribly brutal.”⁸⁰ Wade further critiques the author for creating a book whose sole purpose was to entertain “New Yorkers or soon-to-be New Yorkers,” and that he did so because he was, “...plaintively anxious to please the kind and class of people that he has come to be affiliated with—the detached, nervous, thrill-goated metro-cosmopolitans of his own day.” Wade also criticized Caldwell’s sensationalization of the rural South for the purpose of entertaining Northern audiences:

“...it is all a very sad commentary on the unhappy folks who have not had the wit to move to some of the nation’s many Fifth Avenues or Greenwich villages...and it is all very authentic sounding, written by one who clearly knows the region he describes. There is no end of direct and immediate sex; there is a *bona fide* lynching with coca-cola served during the intermissions; there is an idyl of two utterly brutal white men monkey-wrenching five gold teeth from the mouth of a dead negro...”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Davidson, “Expedients vs. Principles,” 651.

⁸⁰ John Donald Wade, “Sweet are the Uses of Degeneracy,” *The Southern Review* 1, no. 3 (1936), 453.

⁸¹ Wade, “Sweet Are the Uses of Degeneracy,” 654.

In so doing, Wade argued, Caldwell was perpetuating a stereotype of the South as being a backwards, “less than” region, and that then this stereotype would be used by Northerners to empower them against the South. Wade very clearly described the publication of this novel as an attack on Southernness because it took actual Southern aspects—the existence of tenant farming, of lynching, and the like—and painted them to depict the South as a backwards region. While Wade is arguing that these aspects are over-dramatized in the novel, he is regardless admitting that they are emblematic of Southernness.

In “Erskine Caldwell’s Picture Book,” Donald Davidson critiques a photographic album composed by Erskine Caldwell. While primarily an account of the state of sharecropping in the South, Davidson argues that Caldwell taints the whole product with Mencken-like tone, or in other words presents the information such that the South is depicted as a backwards, racist, and overly religious place. He also argues that Caldwell leaves out the “colonizing relationship” between the North and the South and claims that farmers are not the only tenants in the South, because, “Nearly all Southerners are tenants, in effect or actuality. We have tenant bankers, tenant merchants, tenant manufacturers, tenant teachers, tenant clergy...And the absentee landlord over there tenants is the North.”⁸² Here, Davidson is elaborating on the existence of a colonial relationship between the regions: because every profession is “tenant” in nature, all Southern resources belong to the North, thereby stripping the South of its autonomy. In addition, by failing to address the colonial relationship, the South is painted as backwards because it has so much sharecropping—however, according to Davidson, sharecropping is due to the colonial relationship. Thus, “Erskine Caldwell’s Picture Book” attempts to defend the South against

⁸² Donald Davidson, “Erskine Caldwell’s Picture Book,” *The Southern Review* 4, no. 1 (1938), 15.

attacks that it is “backward” and instead suggests that its hardships are actually due to the colonial relationship with the North.

In “The Origins of the Civil War,” Frank Owsley reviews *The Antislavery Origins of the Civil War* and argues that it incorrectly claimed that slavery was the sole cause of the civil war. Instead, Owsley argued, slavery was always a sectional issue, but there were also many other sectional issues—like agriculture, soil, and land—that created tensions between the regions much before the establishment of the abolitionist movement.⁸³ Owsley also explained his point of view that the abolitionists, though painted as sweet and good-hearted folks by the Northern press, were actually insensitive, mean, and aggressive people who released incendiary content that deliberately attacked the core of Southern spirit. Therefore, Owsley argued that the issue of slavery and race was “incorrectly” sensationalized by abolitionists for the purpose of justifying the Civil War, because admitting that the Civil War was a conflict based in economic resources such as land and soil would cause the North to lose its justification for war.

In all these examples, the Agrarians point to an attack on Southern institutions and “Southernness.” However, there are some inconsistencies. When the Agrarians fight back against Northern critiques of rural Southerners as being crude, poor, and “backwards,” they are effectively asking for a cessation of unbiased stereotyping of rural folks. While the rural South was indeed poorer than the rest of the nation, asking the North to cease passing judgment on rural folks for their poverty—which they cannot control—is a justifiable act that is not inherently controversial. On the other hand, when the Agrarians express disdain towards critiques of segregation, slavery, and abolition, they are claiming that these institutions are crucial to “Southernness” and that their abolition would result in a loss of Southern identity—a claim that completely fails to acknowledge the violent historical reality of the antebellum South.

⁸³ Frank Owsley, “The Origins of the Civil War,” *The Southern Review* 6, no 1 (1938), 612.

Thus, how can one make sense of the Agrarian stance? Admittedly, slavery was indeed a crucial component of Southernness prior to the Civil War, as the entirety of Southern society and Southern economy revolved around the existence of slavery—in this way, the Agrarians are technically correct in claiming that segregation was a crucial Southern institution. Just because something is technically correct, however, does not mean it is right—and in fact, there were many other aspects delineated by the Agrarians (such as a love for the land, a repudiation of mass industrialization, the ability to make unfiltered art, etc) that they also categorized as being inherently “Southern” and that did not center the exploitation of human life. Had they refrained from supporting segregation and slavery, thereby nearing their ideology to that of the “Old South,” it is possible that their views on other issues, as well as their conceptualization of “Southernness,” would have been more readily received.

The Agrarians utilized the concept of a “colonizing relationship” as a framework through which to explore the dynamic between the North and South and provide solutions to the Southern Problem. In the Agrarians’ view, the existence of the “colonizing relationship” was supported by the inherent flaws of industrial capitalism, a perceived economic exploitation of the South on the part of the North, and the occurrence of repeated cultural attacks on Southern institutions from Northern media outlets. While the “colonizing relationship” contributed to the victimization complex of the Agrarians and therefore facilitated their rejection, an exploration of the group’s rationale behind this framework reveals the presence of constructive elements within the Agrarian ideology and contributes to a nuanced understanding of Southern regional identity.

Conclusion: Why Study Regional Identity?

The 1930s South was a unique historical moment where the region found itself transitioning between the modern and non-modern world. In response to this period of rapid change, a new wave of Southern intellectuals emerged who, in trying to grapple with the changing identity of the region, proposed solutions and suggestions for how the South should exist in the modern world. The Agrarians were one such group who repudiated the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the South and instead proposed that the region remain primarily agricultural. To prove this point, the Agrarians painted an idealized picture of Southern rural life and argued that the perceived economic and sociocultural shortcomings of the region were rooted in a “colonizing relationship” between the North and the South, whereby the industrial machine of the North took advantage of and depleted Southern resources. However, the Agrarians’ heavy reliance on rural romanticization, in combination with their tendency towards sectionalist government and victimization of their region, evoked connotations with the Confederacy and “Old South” and resulted in their widespread rejection.

Having fully characterized and contextualized the Agrarian ideology, one also sees how their tendency towards romanticization, sectionalism, and victimization was also present in other modes of Southern thought; however, because the Agrarians solely relied on these lenses, and failed to provide objective fact, the group was written off as being composed of Southern fanatics instead of individuals able to provide concrete solutions to the Southern Problem. Though not explored in full throughout the thesis, it is also important to note that the Agrarians’ reliance on romanticism was particularly damaging for their credibility due to their background

as literary figures; in using flowery language, their argumentation was not only written off as fanatical, but also based in literary as opposed to sociological expertise.

And yet, the widespread rejection of the Agrarians, both during their time and today, is important because it symbolizes a greater pattern of Southern regional identification. It may be relevant here to consider broader definitions of identity. James C. Cobb, a historian of the American South, defines identity as something that is constructed, noting that “identities have not existed in isolation, but always in relation to other perceived oppositional identities.”⁸⁴ Thus, undergoing the process of self-identification and self-conceptualization can only occur in response to an event or perceived “other.” It then follows that the formation of regional identity, or any identity, is a political act with social, cultural, and economic ramifications in the future of a greater nation. Analyzing the development of a regional identity is therefore a highly constructive endeavor as it can shed light on the history, and current predicament, of a nation.

At large, Southern regional identity has consistently been constructed in opposition to other regions of the United States. In the context of the Agrarians, their rejection was not based on the objective content of their ideology but rather by pre-existing notions of Southerners as fanatics obsessed with glorifying and romanticizing the South. The widespread rejection of the Agrarians by Northern audiences therefore “othered” Southerners and bolstered the existence of a Southern regional identity constructed in opposition to other regions in the United States. Understanding this rejection not only allows for a deeper comprehension of Southern and United States history, but also allows one to see a moment where a Southern regional identity was further defined through the “other-ization” of the Agrarians.

The oppositional nature between Northern and Southern regional identity is supported by the inherent geographical differences between the North and the South, which further bolstered

⁸⁴ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford Press, 2005), 6.

the opposing nature of the two regions. As was explored in the introduction, the South partially evolved into a different society than the North because of its warmer climate and fertile soil, which invited the importation of plantation slavery from the Caribbean. This resulted in the South developing a societal, economic, and political structure completely distinct from that of the North by the outbreak of the Civil War. In the wake of its defeat and “humiliation,” the South had to redefine itself such that it could maintain aspects of its unique regional identity in the new context of the Union; a quote from Southern intellectual Wilbur J. Cash perfectly encapsulates this idea: “...the conflict with the Yankees...created the concept of the South as something more than a matter of geography.” This post-war process of regional redefinition resulted in Northerners and Southerners holding a completely different understanding of the South: while Northerners looked down upon the region as underdeveloped, uncultured, and savage, Southerners glorified and romanticized their region.⁸⁵ This present-day tension between regions of the United States is partially rooted in the oppositional nature of identity-making, a process that has been occurring since the foundation of the first colonies. Understanding the process through which Southern regional identity has evolved is therefore crucial for understanding the United States today.

Studying the development of regional identity is also crucial because there are inherent limitations and dangers to approaching sociocultural issues with the inherent biases of regional identity. Scholars have pointed to the irony in the reception of the Agrarians; although they were widely rejected during their time, many of the ideological stances presented in *I'll Take My Stand* re-emerged in later progressive platforms. For example, in the 1950s, American intellectuals specifically denounced the new consumerist, “other-directed” post-war United States society;

⁸⁵ Edward L. Ayers, “What We Talk about When We Talk about the South,” in Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Steven Nissenbaum, and Peter Olaf, eds., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 64.

this was predicted by the Agrarians' complete repudiation of industrialist societies. The Agrarians' call for respect of the land re-emerged in the 1970s, when environmental concerns became more serious and popular environmentalist movements began to organize. In the 1980s, energy shortages and lack of resources inspired a widespread call for organic, earth-conscious living that was reminiscent of the Agrarians' repudiation of industrialized, urban societies.⁸⁶ Thinking about the ironic reception and continued relevance of *I'll Take My Stand* begs one to consider the role of regional identity in its creation, but also in its widespread rejection. To phrase it as a question: in what ways did common understandings of Southern regional identity inhibit the ability for intellectuals to communicate about critical economic, political, and cultural issues in their nation?

In discussing the limitations of regional identity, it is also important to address the limitations of this thesis more broadly. Focusing solely on a group of white, educated Southern men, and making claims about Southern regional identity based on their writings, results in the erasure of all other classes of Southerners. The South is not composed of only white, conservative men: in *Other Souths*, historian Pippa Holloway notes that, "the South is composed of individuals from different races, backgrounds, sexual orientations, and cultures."⁸⁷ The experience of living in the South and discovering one's regional identity is completely different depending on what kind of Southerner you are. Thus, an analysis of the Agrarian ideology as a means to understand Southern regional identity does not account for the experience of other classes of Southerners. At the same time, the basis of the Agrarian rejection was due to their connotation as Confederate-leaning Southern fanatics; this phenomenon is emblematic of a

⁸⁶ Paul Conkin, "The Book" in *The Southern Agrarians* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 88.

⁸⁷ Pippa Holloway, ed., *Other Souths: Diversity and Difference in the U.S. South, Reconstruction to Present* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 1.

certain tendency to connote the South with one image. This conception of the South not only contributes to the "othering" of the region, but also contributes to the creation of a homogenous Southern identity. Therefore, although this thesis only focused on a small intellectual group, it hopefully also raises critical questions surrounding the erasure of minority identities within a larger regional identity.

Although briefly explored, this thesis lacked a substantial analysis of the Agrarians' approach to race and class in the South. That said, this shortcoming is rooted in the fact that the Agrarians largely ignored issues of race and class in the South in their argumentation, whether due an unwillingness to grapple with the realities of their region or to an inability to reach a united stance on these issues. Indeed, there is a general lack in scholarship surrounding the Agrarian views towards class and race issues in the South; thus, a potential future direction for this study would be to further explore the Agrarian neglect of race and class and the implications of this in the development of a Southern regional identity.

On a microscopic level, this thesis aimed to characterize and study the ideology of a niche group of literary intellectuals, the Southern Agrarians. Broadly, however, it also aimed to better understand Southern identity and the role it plays in the existence of the South as a region, historically and today, and concluded by pointing to the limitations and dangers of relying on a generalized regional identity to understand a region. It also acknowledges the lack of an analysis of race, and suggests further work on the topic. Identity is a complex phenomenon that deserves continued scholarly attention, as it drives the historical development of nations on a sociological level. It is my hope that readers of this thesis will feel inspired to explore their own understanding of their identities and question the ways in which it has influenced their lived experience.

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