"This Is Our Barn": Agrarian Sentimentality and the Fracking Formula in *Promised Land*

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With the energy insecurity brought about in large parts of the globe by the Russian war against Ukraine, several states, especially in Europe, reinvigorated discussions about energy technologies that were thought to be phased out or eschewed prior. In addition to debates about prolonging the production and use of nuclear energy in Germany, several nation states also brought hydraulic fracturing (fracking) for the extraction of natural gas back on the table. Fracking is a technology that was introduced in the United States as early as the 1950s and that is now used to extract natural gas and oil from shale rock by "injecting millions of gallons of water, chemical additives, and a proppant (sand and/or silica) at high pressure into the wellbore to create small fractures in the rock" (Finkel xiv). While in the earlier days natural gas was extracted from so-called conventional sources, in the new millennium fracking gained a larger popularity with energy companies due to the successful development and implementation of "horizontal drilling," which made it easier to access shale gas, considered an "unconventional" source of fossil fuels (ibid. 3). Especially in the U.S., fracking was hailed as the technology that would bring about energy independence from foreign oil and gas and that would thereby strengthen the nation's position in the global political arena.[1] But fracking has always been controversial: For some it represented a "bridge technology" to cleaner and more sustainable energy production (Kistler 317) because it was said to produce less CO_2

1 Fracking is carried out in many locations, from California through Montana and North Dakota (Bakken Shale) to Texas (Eagle Ford Basin), and Appalachia (Marcellus Shale). The biggest shale gas depot in the U.S. is the Marcellus Shale, which lies underneath Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and parts of New York. Some U.S. states have banned the practice (Washington, New York, Maryland, and Vermont), some of which do not have natural gas depots.

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emissions than coal and oil (Plumer; Nunez). For others, the environmental cost was too high—not least because it slowed the development of solar and wind energy (Kistler 317). In the early 2000s, a literal fracking boom brought the methods and risks of this type of fossil fuel extraction to the larger public's attention. Despite the economic benefits that extracting cheap natural gas promised, it also led to questions about environmental safety and the possible damages of this practice, such as poisoned wells and contaminated groundwater. This boom of shale oil and gas extraction also inspired a number of works (documentary films, movies, journalistic and non-fictional texts, and novels) that explored fracking and its possible consequences, positive and negative, for rural communities, the environment, and ultimately the nation itself. The central theme of a broad range of cultural texts is what Colin Jerolmack calls the "public/private paradox" (7), which entails that private citizens' decisions on fracking possibly influence the livelihood of whole communities and ecosystems. This can be described, with John Cawelti, as producing (and following) a specific narrative formula—what we call the "fracking formula," which structures the majority of cultural texts focused on hydraulic fracturing.

This article examines how the first—and to date only—major U.S. American motion picture on fracking portrays the controversial debate and diverging attitudes toward the issue and shows how it relies on "agrarian sentimentality" to challenge the environmentally risky extractive practice. In 2012, Gus Van Sant's film *Promised Land* brought the environmental controversy surrounding fracking and the economic dilemma many communities face(d) to the big screen, starring Matt Damon in yet another version of his well-known all-American good guy as protagonist Steve Butler. Steve, born and raised in rural Iowa, is a highly successful "landman" at the oil and gas company Global Crosspower Solutions, traveling the rural United States with his colleague Sue (played by Frances McDormand) to get people to lease out their land for natural gas drilling. Due to some unexpected complications with the well-informed local high school teacher and former engineer Frank Yates (played by Hal Holbrook) and what Sue and Steve call an "environmental presence" (John Krasinski as fake-environmentalist Dustin Noble), they must prolong their stay in McKinley, a town that Van Sant portrays as the generic U.S. small town. Steve, who is himself from the 'heartland,' ends up re-discovering his rural (family) roots and his love for small-town life during his stay. When it becomes clear that Dustin Noble, the environmentalist, was sent by Global to deceive the locals and make them vote in favor of fracking, Steve ends up turning on his employer and warning people about the dangers of fracking.

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Promised Land relies both on the Agrarian Myth, a construction deeply rooted in U.S. American cultural memory, and the sentimentalization of small-town life. Indeed, in taking a new agrarianist stance,[2] the film places a rural town and its people's small-scale family farming lifestyle at the center of the national debate surrounding energy transition and sustainability, the rural/urban divide, (loss of) community, and democracy. In the following, we analyze the film as an exemplary text using the "fracking formula" and a particular brand of sentimentality—what we call "agrarian sentimentality"—to teach audiences how to "think and act in a particular way" (Tompkins xi), and we might add "feel," about the destructive effects of resource extraction, and especially hydraulic fracturing. We read *Promised Land* as a romantic, and at times nostalgic, depiction of the rural as the last stronghold of original U.S. American values (and virtues). In offering a sentimentalized account of rural community bonds and small-scale family farming as a bastion against the fracking industry, the film not only obscures the realities of the contemporary agro-industrial complex and the economic struggles of small farms but also evades an in-depth inquiry into the politics of natural gas extraction.

Promised Land and the "Fracking Formula"

Since the 2010s, there has been a wave of documentary films and novels that have aimed to encapsulate the meanings and consequences of hydraulic fracturing—see, for instance, *Gasland* (2010), *Triple Divide* (2012), *TruthLand* (2012) and *FrackNation* (2013), as well as the novels *Fractures* (Herrin 2013), *The Fracking King* (Browning 2014), *The Fracking War* (Fitzgerald 2014), and Jennifer Haigh's *Heat & Light* (2016; see author's interview and Heike Paul's article on the novel in this volume). Most of these cultural artifacts are infused with the same key themes and stock characters and share a similar setting—so much so that one might speak of a "fracking formula" that would unite these texts into a coherent cultural subgenre.[3] This formula often includes the establishment of a di-

2 New Agrarianism is a movement of both scholars and farmers that originated in the late 1970s with, for example, author/farmer Wendell Berry as a leading voice. The movement rests on the agrarian tradition that connects democracy and land-use (Fiskio).

3 Amitav Ghosh has introduced the term "petrofiction" in the 1990s to categorize and examine (literary) texts that have dealt with the impact of oil on societies. For our context, it might be relevant to talk about "frackfiction" to discuss the texts that are

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chotomy between the (coastal) metropolis or metropolitan area and the small town in the 'heartland;' a reinforcement of stereotypes of not only 'urban environmentalists' or professional protesters but also those of the uneducated rural population; and references to the United States' (mythologized) agrarian past. Moreover, narratives of the formula tend to stress the cultural specificity of fracking in the U.S., and in particular the "intimacy" (cf. Jerolmack) of the issue. The formulaic fashion of narratives about fracking may simply have to do with the strict sequence of events that fracking usually entails: the 'discovery' of natural gas in a certain region, the company landmen visiting people in their homes, residents having to decide whether to lease or not, ensuing environmental protest, and, sometimes, the actual drilling and its consequences for the area (for example the installment of necessary infrastructure, the building of so-called man camps, as envisioned in *Yellow Earth* [Sayles 2020], the influx of money, and environmental degradation). However, we argue that these recurring themes make up a "fracking formula" that points to a fascination with the phenomenon of fracking and the culturally specific way this drilling technology is at the core of controversy in the U.S.

Formulaic narratives, according to John Cawelti, not only "tend to have a much more limited repertory of plots, characters, and setting" but are also tied to "a particular culture and period of time" (120–22). Before going into more detail about the themes, characters, and setting, a closer look at the cultural specificity of fracking helps clarify why much of the cultural production on fracking is in formulaic fashion. While fracking is certainly a topic of (political) discussion in many countries, there seems to be a culturally specific fascination with the technology in the U.S. that also results in specific tropes and themes in narratives about fracking; not only because it is carried out in the U.S. on a scale that had politicians and pundits talk about "the shale revolution" but also because private citizens are especially involved in the decision-making. The choice of whether to 'frack' for natural gas or not is largely left to private citizens and not the American public to decide (Jerolmack 16–17). Colin Jerolmack therefore describes fracking in the U.S. as a "private," even "intimate" matter (7). The reason for this "intimacy" is a legal peculiarity of the United States, namely that property rights here extend "up to heaven and down to hell" (ibid. 17), meaning that whoever owns the surface land also holds the mineral rights and has thus the power to decide whether to lease the land to gas companies

turning to this 'novel' form of resource extraction—as powerful and as destructive as oil extraction.

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or not. This is especially true for states east of the Mississippi where the practice of 'split estate' (i.e., mineral rights are separate from surface land rights) is not as common as in the western United States (ibid.18). This peculiarity then results in what he terms the "public/private paradox" (7).

Setting

As indicated by Cawelti, setting is a major aspect of formulaic narratives. Due to the Marcellus Shale lying underneath Appalachian states, the debates about fracking also shed light on the rural areas of this region. The election of Donald Trump as President and publications such as J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016), put small-town Appalachian communities in the spotlight and have inspired various stereotypes over the years, most significantly that of "a space set apart from the rest of the nation," "America's 'Other,'" characterized by "economic and cultural marginalization" (Long 84; see also Bell 14–17; Harrison 735).[4] Here, fracking meets "socially and geographically isolated heartland communities most decimated by the postindustrial service and tech economy" and the decision whether to 'frack or not to frack' "is largely in the hands of conservative, working-class whites residing in rural America—precisely the communities that purportedly feel forsaken by beltway politicians and coastal elites" (Jerolmack 18). The split estate rule and public/private paradox may also be the reason why most accounts on fracking are preoccupied with and/or set in Appalachia and regions above the Marcellus Shale, as opposed to Texas (the Eagle Ford Basin is the "most active shale play in the world" [eaglefordshale.com]) or North Dakota (Bakken Shale). As already mentioned, here, private citizens carry the burden of making decisions that not only have an impact on their bank account but also on their environment and by extension that of their neighbors and their communities.

This region offers an interesting contrast to the often 'ugly' sights and sites of extraction: hilly and green pastoral landscapes dotted by small-scale family farms and small towns. The economic hardship in the rural parts of the Appalachian states combined with the monetary potential of the fossil resources in the ground further serve to highlight the dilemma of residents and communities, many of which are seemingly dependent on extractive industries—or used to be, in the case of coal—rather than making a living 'off the land' with

4 See Bell's *Fighting King Coal: The Challenges to Micromobilization in Central Appalachia* for a discussion of Appalachia as "internal colony" or "energy sacrifice zone."

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traditional farming. Due to the rurality and small-scale community structure of the locations where gas companies seek to conduct fracking, "[s]hale communities are in the unenviable position of having to confront the public/private paradox face to face, at the fence post, the general store, Little League games, and town hall meetings" (Jerolmack 7). In *Promised Land*, Steve and Sue not only travel through all these spaces—the general store, the town hall, and the children's baseball game—, they also have a particular method of convincing people to lease their land that plays on very private and intimate issues. Sue, herself a mother, stresses the importance of school funding to a potential signatory, while Steve claims he wants people to keep their family farms or live in a luxury they never experienced before. At the McKinley dive bar, Steve antagonizes four local farmers for not leasing out their land by telling them:

> You don't want to apply for college loans for your kid? This money says, "Fuck you" loans. You worried about car payments? "Fuck you" payments. The bank's gonna come and foreclose on your farm? "Fuck you" bank. "Fuck you" money is the ultimate liberator. And underneath your town there is "fuck you" money. (01:05:39-01:05:57)

The quote reveals that Steve cannot understand at first why the community would pass on the opportunity he and Sue supposedly offer them on a silver platter. Steve, who is clearly still affected by the downfall of his own hometown after a Caterpillar plant closed down, finds in fracking a promise of economic success that can resuscitate 'let down' small towns around the country. Fracking narratives thus not only examine fracking as a technology and an extractive practice, but as a more comprehensive societal issue with critical economic, social, cultural, and environmental repercussions.

Themes

Fictions about fracking often present a rural community that is disrupted by the 'discovery' of natural gas underneath it—as it is the case, for instance, in Sayles' *Yellow Earth* and Haigh's *Heat & Light*. The prospect of monetary gain and wealth (or of becoming a "shaleonnaire") that is offered by gas company representatives is mostly portrayed as an outside force potentially threatening the rural idyll, community cohesion, and an agrarian lifestyle, bringing to light latent conflicts and intensifying already existing ones. Rarely, fracking is portrayed as the only way to prolong the existence of the otherwise struggling American farmer (as in the documentary *FrackNation*). *Promised Land* is based

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on the premise that Steve and Sue's offers trigger changes in the community that could possibly upend people's lifestyles. The depicted communities then struggle with making the decision for or against fracking (as embodied by the town's vote in *Promised Land*), with the decisions of their neighbors (like Rena in *Heat & Light*), or the consequences of their own decision (in *Gasland*, *Heat & Light*, and *Yellow Earth*, for example). In a key scene of *Promised Land*, Steve and science teacher Frank Yates share a heart-to-heart on the old man's porch, looking out on Frank's pastures and miniature horses as the sun goes down. In an impassioned speech, Frank describes the sacrifices that many individuals envision in the prospect of giving up their lands to oil and gas companies:

> You're a good man, Steve. You have so many of the qualities we need more of these days […] I just wish you weren't doing this. You came here and offered us money, figuring you were helping us. All we had to do to get it is, be willing to scorch the earth under our feet. (01:18:56-01:19:25)

Steve is depicted here as an intruder who disrupted the quiet town of McKinley, despite his seemingly good intentions. It is relevant that this scene appears shortly after Steve's "fuck you money" speech because both make use of the image of the underground in very different ways. While Steve equates the ground, and more precisely what lays underneath it, with wealth and riches, Frank posits it as sacred in itself.

The company-sent landmen are agents in the plots of fracking narratives that readers and viewers accompany to the farms, kitchens, living rooms, and porches of small-town Americans. While they symbolize corporate greed and a capitalist disregard for the environment to some, for others they represent financial independence and the American Dream of upward mobility. Despite the cold calculus of lease negotiations and agreements for mineral rights, much of the plot of fracking narratives takes place in these intimate spaces, and not on gas fields or next to waste-water pits, highlighting the personal matter of the choice. It is often during the landmen visits that the technology of fracking is explained to landowners, and, by extension to readers or viewers. These explanations of fracking tend to be 'dumbed down' and its inconvenient and dangerous aspects are left aside or glossed over. This serves to characterize the rural residents not only as gullible and uneducated, but also as falling prey to corporate deception. Steve, who at the beginning of the film proudly accepts his boss' praise that he is the most productive of Global's landmen, comes to admit in the film's final scene that he lied to people on purpose about the worth of their land: "I've looked a lot of you right in the eye and told you there's a

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bunch of money under your feet and we can get it out, risk free, guaranteed. Clearly, that's not true."

Another major recurring theme in most fracking narratives is water, which also plays a subtle but symbolic role in *Promised Land*. The film begins and ends with Steve washing his face in crystal clear water—once in the bathroom of a restaurant in New York City,[5] and then towards the end in the local town gym. This opening scene is noteworthy because NYC gets large parts of its water supply from the Delaware River basin, which in part lies in Pennsylvania (approximately 5 million New Yorkers are supported by water from the Delaware River basin, which supplies water to 13.3 million people; cf. Delaware River Basin Comission). Water supply in general is a theme that particularly highlights the consequences the public/private paradox can possibly have for millions of Americans in terms of environmental risk. The Academy Award nominated documentary *Gasland* provided the U.S. American public with one of the most infamous, and iconic, images associated with fracking: a man lighting his tap water on fire due to methane contamination.[6] *Promised Land* reiterates this iconic moment from *Gasland* in a scene where Dustin Noble, in a demonstration of what fracking chemicals allegedly do to the groundwater during his presentation on fracking to a school class, sets his props ablaze and ominously says: "This is all the water that we had, all the water we had to drink, all the water that cows had to drink, all the water that puppies and kittens had to drink, all the water for the fish and the rivers" (00:53:10-00:53:20). Though again the film does not show the consequences of fracking for groundwater and wells explicitly, it does visually connect the practice of fracking with water and its potential contamination throughout.

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5 Though not explicitly stated, there is a reference that Butler's boss flew in to Teterboro airport, NJ.

6 Especially famous is the case of Dimock, Pennsylvania, a small town in the rural part of the state where inhabitants were filmed lighting their tap water on fire due to alleged methane contamination—a scene that was picked up in both *FrackNation* and *TruthLand* as well as by anti-fracking activists. Protesters used an image of Smokey Bear, a Forest Service icon for wildfire prevention, and updated his famous slogan ("Only you can prevent forest fires") to "Only YOU can prevent faucet fires." The artist who created the Smokey meme, Lopi LaRoe, later received a cease-and-desist letter from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which also includes the US Forest Service. The slogan, the agency claimed, was not to be altered in order not to confuse citizens about wildfire prevention. (Rugh; "About LMNOPI")

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Characters

Recurring figures of fracking narratives include the landman, representing oil and gas companies, the farmer, mostly represented as farming 'traditionally' and on a small scale rather than in industrial fashion, well-educated, fracking-skeptic outsiders that moved to the country ("rusticators"[7]) or moved back home, and environmentalists. Steve Butler differs to a degree from other representations of this stock character because he can claim a farming background for himself. However, to him, as "one of two guys of [his] graduating class that went to college and studied something other than agriculture" economic success is more important than "the farming town fantasy" he calls "delusional self-mythology" in the beginning of the film. He views money "as the ultimate liberator" and tells the residents of the town they had "fuck-you-money" in the ground—meaning they could leave farming behind in the future thanks to oil and gas money. Environmental safety, especially regarding water, is not Steve's concern in the beginning, who also celebrates natural gas as "the clean alternative" to oil and coal, reiterating the idea of the "bridge technology." Steve is thus depicted as a career-oriented man pursuing a big promotion at Global—which he ends up receiving— and his upward mobility has after all been largely afforded by the extractive industry.

Next to the stock character of the landman, fracking narratives are usually also populated by environmentalists and anti-fracking activists, who also represent an element of disruption. As in *Heat & Light* and *Promised Land*, environmentalism does not seem to exist within the rural regions where the stories are set but is a phenomenon that is brought into the communities by outside actors—rusticators and well-educated city-dwellers. *Promised Land* features an environmental activist who goes by the telling name of Noble, a young man who arrives in the town alone shortly after the gas company. This portrayal of environmentalism as a phenomenon of the city rather than the countryside is reinforcing stereotypes of an urban population that is "out of touch with the economic struggles of those who work in rural extractive economies" (Sutter vii). Similar to the figure of the rusticator, the environmentalist in fracking narratives is usually a city person that is pitted against the small-town community. *Promised Land* makes clear from the beginning that environmentalism poses a threat to Steve and Sue's endeavors, but they come prepared: Before

7 According to Jerolmack, "someone of means who moved from a metropolitan area to the country" (8).

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they set out to win over a new town, they are briefed on whether they should expect resistance or if there is an "environmental presence." When farmer and MIT graduate Frank Yates asks a critical question about fracking at the first townhall meeting, Butler immediately asks him: "Are you with an environmental group?," indicating a certain disregard for concerns the locals might have and positioning environmentalists as the ultimate obstacle in Butler's way. Later in the film, when Dustin Noble enters the scene, environmentalism vs. extractivism is established as a central dichotomy of the narrative. Steve projects a range of stereotypes about environmentalists on Noble, who is portrayed as the average nice guy wearing a baseball cap (reminiscent of Josh Fox in *Gasland*), driving around in a Forest Service-green pick-up truck,[8] and singing Bruce Springsteen during a karaoke night in town. Steve calls him a "hippie," talks about his "stoner buddies," and orders him "one of those fancy imported [beers] and a granola bar" at the local dive bar, suggesting that Noble does not fit into the rural landscape as well as Steve because he is supposedly a disconnected urbanite. Sue, moreover, calls him "a really nice kid" showing a belittling attitude towards environmentalists. The fact that Noble is later revealed to be an employee of Global, who was sent to McKinley to 'play environmentalist' in order to get the town to distrust any environmental agenda renders the movie's portrayal of environmental activism rather negative. Thus, while "environmental protection as a value is upheld," "the people in charge of it are identified as untrustworthy" (Moore 242).

Instead of offering an in-depth exploration of fracking and its environmental impacts, *Promised Land* thus turns to what could potentially be lost in the fracking boom: namely the (past) agrarian lifestyle of rural America, the close-knit communities of the U.S. small-town, and with it, the nation's core values. It romanticizes small-town America and offers a sentimental return to the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal as a (non-)solution to the problem of hazardous natural gas extraction and the economic problems of rural regions. Here, "the rural is not only suggestive of a particular national past" but is also "appropriated as an allegory of the nation" in envisioning the future (Kley/Paul 3). In fact,

8 Ironically, radical environmentalists have historically viewed the Forest Service as an obstacle and accused the federal agency of catering to corporations and betraying their task of managing public lands through timber sales and the building of roads (Woodhouse 174–175). It should be noted though that in some parts of the U.S., the Forest Service is also in charge of managing designated wilderness areas that are, in turn, viewed critically by those in favor of industrial development.

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this agrarian sentimentality could also be defining for the fracking formula we conceptualize. In the following, we examine the ways in which the film sentimentalizes agrarian life and reconfigures it to critique extractivism.

Challenging Extractivism through Agrarian Sentimentality

At its release, *Promised Land* gathered mixed reviews from film critics. While some applauded the director and writers' attempt to treat cinematically a determining issue for the contemporary moment, for others, the film was simply too sentimental. Philip French from *The Guardian* judged the film "sentimental, Capraesque fare" and for *NPR*'s Jeannette Catsoulis, it is a "gentle but knowing natural gas drama" that ends up "cav[ing] to sentiment and stereotype." That 'sentimental' is used here pejoratively to condemn the film's supposedly obvious manipulation of viewers' emotions is noteworthy because it reflects a broader cultural suspicion towards the sentimental as something inauthentic, exaggerated, disingenuous, perhaps even, futile. Yet, the sentimental, or sentimentality, "as a communicative and relational code" ("DFG Research Training Group"), performs important cultural and political work on the audience. *Promised Land*'s agrarian sentimentality is geared toward both a political mobilization against fossil fuel extraction and a stabilization of the agrarian ideal at a time of economic and environmental uncertainty. The only way to keep fossil fuel in the ground, it seems to argue, is to care for the land and the communities above it.

To this day, the Agrarian Myth is one of the most enduring and elastic national myths in the United States. Briefly defined, it encapsulates the belief that rural spaces, populations, and lifestyles are the quintessence of the U.S. nation. Attached to this myth is a set of qualities, which are supposedly distinctly agrarian yet also define the whole U.S. national character, like virtuousness, self-sufficiency, integrity, and duty to a local community. In *The Age of Reform*, historian Richard Hofstadter describes that "[t]he American mind was raised upon a sentimental attachment to rural living and upon a series of notions about rural people and rural life" (23). He elaborates:

> The agrarian myth represents a kind of homage that Americans have paid to the fancied innocence of their origins. Like any complex of ideas, the agrarian myth cannot be defined in a phrase, but its component themes

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> form a clear pattern. Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. (ibid.)

For Hofstadter, popular literary discourse in the early 19th century participated largely in the development and affirmation of the myth, noting that later on it evolved into "a mass creed, a part of the country's political folklore and its nationalist ideology" (28). The "sentimental attachment" to the rural that the Agrarian Myth is based on long served to obscure the violent expropriation of Indigenous peoples from the land during European settlement. Scholars, like Richard Slotkin, have traced its lineage back to the nation's colonial beginnings in the 17th and 18th centuries as the myth became crucial to the discourse of Westward expansion and the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Manifestations of the myth can also be found in early republic writings with notably Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785). Jefferson's agrarian republicanism envisioned the United States as a democratic nation founded on the virtuous nature of farmers—"the most valuable citizens" and "chosen people of God" (135)—and the 'richness' of the land. Jefferson posited agrarianism as a safeguard against industrialization, urbanization, and supposed national moral decay. Jeffersonian notions of the farmer as the ideal U.S. American citizen and agrarian spaces as settings of democratic experience, self-sufficiency/autonomy, and virtuousness/authenticity continue to be resonating cultural and political symbols (for a national identity) to this day. Indeed, the Agrarian Myth is particularly malleable and has continuously been (re-)shaped for new purposes and ideologies in relation to rural landscapes and the people who inhabit them—from republican politicians talking about a "real America" to Dodge Ram car commercials (Kley/Paul 3–4), and leftist grassroots social movements arguing for sustainable farming and climate justice (Singer/Grey/Motter). The agrarian setting in Van Sant's *Promised Land* is depicted through vast landscapes with flourishing green fields, only sparsely spotted by small-scale family farms, red barns, and rustic houses with white picket fences. Although it does depict U.S. American rural spaces amidst economic hardship, the film rests heavily on a sentimental activism that uses the Agrarian Myth to propose a story of renewal, hope, and resilience.

First and foremost, the film aestheticizes and idealizes rural spaces. The opening scenes of the film are relevant in this context because they play on the dichotomy at the core of the Agrarian Myth: country versus city, metropolis versus small town. While the film posits the rural as a space of "'authentic'

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Americanness," this is only fleshed out as a contrast to "urban or metropolitan spaces" (Kley/Paul 5). At the beginning of the film Steve Butler is shown entering the main room of a fancy restaurant in New York. As the camera follows the character on his way to his table, it lingers on the ostentatious architecture of the place, with its massive columns, huge paned windows, and gold ornaments. The frame is crowded with people dining, laughing, drinking, and is constantly split up by wooden panels, waiters passing by, mirrors, and walls. The scene is set in a cool lighting with blue and grey tones. Overall, the composition of the scene creates a dull, almost gloomy, atmosphere in which the character seems to be 'lost' in the crowd and alone. The next scene is constructed in opposition. From inside an empty barn, the camera follows a man in his late '70s opening the door and loading his pick-up truck with a bag of what looks like hay. The scene seems to be shot in the morning, with natural warm light, beaming through the door and the cracks of the barn—a cat sits peacefully in the frame of the door and birds are chirping. A montage follows and alternates between the elderly man driving off his small farm and lush garden and Steve Butler sitting in a bus, looking at the fields outside the window. While we follow the old man from a shoulder level shot, which provides a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the character, we follow Butler's bus from an aerial shot, which captures the expanse of the vast landscape. Accompanying these images is a score by Danny Elfman, an eerie and melancholic choral music (in fact, performed by a boys' choir) that conveys to the audience a quasi-religious experience—connecting therefore the landscape to the sacred. These shots provide pastoral images of rolling hills and rustic barns that contrast starkly to the cold and impersonal atmosphere of Butler's New York meeting. They establish, right from the beginning of the movie, rural and agrarian spaces as idyllic when compared to urban spaces.

The landscape is indeed a recurring element in the film, and viewers are presented throughout with long aerial shots of green meadows, vast fields, open blue skies, barns and farms, and small-town shops and buildings that aestheticize rural life—this is emphasized by the non-diegetic melancholic score overlapping the images. The film casts a nostalgic look on the rural small town life as it catalogs the well-known landmarks of this idealized space. Steve and Sue shop for clothes to "look local" at the general store and gas station "Rob's Guns, Groceries, Guitars, and Gas" (Sue: "up here, they always wear flannel," Steve: "or camo"), they stay at what appears to be the only motel in town, spend their evenings at Buddy's, the local dive bar, and their mornings at the town diner. One hour into the film appears an unexpected montage of

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images accompanied by a slow-paced folk song that provides a nostalgic look on the rural small-town life. The camera first displays the town from a birds-eye view, then, in slow-motion, a barber shop and a hardware store, a community center where elderly women play bingo and children play baseball, before the camera lingers on a police officer leaning on a vintage Pepsi machine, men working in a rusted factory, and a woman sitting on her porch with the American flag flying in the wind. This montage, along with the end credits that are paired with an aerial shot of the town slowly zooming out, underlines the notion that this town could be any town in the U.S. The universalization of the small town is a common trope in U.S. culture that has its roots in the Agrarian Myth. As Sheila Webb writes, "[t]he small town occupies a mythic place in American life and culture" as it is often portrayed as "the ideal American space" (35). *Promised Land* plays on this notion of the universal small town quite openly, with protagonist Steve explaining to his bosses at Global that he is so successful at his job because: "Well, I'm from Eldrige, Iowa—it might as well be Rifle, Colorado, Dish, Texas, or Lafayette, Louisiana, any of these towns we've sold. I know them, they know me."[9] Even though the experience of fracking may not be universal, as it is usually very much restricted regionally, the film provides a romantic image of the universal small town in the countryside as an idyllic space. It sentimentalizes agrarian spaces and places as sites of both embodiments and reproduction of an idealized (i.e., fantasized) U.S. American identity.[10]

Secondly, the film sentimentalizes solidarity and community among rural folk as a model of democratic society. It depicts a close-knit community in which the self-interest and greed of one person interested in leasing their lands for fracking could disrupt not only the harmony between everyone in the town but also the harmony between them and the land. The people of the small town are portrayed as sharing the same values—this is highlighted by

9 The references to Dish, Texas and Lafayette, Louisiana are interesting here, as both these towns can be linked to fracking-related health hazards and toxicity; Lafayette, in the fictional world of the film, is later revealed to have had a chemical spill that killed cows; the small town of Dish, Texas, on the other hand, actually became more widely known in and outside of the U.S. because of fracking-related lawsuits and protest. Many residents, among them the major, claimed that they suffered from illness and diseases that could be linked to fracking in the vicinity (cf. "Town's effort").

10 Antje Kley and Heike Paul argue that due to this well-established connection of the rural to "a national discourse of 'authentic' Americanness […] [it] may ultimately appear as unmarked" (5).

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the town's meetings and the collective vote for or against fracking in the town. The movie contrasts the lived and strong bonds that connect rural people, who are shown coming together in the town hall, diner, bar, and community center, explicitly with the digital and broken relations that connect Steve and Sue to their employers and relatives—those are mostly taking place via cell phones and computers. The community, despite the private/public paradox and a general divide between those who want to get at "the money under [their] feet" and those that are more cautious, like Frank Yates, is intact. The rural community is also portrayed as authentic, as opposed to the urban, corporate culture, which is portrayed as dishonest and based on prefabricated jokes.

Thirdly, the film idealizes agrarian ethics of work and care, mostly through the characters of Frank Yates—a retired MIT scientist who teaches science at the local school and who raises miniature horses—and Alice, a school teacher (and Steve's love interest) who teaches her students to care for 'nature' on the farm she inherited from her father. Throughout the film, these rural characters, among others, are opposed to and clash with urban Global consultants Steve and Sue. Frank and Alice are depicted as hard-working, honest, and loyal to their community and as living a simple but satisfying life, while Steve and Sue are (first) portrayed as workaholics, eager for success, manipulative (Steve dupes the mayor into leasing some land for cheap), and lacking foresight. Butler, however, remains remotely attached to his agrarian background. To connect with the prospective leasers, he tells them almost ritualistically that he grew up in a farming community in Eldridge, Iowa. Furthermore, his boots, the family heirloom he inherited from his grandfather ("they're made in America," he proudly tells Sue), can be read as a symbolic connection back to his own agrarian past and express a sentimental attachment to a lifestyle that he initially believed to be gone ("the farming town fantasy was just shattered"). This lasting connection to his agrarian past foreshadows throughout the movie that Steve can, and will, be redeemed through a return to agrarian, and by extension rural, values. In depicting Steve's moral and physical conversion from urban, fossil-fuel industry consultant to rural inhabitant/settler, claims the superiority of pastoral and agrarian ideals over corporate and individualist ones. The film depicts Butler's regained innocence right before and during the penultimate scene at the town meeting at the gym, first when he washes his face in the gym toilet in a symbolical rebirth and when he takes the microphone to address the town as part of their community. The final monologue, along with the choral music from the film's opening scenes, and the fact that it is delivered by a misty-eyed and sincere Matt Damon, sentimentalizes agrarian lifeways.

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Holding the picture of dead cattle in front of a barn that Noble used to convince the residents to vote against fracking (before his deception was revealed), Steve addresses the town one last time:

> I was looking at this picture for a while last night […] But I found myself staring at this barn. The wood's chipping away and the paint is flaking off there. Probably from all the salt water in the air. It reminded me of my grandfather's barn. That barn was the bane of my existence. It was immaculate. We painted it every other summer. Just him and me. I asked him 'why?' 'Why do we have to do this?' And he'd look at me and say 'This is our barn. Who else is going to do it?' […] I think he was just trying to teach me what it meant to take care of something. […] This is a real farm. […] Look, is this going to happen here? I honestly don't believe that it will. But they know that the only reason we're all gathered here is to ask the question 'what if it did?' […] But where we are now? Where we're headed? We might be betting more than we think. Everything that we have is on the table now. And that's just not ours to lose. But this is still our barn. (01:31:05-01:34:37)

Through the reminiscing of childhood memories, Steve not only paints a sentimental picture of the family farm and his connection to his lost grandfather but also pays tribute to agrarian values of self-sufficiency and hard work. The personal story morphing into a national one, highlights the importance of care and community over private interests and short-term financial gain with potential detrimental consequences. The barn can also be read in a planetary sense—as a metaphor for Earth and a reminder that extractivism is impacting the future of younger generations, who are also present in the gym. *Promised Land* is ultimately constructed around the idea that a return to agrarianism—in the sense of a return to the community, land, and care—will prevent the expansion and domination of resource extraction in the United States, thereby safeguarding the land and a future for upcoming generations.

The film sentimentalizes agrarian life as the last bastion against corporate greed and as a place of regeneration—it argues that we should care for "our barn" rather than selling it. It tells us that agrarian values are ultimately the answer to the failures of late capitalism and extractivism: The town will not yield to Global Crosspower Solutions and their money-making schemes but will stand in defiance, facing even the dire consequences of economic downfall. *Promised Land* inscribes itself as a kind of rural jeremiad, promising that the suffering and sacrifice of the rural community will not be in vain but will

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allow the nation to be democratically and environmentally intact for the generations to come. *Promised Land* uses the rural as an allegory for the nation and an 'authentic Americanness,' always to be actualized in the future—in fact, the film's title alludes to this notion of infinite actualization through the Puritans' vision of North America.

Conclusion

This article has examined how Gus Van Sant's 2012 *Promised Land* pictured contemporary debates surrounding hydraulic fracturing in the United States, in a context of heightened awareness of the practice's environmental and health consequences. Though the film erases the materiality of fracking operations—drilling rigs, wells, pipelines, and trucks remain absent throughout the film—, it uses several narrative elements that make up what we have called the "fracking formula" to make a point about extractivism in the 21st century U.S. With an exemplary reading of *Promised Land*, this article has shown how formulaic narratives about fracking rely on a set of key themes to portray it, not only as a technology and an extractive practice, but as a comprehensive societal issue with critical economic, social, cultural, and environmental repercussions. In elaborating a formula about fracking in fiction, we want to bring attention to the presence of the practice in the cultural imaginary.

The film centers on questions of moral, economic, and environmental dilemmas propelled by extraction. Its main character's personal identity quest stands for the nation's own quest for identity in the 21st century. Van Sant's film argues that like Steve, the U.S. can reverse the course of its history, stop exploiting poor rural communities and extracting resources from the ground, to instead become a truly democratic nation and secure a healthy and prospering land for future generations to live on and from. To make this argument, the film rests on what we have called "agrarian sentimentality," i.e., the sentimental depiction and idealization of rural peoples, spaces, and lifestyles. Sentimentality, or the sentimental, performs important political and cultural work because it allows viewers (or readers) to put themselves in a character's shoes (in this case, boots) and can generate compassion and solidarity. Agrarian sentimentality is deployed here to convince the public against the destructive potentials of hydraulic fracking, and more generally of extractivism.

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The politics of sentimentality, or sentimental fiction, have long been debated by literary and cultural studies scholars. The kind of agrarian sentimentality that is at the core of *Promised Land* renders the film likewise extremely ambiguous when it comes to its politics and the cultural work it performs. Indeed, at a time of climate emergency, the film raises several important themes, notably the idea that community and care for the land are more valuable in the long term than individual monetary gain and the exploitation of resources. The film seemingly relies on new agrarianism's beliefs as it upholds agrarian spaces, peoples, and lifestyles as virtuous, democratic, and regenerative—a (re-)turn to the local and the agrarian in the face of industrialization and globalization. It constantly depicts the democratic possibilities of the small-town community, which thanks to its limited scale and its shared values, can debate and decide collectively about its future. The town is a microcosm in which the national debate about fracking, and more generally about resource extraction, plays out. The film also successfully argues about the multifaceted consequences of individuals usurping the commons and extraction splitting, not only the ground, but also the fabric of communities, and about the vulnerability of the environment—"our barn"—in the face of extraction. However, the film performs this political reversal only in its last fifteen minutes as it fantasizes a return to agrarian values and lifestyle, without proposing any kind of way forward for the rural at a time of economic and climatic disruption. In fact, the film, by its cinematic circularity and lack of closure, does not provide a solution to the debates surrounding energy transition, sustainability, and environmental crisis. Further, the agrarian sentimentality deployed in the film stabilizes a settler-colonialist, racialized, and gendered regime of representation in showcasing scenes of sentimentalized white U.S. American rural life as essence of 'Americanness.' Finally, the film tends to regress in nostalgic depictions of an agrarian and rural small-town, with mom-and-pop shops, small-scale farms, and even miniature horses, that obscures the realities of contemporary agrarian and rural spaces and their relationship to extractivism, capitalism, the environment. In its reliance on the trope of main-street U.S.A., *Promised Land* is a product of the fracking boom that aims at moving the audience to "think and act [and feel] in a particular way" (Tompkins) about hydraulic fracturing, while providing a glimpse of a non-extractivist future through a return to an imagined past.

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