Identifying Suburbia: Competing Place-making Processes and Shifting Materialism within Global Capitalism

by

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Abstract

Materiality has always been central to identity creation, but the focus of this materiality has shifted with the growth of the global capitalist system. Through examining the relationships between identity formation, place, and capitalism, I outline that historically identity has been centered around the materiality of place and an individual’s physical relationship with the land and those who share it. In the last few hundred years, the material base of identity has shifted towards commodities and other material forms rather than a focus on the physical landscape. Suburbia functions as an arena through which to examine this relationship, as it involves peoples’ interactions with land, materiality and the influences of capitalism on settlement development. This study will explore the ways that suburbia functions as a material object for identity formation rather than an attachment to the landscape itself, and the ways that conflicting place-making processes under capitalism lead to the necessity of forming identity through material channels other than place-making, such as the commodity.
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**Introduction**

To my reader, I know we’ve only just become acquainted with each other but I’ll ask you the favor of humoring me. Think back to the physical environment that comes to mind when you hear the word *home*, or a space in which you feel an emotional connection, in which you belong. This can be any location where you are comfortable and feel connected to the people and environment around yourself. For me this is my childhood home in Charlotte, North Carolina. I can see it in my mind’s eye, looking at a red brick ranch style home located on a quarter-acre plot, on a street divided into three blocks with a cul-de-sac on either end. I lived in this home for eighteen years with my mother and my sister, and picturing this space and the atmosphere created by making this place a home rather than just a house is as easy as breathing. Memories lurk in each corner of the home, some good and some bad, but each supports the present relationship and understanding of the place that my family and I have built with the help of the house as a material structure.

I hope that I am not wrong, reader, in assuming that you had a similar experience in recalling your own place of belonging. Through the process of making this space our own, we changed it and it in turn changed us. The impact that places and materiality have on a person is central to the creation of individual and collective identities. When making space into a place, a connection is formed between the person and the place. This tie comes from continued reciprocal interaction, and historically is built through relationships between people and the landscapes on which they live and make their own.

This thesis studies the relationship between place-making, identity, and capitalism, and I use suburbia as a cultural and geographic area through which to analyze shifting processes of identity formation. North American suburbs were developed out of fear of the
loss of social uniformity, and the need for escape for much of the white middle class post WWII (Baldessare 1992). Functioning as a perceived (and to the best abilities of its practice) white haven, young families fled from the quickly diversifying urban areas out to the suburbs as an attempt to maintain segregation through the power of will and redlining. With many of the residents sharing economic, ideological, and racial backgrounds it was assumed that these people would desire similar forms of housing as well, leading to the assembly line type of housing construction that became popularized through the infamous suburb, Levittown.

Levittown was manufactured by the Levitt family in Pennsylvania in the year 1947, a family described as being the Henry Ford of housing with their development being equated to “the Model T of the built environment” (Marino 2014, 494). Levittown has been called the first American suburb, and has impacted much of the mythology and imagery that comes to mind when thinking about stereotypical suburbia. The long rows of similar houses from aerial images were so new and jarring that many residents actually requested that pictures of their neighborhoods only be taken from the street, as the aerial view was off putting and upsetting (Thompson 1954, 27).

Suburban communities foster certain identities while limiting the growth of others, and the identities they produce influence our lives as the majority of Americans live in the suburbs (Baldessare 1992, 476). Identity has become a prevalent topic in present discourse as gender, sexuality, and class are being brought to the forefront of policy decisions with legislature such as the ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill being pushed through across the United States (Diaz, 2022). While education and policy surrounding differing identities are important, knowing who we are and how we became that person are not always clear-cut. How do we
build a sense of identity and in what ways is our identity built around and with the places we frequent, governmental administrations, and the social structures of our world?

In this thesis, identity is defined as the way an individual contextualizes themselves and their functions in relation to the people and places around them, a reactionary identity based in relationships with the surrounding environment. There are different types of identity, as identity functions on different levels and scales in our daily lives, and some parts of our identities are so naturalized that we have never questioned them. The choices presented to us during our formative years of enculturation and the decisions we make in response to these choices determine how we choose to position ourselves in relation to others and their own versions of identity expression. Identity is dependent on enculturation, and the combination of identities within a culture can look different depending on the intersections of multiple aspects of identity, resulting in varying perceptions of an individual’s identity within the same culture.

Presentation of identity by the individual is done through performance, a theory made popular by Judith Butler in their 1988 publication. They study the performance of identity through the lens of gender presentation, arguing that gender is created through a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519). Through these acts, an individual can become an identity, and according to Butler’s theory no one is born with predestined identities, rather they are created through this repetition. The key to this performance is that both the performing individual and their societal audience must believe that this performance is one of truth, and that this acceptance of performed identity leads all involved to “perform in a mode of belief” (Butler 1988, 519). Whether a performed identity is accepted or rejected is based on social sanction and taboo, and if an identity is rejected it can further the division between
internal and external identity for an individual. This performance can take the form of how an individual dresses, sits, eats, and speaks along with all other aspects of their behavior. Performance of gender occurs in this same way, with gender roles being maintained through normalized divisions of commodity consumption between femininity and masculinity.

This performance is broken down into levels depending on varying perceptions of the actors and audience. The internal identity (or self-identifier) is based in reflection, and is the way you view yourself and your consciousness as a totality. The way you view yourself and the categories with which you align take physical form through the performance (or lack thereof) of those affiliations and identities. The external identity is the sector of internal identity that is performed for those around you, and includes a response to their perception of that performance. It is impossible to know exactly how a person views themselves internally but it is possible to gather information from what they choose to show to society. This tends to be a more culturally-palatable version of the internal self which has been manipulated to fit within the system of enculturation upheld by society.

While external identity is the way we perform our internal identities, perceived identity is the social response to this external identity expression. Predicted social responses to our identities determine which aspects of ourselves we will play up, and which parts of us we try to keep limited to our internal identity. Perceived identity falls under the umbrella term of external identity and refers to the social response to our performance of identity based in enculturation. Perceived identity can function in the abstract through things such as stereotypes, but also acts on the individual scale.

Recognition of different levels of identity is important because our self-identification does not always align with our perceived identity, and can cause conflicts within the
individual and in interpersonal communication. Clashing of identities mimics the conflicting place-making processes between collective embedding of meaning and the commodified identity within a capitalist system, and during this conflict between individual understandings and collective perceptions of identity, the self and performances of individual agency and ethics are brought to the forefront. This thesis discusses both the individual and collective levels of identity, but prioritizes the individual identity over the collective due the individualism that is promoted through the culture of capitalism. Tying this back to ideas of enculturation, collective identities have an effect on the ways that people view their situation within the system of enculturation, highlighting the impacts of cultural perspectives and norms on individual identity further.

Identity is formed in relation to the social structure in which it is located, and its expression relies heavily on the society in which an individual lives. This connection to the places with which the individual interacts is vital for identity formation and processing. Cultures and their practitioners have interacted differently with land and each other, leading to shifting identity formation processes throughout history and even prehistory. Global capitalism was made possible through the global decolonization movements of the 1960s and the resulting process of state incorporation, and has had drastic social and environmental impacts. This movement shifted the way that individuals view themselves, their labor, and the places that they inhabit, leading to a new type of identity formation.

This thesis argues that capitalism is one of the biggest cultural changes of the last few centuries, and has changed our relationship to places and the process of making them. With this shift in the material basis of identity formation, I will outline a process of identity formation within capitalism centered around commodities. My argument will be broken
down into three different sections; the first section focuses on the relationship between place and identity, the second discusses the relationships between place, identity, and capitalism, and the third frames the relationship between place, identity, and capitalism within the arena of suburbia. While this process is continuous and non chronological, I will examine the general trend that this shifting material base of identity formation follows and its impacts on North American identity.

Chapter One: Place and Identity argues that before incorporation into the global capitalist system, identity was formed through the process of collective place-making. Firstly, this section will outline the differences between space, landscape, and place and why the prioritization of place over space and landscape is important when forming an identity. This outline of spatial theory will also include the palimpsest theory, outlining the impacts of previous places on future places through the layering of places in the same geographic space (Ingold 1993). To do this I will use four different examples of landscape-based identity formation, two which outline positive landscape-based identity formation and two which outline oppositional landscape-based identity formation.

Positive landscape-based identity formation is made possible through active embedding of collectively understood meaning within the landscape, and this meaning in turn supports the identities of those involved in creating and maintaining that sense of place. The case studies of the Kanaka Maoli and Tanzanian farmers outline this positive relationship between people and the places that they create through ancestral connections to land and the accumulation of place-based knowledge (McGregor & Aluli 2014, Scott 1998). Oppositional landscape-based identity formation is opposite to its positive version of identity formation. Rather than establishing a collective sense of identity through place-making,
oppositional landscape-based identity is reactionary and is brought to the forefront when an outside force attempts to embed their version of meaning within an already occupied landscape. The case studies of Mexican Moreno identity and West Virginian settlers in Appalachia exemplify the conflict between differing histories of place and state-avoidant processes involved in the oppositional landscape-based identity formation process, and will be outlined in this section (Lewis 2001; Scott 2009).

After establishing the ways in which the landscape forms identity through the process of place-making, these concepts will be applied to the place-making processes of administrative bodies. Through this section, I argue that administrations and the places they create allow those in power to control the performance of identity of those who live their lives within the place created by the administration (Foucault 2008). Power is the ability to restrict agency necessary to perform identity, and through this power an administration is able to monitor an individual’s behavior while also establishing a normative identity in alignment with the administration’s ideologies through the built environment of infrastructure.

Chapter Two: Place, Identity and Capitalism examines the impacts of incorporation of the landscape into the global system of capitalism and the ways this changes identity formation. I argue that primitive accumulation acts as the catalyst for this material shift in identity formation, moving from landscape-based identity formation towards commodity-based identity formation. This section establishes the criteria for a capitalist system, which includes creating a culture of capitalism, framing capitalism as inherently patriarchal, and embedding ideologies of the capitalist administration into the landscape through the process of place-making. Capitalism as administrative power prioritizes the
individual and breaks down the community network of reliance that supports collective living (Marglin 2008, 2). By prioritizing individualism and convenience over the ease of administrative control, it becomes possible to observe how capitalism has become the dominant motivating force behind relationships, development, and lifestyles.

The place-making processes of capitalist administrations often center around the goals of productivity, convenience, and transport, changing the relationship an individual is able to create with both their situation within space and time. As primitive accumulation separates the individual from the land that supports the performance of identity, the individual scrambles to find a replacement for that material base, most often presented in the form of commodities. Ownership of commodities within capitalism allows an individual the performative agency to associate themselves with certain in-groups, while removing themselves from other groups (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012). Building identity through commodity consumption includes land as a commodity in addition to the products made possible through that land. Thinking of land in this way transforms land into territory, and disconnects territory from the places present within that landscape in the past.

I refer to this disconnect from previous places as an erasure of the palimpsest, and in addition to erasing the past meanings embedded in the landscape, capitalism creates the possibility of non-places as a new form of relationship with the landscape. Non-places are landscapes not embedded with collective meaning, and are a symptom of supermodernity within the capitalist market-society (Auge 1992, 33). There are three tenets of supermodernity: the overabundance of space, the overabundance of events, and the individualization of references. The inversion of modernity signifies the shift into
supermodernity, and allows suburban materialities to build identity through consumption within the capitalist market-society (Auge 1992).

Chapter Three: Place, Identity and Capitalism in Suburbia outlines the ways in which suburbs and the commodities within them function as the material basis for identity formation within capitalist supermodernity. I argue that the economic boom post-WWII allowed for suburban growth and the establishment of suburban identities based in consumption. Exhibiting this through the layout of the neighborhood, the car, and the home and its attached territory, I outline the material basis for commodity-based identity formation.

Neighborhood design promotes isolation and the individualism promoted both by capitalism and the Economic Man as an ideology, and space is organized in relation to perceived identity. Car culture is supported by capitalist patriarchy and results in environmental degradation through the performance of American masculine identities built through car consumption, identities which are often designed by the producer of the commodity (Ford Media Center 2020). The home and its attached land are the last suburban materialities to be analyzed, and exhibits the individualization of references indicative of supermodernity.

The idea of placelets illustrates this individualization of meaning within the suburbs. Placelets are small scale places created within the territory of the house and land that is able to be owned through the commodification of land. Individuals and families embed meaning within their property, and this creation of micro-places as placelets creates a patchwork of meaning across suburban neighborhoods, but no embedding of meaning in the landscape is made accessible to the suburban collective. These placelets work within the framework of
space, but also highlight the conflicting place-making processes that occur within the suburban arena.

The performance of identity and the shift of its material basis from landscapes to commodities highlights two ways that identity formation can have real world implications. The first is in the ways that identity matters on an individual scale as it dictates the opportunities, connections, and livelihoods that are available to an individual depending on their cultural situation and their positionality within that culture. The choice to perform certain identities can have social ramifications such as ostracization, being fired or discriminated against in the workplace, and losing an emotional connection with family and friends. This conflict between self-identification as internal and external identity is mirrored in the relationship between the performed identity and the perceived identity. The miscommunications between each of these layers of identity can lead to interpersonal conflict and mental health issues.

Secondly, this shift has led to the macro-level damage to physical landscapes through the disconnect between people and the environment that sustains them. This has become a prevalent issue in discussions of climate change and resource management, especially in relation to the capitalist ideology of resource preservation being equal to resource wasting. If there are no cultural connections between people and the land they live on, land becomes interchangeable and valued for its resources as territory rather than for its embedded meaning. Buying into this interchangeability of land logically concludes that a person has the ability to move and create the same livelihood and life as before on a different plot of land. Dispossession has become more common as Western capitalist ideologies clash with indigenous cosmologies, leading to the destruction and desecration of sacred land for the
sake of profit. The ideology of capitalism presents itself through the Economic Man, who does not care about environmental destruction in order to access natural resources. This apathy or lack thereof towards environmental degradation has differing performances in association with gender identification.

Gender identities have differing associations with nature, reproducing environmentally harmful actions as part of the typical gender performance of masculinity. Through analyzing the characteristics that produce both masculinity and environmentally detrimental behavior, that association begins to unravel. While capitalism has impacts on the performance of both masculinity and femininity, I choose to focus on masculine performances of identity due to the reproduction of patriarchal structures through capitalism’s processes and their erasure of feminine characteristics and women’s work (Bahn et al., 2020, 696). By realizing the ways that we navigate our own identities in relation to the identities of others, we are able to better understand other people while learning about ourselves in relation to the world we have created, and are still creating.

Chapter One: Place and Identity

This chapter argues that pre-primitive accumulation, both individual and collective identities were formed through the process of place-making. First, I will establish the framework of spatial theory that will be used throughout the rest of the thesis, and define the differences between space, landscape, and place. Place is prioritized over both space and landscape due to it being created through reciprocal human-environment interactions. Moving forward with this spatial framework, the layering of places through the palimpsest theory connects places across temporal scales which allow previous places to be sensed
within the present place. Secondly, I will outline the process of landscape-based identity formation with four examples, with two describing positive landscape-based identity formation and two outlining oppositional landscape-based identity formation.

After setting up the basis of landscape-based identity formation, primitive accumulation and the chain of incorporation are used to describe the process of separating people from their land, and the impacts that this has on the performance of their identities. The capitalist administration is then able to form their own places that regulate identity performance through the embedding of administrative power in the built environment, described through Foucault’s Panopticon and architectural ideologies. This chapter concludes by outlining the impacts of primitive accumulation on identity formation, and sets up Chapter Two: Place, Identity & Capitalism to discuss the new kinds of identity formation within global capitalism.

Multiscalar Temporality for 600: What are Space, Landscape & Place?

To begin to understand the relationship between place and identity, it is necessary to define space and the difference between this concept and the ideas of place and landscape. Space and landscape are often interchangeable in discourse, but actually mean very different things, especially when used in the anthropological sense. Space is the abstract reference or quantitative representation of land, and is a grid that is placed over the physical land in an attempt to measure and categorize it (Ingold 1993, 155). Rather than looking at the specificities of a particular region, space refers to a comprehensive and overarching view of land patterns and features. Space, in discussions of place-making, is the land without recognition of meaning through reciprocal interactions with humans and other organisms.
contained within that ecosystem. When we talk about acreage or reference a set of coordinates, we are talking about space.

While space is the quantitative measurement of the physical features and layout of the land, landscape functions differently. In the artistic sense, the landscape is everything that an individual is able to see from a specific point on the land (Meinig 1979, 1). From this definition we can assume that the landscape is used as a stage for organic activities that occur within and on the land. However, this preliminary definition does not cover the breadth of what the landscape truly is. The landscape is the nexus of the connections and interactions between humans and their habitat. Rather than being a stage for livelihoods, the landscape is the cumulative form of all the environmental functions that have occurred on or within that sector of space. Through the landscape, society’s functions are able to be studied as its motivations leave material markings on the landscape. By thinking of landscape as the qualitative results of the use of quantified space, a sense of place is created.

Place in its most basic definition is “framed space that is meaningful to a person or group over time” (Thornton 2008, 10). Space in the abstract is transformed into place through changes in both the physical landscape and the ways of thinking about that landscape by the people who are currently living with that landscape. These are physical changes to the land such as structures or fields, giving spiritual emphasis to certain landmarks or monuments, or simply thinking about the land and its relation to the individual. Humans embed this meaning within the land to create a place centered within a specific spatiotemporal location. By prioritizing place over both space and landscape, the meaning embedded during the place-making process is brought to the forefront allowing us to see the ways that varying understandings of meaning impact identity on both an individual and collective level.
Because of this prioritization, I argue that space functions as a linking force, and place as a unifying force. Through a collective understanding of meaning, place fosters connections between individuals that are not present in landscape spaces. Places are felt by those who continue to create them, while spaces do not produce this same emotional effect. The interactionality that is required to create a place puts place in the intersection of two different lines of being: the vertical line of time, reaching up into the future and down into the past, and the horizontal line of connections to land which are made possible through the interactions of individuals placed within the same arbitrary segment of the vertical timeline.

The Phantomic as Palimpsest Penetrating Radar: Sensing of Previous Places

This idea of multiscalar temporality is described through the palimpsest theory. Through the lens of this theory, landscapes reflect the accumulated changes caused by humans when creating places for themselves, and so places function as layers of paint on a palimpsest. You can peel back the layers of more recent places to find hints and effects of past human-environment interactions on the way we use the land today. This accumulation and layering of places works through temporal scales, which situate a certain event, action, or place on the timeline of landscape history, showing the continuous transformation that occurs due to human creation of place as habitat.

Place is therefore “multilocal and multivocal”, as the same place exists as separate entities within the mind of each individual whose interactions are vital in the continuous process of placemaking (Rodman 1992, 647). It is multivocal due to the ability of multiple individuals and ideas to be present in this process through the creation of collective meaning and feeling of place. Anthropologists argue that places have come to refer “less to a bounded
place than to an imagined state of being or moral location” (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 8).

Cementing the idea that place is based in relationship to the land rather than just use of the land itself (space), an “imagined state of being” harkens back to the opening of this section in which we (if you were participating, reader) conjured up an idea of somewhere we felt that we belonged. Therefore, place functions as an arena to facilitate the building of these relationships, therefore tying together place, community, and individual through the process of identity formation.

Even when forging an individual relationship with the land, these traces of the place that came before can still be sensed through the landscape. In archaeology these traces are found through methods of phenomenology, which focuses on the physical experience of being in and a part of a place, in an attempt to experience the landscape as someone in a previous place within that space would (Tilley 1994). These traces of previous places range between anything from the smallest settlements to entire nations, but the attempt to catch the feeling or affect of the places that came before is shared by all phenomenological field work. While phenomenology as a methodology is not always highly regarded and thought of as only vaguely scientific, this idea is similar to the phantomic in relation to the “make-believe space” (Navaro-Yashin 2012). In this case, the make-believe space is “Northern Cyprus” which became a de facto polity after the Turkish invasion in 1974, leading to administrative policy and name changes that impacted the Cyprans’ sense of place and identity (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 1).

Through this work Navaro-Yashin discusses the idea of the phantomic and how this works to create a sense of a nation with both place and identity. The phantomic is referenced as a sort of haunting through the affect that a place creates for those experiencing it. The
‘ghosts’ of the places that existed previously within a certain space are working against the administrative reminders of their hegemonic power through the built environment, also known as the phantasmic (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 16). Through the encounter with the affect of a past place as the phantomic force, those creating new places on that land are able to connect the present place to those in the past.

The affect produced by the phantomic has been a topic of anthropological study for many years, aiming to uncover the relationship that a landscape has with humans and the places they create through time. Ingold used a metaphor of refractions in a crystal ball to describe the temporal relationships between past, present, future and their respective places, claiming that a landscape is able to “constitute [the] present, conferring upon it a unique character [...] the past is not marked off from a past that has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into itself” (Ingold 1993, 159). The phantomic ‘haunting’ is the ability to sense this collection of refractions (or affects, according to Navaro-Yashin) that are contained within space as it is constantly molded into a new place.

**Positive Landscape-based Identity Formation**

While the same places have meant different things to different people throughout time, a place can only be defined through reference to embedded meaning made possible through the relationships people have built with the land. Place plays a large role in the creation of individual identity and the way a person views themselves. Historically, this often shows itself through the participation of an individual in collective activities and ideologies, creating a stable sense of self along with the inclusion of an individual in a larger group. To
establish the groundwork of land-based identification, the stories of the Hawaiian National Movement and Tanzanian farmers will be used. These examples highlight the ways in which positive identity is created through processes of landscape creation, and the ways in which this identification is reinforced by conflicting attempts at place-making and understandings of landscape. As this landscape-based identity is tested, individual and collective identification is created as positive identities negotiate their performance in relation to other place-making processes.

Kanaka Maoli is the self-identifier of Native Hawaiians, and their lineage traces back to the Mother of Volcanoes, the goddess Pele herself (McGregor & Aluli 2014, 182). The factor of exclusion in this identification is the ancestry tracing back to Pele, who walked the Earth as a human and now looks after the Kanaka Maoli from her sacred home at the summit of Kīlauea, within Halema'uma'u crater located within a United States national park (McGregor & Aluli 2014, 183). By choosing to live within the Earth, Pele tasks her descendants with the protection of their land and resources on the island.

This familial tie to the land is the connecting force behind Kanaka Maoli identity, and therefore key to the way people characterize themselves and those around them. *Ea* is the driving principle behind Kanaka Maoli social and political practices, and when translated directly means “life”, but in practice also means sovereignty, rule, and independence (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua 2014, 3-4). This not only includes the relationship between humans and land, but also the web connecting all living and nonliving things together in one complete system. *Ea* is used to dictate proper human-landscape relations, both to provide for themselves while also making sure that the landscape they create will support the generations coming after them. *Ea* as a governing force is not necessary in the creation of
landscape-based identity for every community, but for the Kanaka Maoli it dictates the proper form of relationships with the landscape and the impacts of land-use on identity in the collective sense inherently impact the individual identity as well. This connection to sacred places and craters is currently being threatened by proposed geothermal energy plants and telescope plans for Mauna Kea, and in fighting for continued land access, identity is reinforced through the performance of cultural agency.

Not everyone is able to maintain their connection to their ancestral land, and this separation of people from land has increasingly detrimental effects on identity. During the 1970s, the Tanzanian government pushed a villagization campaign that was a widespread attempt to permanently resettle most of the country’s population in villages with layouts and economies planned by the central government (Scott 1998, 223). In doing this, the government forced people to leave their land, which was not always officially owned but rather passed down through the generations of Tanzanian farmers. This long history of farming on the same plot of space led to a wealth of knowledge of how to grow the best crops with the best yields on that certain parcel of land. When forced to leave the only land they knew how to farm, the Tanzanian farmers were suddenly no longer farmers. Loss of livelihood and local knowledge on this scale landed a huge blow on the Tanzanian farmers’ sense of identity, creating a sense of amputated identity that occurs when a sector of identity has been forcibly taken from you, or the individual no longer has the ability to exercise their agency to perform a particular aspect of their identity. Amputated identity in this way leaves the individual scrambling to find something to fill the vacuum left by that loss.

For Tanzanian farmers this amputation occurred due to the sudden inapplicability of the knowledge that allowed them to be successful farmers, because “when a farmer from the
highlands is transported to settlement camps in areas like Gambella, he is instantly transformed from agricultural expert to an unskilled, ignorant laborer, completely dependent for his survival on the central government” (Scott 1998, 251). The Tanzanian government views the farmer’s land through the lens of space, and rationalizes farmers’ dispossession by giving them a different, and in the state’s view, equivalent plot of land on which to work. Through practices such as this, governments value land as interchangeable and uniform, while the Tanzanian farmers see their land through the lens of place. The shift in identity is instant within this farmer, one second he is successful and an expert in his field (in both senses of the word) and the next he is a dependent of the central government forced to sell labor to those who broke apart his identity for commercial gain.

**Oppositional Landscape-based Identity Formation**

The examples above show two interconnected parts of creating identity through reciprocal relationships with the landscape: through affirmative inclusion and ancestry as in the Kanaka Maoli case, and through personal connection and knowledge of the land as shown through the Tanzanian forced relocation example. However, I argue that there is another form of identity creation that is possible through manipulations of the landscape. This is a sort of de facto identification that comes from long term interactions and understandings of the land, but no identity is realized until an ‘other’ begins to embed their own meaning within that landscape. Identity based in opposition such as this contrasts the affirmative form of identification described in the Tanzanian and Kanaka Maoli cases, and will be shown through examples of Moreno Mexican identity and the identity of early Appalachian settlers in West Virginia.
In discourse surrounding myth and shared stories in collective identity formation, the multiple identities based in meaning embedded in the town of San Nicolás have been the study of anthropologists interested in place-making. Lewis and other scholars have analyzed the use of the identifier ‘Moreno’ as a signifier of shared history, genealogy, and contemporary experience with Indians in a way that differentiates Morenos from their ancestors who were “really, really black” (Lewis 2001, 62). This term acknowledges the shared meaning of their situation for those who identify as Moreno, but rather than focus on the things that tie them together, the requirements to perform this identity are based on what a person is not, rather than what a person is or will become. The perceived differences in identity allow the Morenos to divide themselves from other black residents of Mexico. Through tracing origin stories of how both groups reached the same plot of land, it is found that this division stems from differing understandings of the historical context surrounding the town of San Nicolás (Lewis 2001, 62).

Emotional and physical understandings of identity are tied to the status of San Nicolás and the myths that surround this town (Lewis 2001, 63). While both the Morenos and black Mexicans are culturally tied to San Nicolás, they view the opposing groups as outsiders or as foreigners who have overstayed their welcome. Animosity built in this way has reflected itself in the spatial organization of demographics within the city, with neutral populations being used as a way to buffer interactions between black Mexicans and Morenos (Lewis 2001, 65). This is seen on both the individual level and collective level of identification in the self-defined separation between these groups, as identity in the de facto sense is based in different understandings of race and place, while also navigating the shared local knowledge and spatiotemporal contexts that have impacted both groups.
A secondary example of identity through opposition is seen in people living in hill settlements in an attempt at government avoidance, both in the Appalachian case and the Zomian case. I choose to focus on the Appalachian example of the incorporation of West Virginia due to this being a study primarily focused on North American land-use and the shift towards the suburbs, but will continue to draw from other writings on state-repulsive practices in cases like the Zomian one. Scott argues that while living in the mountains, the residents make active political choices to ward off incorporation into the state (Scott 2009). This was made possible through the ideas of barbarism surrounding mountain life, and the ability of mountain dwellers to play into this characterization to avoid the civilization of the state.

In a historical study of the settlement and development of Appalachia, Appalachian settlers had been living off the land in these mountains for decades before the establishment of official state settlements in the lower piedmont and valley areas, allowing mountain settlements to devise their own ways of living and types of knowledge that did not align with those who lived in state-organized valley settlements (Stoll 2017). Now having an ‘other’ to oppose, Appalachian identity was born in the conflict between those who aimed to pull them towards the ‘civilization’ of the state. These place-making conflicts allowed Appalachian settlers an opportunity for collective identity, which they took and did their best to uphold.

And now to my reader, recall the place that came to mind during the very beginning of our time together. That place has been taken from you; it is no longer accessible to you, the relationships built with and on that land are now untethered, and you no longer have the same means of subsistence that have allowed you to support yourself and your family. Close your eyes and distill this feeling, letting it sink down and settle. Keep this feeling in mind.
when reading the upcoming sections, and compare your own immediate reactions and feelings to those potentially felt by the Kanaka Maoli, Tanzanian farmers, the Morenos, and the Appalachian settlers.

**Incorporation as Accumulation & the Amputation of Identity**

The settlers who chose to make their homes in the Appalachian mountains were often discriminated against due to ethnicity or lack of wealth, and if they were involved in the selling of their labor, it was most commonly in the form of physical labor. However, wage labor was not as widespread in the hills as it was in the state-inhabited valley. After establishing a system that worked for them, the people living in what would soon be West Virginia had no desire for state incorporation (Stoll 2017). Not needing a state identification to add to their arsenal of identifying traits, those living in the mountains defined their identity in relation to the landscape around them, and their status as outside the authority of colonial law.

Those living in the Appalachian Mountains based their identity on the independence that was afforded to them due to their settling away from the administrative control of the valley. Through this performance of agency, the mountaineers were able to support this independent subsistence through their access to land and the ability to survive without reliance on the governor or other authoritative system (Stoll 2017, 11). This refusal of state subjugation was only one aspect of the pioneer’s identity, but it did build a public perception of mountaineer identity as the trickster heroes who were forging the way for future colonial settlements (Stoll 2017, 14). This perception of the brave mountain folk began to taint with the ensuing clashes between practical and official ownership of land. The double-tiered land
system allowed the pioneers to grab land for practical use while not actually having the legal claim to the land through title. While this worked in practice for a few years, it quickly became a prevalent land-use issue when those who were living on and using the land had to fight for access to land providing their subsistence opposite those who were in possession of the title. In most cases official legibility won out over historical squatter’s rights, leaving many Appalachian residents dispossessed and struggling to survive (Stoll 2017, 33).

Mountaineer identity as synonymous to the ‘trickster hero’ was not long lasting, as speculators started grabbing the coal rich land in the West Virginia mountains (Stoll 2017, 133). Since very little land that the hill settlers lived on was legible property that was proved through state titles, it was able to be bought out from under them, leaving the mountaineers homeless, foodless, and landless (Stoll 2017, 33). The separation of those in the mountains from their ecological base was the downfall of their de facto identity, and this loss resulted in an amputation of identity through the restriction of performative agency. Dividing the landscape into the discrete categories of land and people forced those who once had access to all the land they needed into smaller, cramped homes. Losing their land in the same way as the Native Americans didn’t help the rusting of the hero label, and in this way dispossession was able to erode their identity (Stoll 2017, 28).

**Land Enclosure & the Chain of Incorporation**

This destruction of livelihood and amputation of identity was extremely detrimental for citizens of the newly incorporated state of West Virginia, and coal mining companies were quick to swoop in and offer their own benefits that came with wage labor to those they had displaced. After decades of mountaineers trying to adapt from agriculture, to logging, to
cattle farming, their last resort for survival in the mountains was resigning themselves to lives on the coal camps. Coal camps were the final nail in the coffin for pioneer independence, and made them reliant on these companies for food, water and shelter (Stoll 2017, 213). While coal companies offered services to their employees, they were still required to pay for food, water, and rent at astronomical rates. The problem arose when mining families continued to grow their own food on the land rented to them by coal companies rather than buy it from companies or other agriculturalists. Once it was acknowledged that this system of captured gardens was productive for the companies, they were encouraged and even required by landlords (Stoll 2017, 214).

The captured garden was a garden tended by mining tenants renting their homes from coal companies, and functioned as a way to commodify the ecological base to which mountaineers previously had access. Originally an idea from the British aristocracy, the captured garden was a way for employers to make sure workers got decent nutrition, but were also able to lower the wages they paid by shifting the burden of subsistence onto the workers (Stoll 2017, 214). Being able to pay workers less for them to tend the land that is owned by their employer was a fantastic deal for the coal companies, and cemented the division of the mountaineers from their means of production. This ensured the enclosure of both land and labor with no threat to the landowners, making such land and labor control schemes common across the fledgling American states, as well as across the Atlantic in Europe and their colonies as well, and began to solidify the paradigm of omnipresent capitalism that we still live in today.

Using the captured garden as an example to outline the process of land incorporation under capitalism, the nature of the state is substituted by the administrative power of
capitalism in the model that Bryant lays out for us. In this chain of explanation, the first step is physical changes to soil and vegetation (Bryant 1998, 83). In the case of the captured garden, this was the shifting of agricultural production from the ecological base to the capitalist owner’s own property. By manipulating the land in this way, the mountaineers created a landscape for their own benefit. After this stage, economic symptoms occur within that space. Crops failed at higher rates because of the inapplicability of the settlers’ knowledge of farming onto a different plot of land, which creates a sense of desperation combated by specific land-use practices. While knowledge of the new soil quality and agricultural practices of the owner’s land were growing, applying this knowledge after failing crops led to overharvesting, overstocking, and unnecessary resource extraction (Bryant 1998, 83, 87). The organization of agrarian societies held by West Virginians pre-incorporation transferred smoothly into the nature of the capitalist state post-incorporation, eventually tying the mountaineers into the international economy (Bryant 1998, 86).

The chain above outlines the scaling up of capitalism to benefit state-making processes as the driving force of West Virginia incorporation and land degradation, and led to the severance of ties between the landscape and the West Virginian identity. This story is not only limited to those living in the Appalachian Mountains, but applies to many of those who view themselves and those around them in relation to the meaning embedded in the landscape. Global capitalism as an administrative system disconnects individuals from the land their food comes from, that their animals graze on, that their house is built from and on, and restricts the performance of agency in creating the landscape around them. Through the breakdown of landscape-based identity, individuals have shifted the material basis of their
identity away from the landscape as habitat and towards the commodities that are produced and distributed through the capitalist market-society.

**Power in Place-making and Restrictions of Performative Agency**

Once an identity is established through interactions between places and people, this identity is reinforced through culture and further administrative practices aimed to cultivate a collective sense of identity. Impacted by the physicality of sound and visual organization as well, sorting of space into place creates a spatial geometry that automatically creates a system of inclusion and exclusion between those who are welcome and identify with a place versus those who do not (Harvey 1990). This idea of spatial geometry is not limited merely to practices of inclusion and exclusion, but can also be seen in the applications of these ideas towards administrative practices such as city-planning and other infrastructural development. Anthropologists argue that through centering the “spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations, we are better able to understand the processes whereby a space achieves a distinctive identity as a place” (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 36). Power in this sense is the ability to exercise your individual agency through a performance of identity without worrying about the consequences of that performance. Performance of identity without fear is made possible through controlling the spatial organization of people, places, and meaning, while also having your own identity framed as normative. Identities now categorized as normative define the zeitgeist of the landscape, and the powerful have the ability to restrict the subsequent performance of identities not falling within that normative categorization through the administrative processes backed by controlling the discourse of identity (Foucault 2008). This form of power functioning through the webbing of spatial distribution
reflects the power and identity of those who create it, making it a part of its inhabitants’ identity through their participation in place-making and maintenance.

The application of this idea towards human individual identity formation shows the ways that power impacts our social choices and sense of place. Having the basis of power be centered in the control of territory through the creation of places leaves an inhabited space under the jurisdiction of a certain circle of power. In this case, the power that acts as an intermediary between culture and land is capitalism. Capitalism functions as the logic by which power is used, allowing the performance of identities that are considered productive and restricting the performance of identities that are not. This relationship is further broken down in the next section titled *Place, Identity and Capitalism*, but realizing the shift from administrative power that results in a place towards administrative power that results in the reproduction of capitalist ideologies is important to state explicitly in order to understand the way that identity formation has changed in the last few hundred years. With the land use and population density growth since the Industrial Revolution, especially since the ending of the Second World War, this hegemonic power supported through place creation resulting in territory has manifested itself through the building and maintenance of infrastructure. Infrastructure as part of the landscape and place functions as a physical reminder of administrative power, and is centered in our daily lives through utility use, transportation, and city design.

The inclusion and exclusion that come into play during identity formation through functions of spatial geometry and administrative infrastructure design are built into these processes themselves. Manipulation of identity through design is broken into three different parts: that the organization of the city must be obvious from above and outside the
settlement, that the grand organizational plan has no relation to the lives of those who interact with it, and lastly that convenience is prioritized as a standard commodity for the market which is made possible through these designs (Scott 1998, 57). This ability to control the performance of individual identity within the social consciousness is the pure form of this power.

Foucault’s example of the Panopticon is used to outline the benefits of auto-policing in understanding the true force behind state control of identity and behavior through reminders of authority. The Panopticon is described as a round, multi-story building with cells lining the outer walls and a central guard tower standing alone in the middle. The cells embedded in the ring of outer walls are open and visible to the guard tower at all times, and all the inmates’ movements are visible from the vantage point of the central tower. The catch of the Panopticon is this: the prisoners are never sure when there is a guard observing them from the tower (Foucault 2008). Taking a page from Schrodinger’s book, as long as the incarcerated are unsure of the presence inside the guard tower, they will behave as if there is an observer at all times to guarantee their safety. This environment of paranoia and constant surveillance creates a sense of nonexistent privacy, and the self-regulation of actions and restrictions of agency in relation to certain performances of identity are now guaranteed without the necessity of force. On a more local level, a similar technique is applied to the cameras on King Street here in Boone. Along the sidewalk, cameras are placed in flower boxes and along rooflines as if asking us to challenge the security that they are guaranteeing. However, at least half of these cameras do not work, much less record security footage. Their effectiveness still persists as long as no one knows which ones actually work, as long as you are unable to see into the Panopticon’s control tower.
Administrative Place-making: The Built Environment of Infrastructure

The possibility of constant surveillance is made real through the building and maintenance of governmentally supported infrastructure. This can range anywhere from road layouts, to radar speed checkers, to building designs. Especially with the rise of incredibly capable observational technology and the permeation of cameras and listening devices into our lives, the possibility of constant surveillance has never been greater. Urban anthropologists argue that infrastructure in this way functions as a governmental strategy with the goal of reproducing its ethics and social ideologies (Larkin 2013, 5). Along with creating a distinct sense of place within their landscape of territory, infrastructure also is also designed with aesthetic possibilities in mind.

Architecture and other physical forms cycle through trends and fads much like any other material style, but architecture is easily tied to the ideas of modernity and the presentation of an administration’s evolution, or rather the status of those who are involved in the building of this infrastructure. This has been termed “infrastructural fetishism” and the ideas behind this developmental strategy are an indicator of a settlement’s role in the paradigm of evolutionist modernity (Larkin 2013, 7). With the association of an administration with modernity, individuals in turn view themselves as modern through their interactions with a seemingly evolved landscape. Changes to the landscape impact the party creating the changes, while also impacting all others who are part of the place-making process as well. Invoking modernity in the landscape in turn pushes modern ideas onto the individual.

In this way, ideologies are embedded within an administration’s built environment. Coupled with the idea of the phantomic, the phantasmic are the physical forms that
administrative ideologies take. This could be something as small as a name such as the changing of the old Greek *Appidhies* to the new Turkish *Armutluk*, or something as large as building a new administrative capitol building in the previous state’s town square (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 1). In simple terms, the phantasmic is the materiality of an administration and its political imagination used to maintain the power to regulate identity performance (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 15).

This self-impacting cycle is reflected through infrastructure design and the physical changes that society makes to itself through its process of place-making. Strategies such as this allow inclusive/exclusive boundaries to function in a way that creates the identities that are encouraged by government and other administrative forces. In the case of direct relationship with the landscape in the pre-primitive accumulation sense, individual experiences and ideas are promoted through the individual’s participation in the embedding of meaning into the shared landscape, and by being able to identify with a collective who perform their identity in the same way. When forming an identity within a place created through a capitalist administration, an identification with hegemonic cultural norms is promoted in the form of individual or national identity as a way of maintaining control rather than forming a collective.

**Primitive Accumulation and Identity Formation**

In order to exercise administrative power over identity within a capitalist system, it is necessary to separate land from the people who use it for their livelihoods and landscape-based identities. Primitive accumulation is defined as the division of labor from the means of production, and most often takes the form of agricultural land being the primary
form of production (Perelman 2000, 13). While primitive accumulation continues to function through the means of dispossession, it has also taken a turn for the abstract in more recent years. The separation of the laborer from their time has become prevalent as a modern form of accumulation, but this does not mean that dispossession is not still occurring as a function of capitalism. Loss of land and time are commonly accepted effects of primitive accumulation, but this chapter also argues that primitive accumulation is the catalyst for the focus of materiality to shift from landscape-based identity formation to commodities as being key to forming identity.

Through the limitation of access to land that was historically your own, it becomes impossible to survive with the resources and knowledge that were previously utilized as they are now useless in a different context, creating a sense of amputated identity. Having to suddenly depend on others and their systems to get what you need makes autonomous and in-touch living with the land impossible. Breaking this connection destroys two aspects of identity that are central to who an individual may be: the first being the central connection to the land. Without this, the person loses their connection to the palimpsest of history, either through disconnection from memories of their own or passed down, or the phantomic “haunting” that offers fleeting impressions of what kind of place this space has been in the past (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Secondly, the individual loses the identification with a community created by sharing their lives, building the place, and embedding in it shared meaning. The loss of both emotional and physical connection in this way leaves an individual struggling to find something else to hold onto, something to make them feel like themselves again.
In some cases, the tie to the land and its importance in framing individual identity is not realized until it is missing, described almost poetically as “the romantic longing for a rooted place is often belated; only the uprooted cry for roots; the innocent know not to lament their fall. Localization and globalization are cultural processes like any other ones” (Peters 1997, 86). Through this separation of the local population from the means of production, the dispossessed are now left reliant on wage labor and employment controlled by the owner. In order to be a wage laborer you must be free in the double sense; you must first be in ownership of your own labor but at the same time must have nothing to sell but your own labor (Marx 1867, 120). Through creating this system of reliance on the individual owner Marx so kindly calls ‘Moneybags’, the wage laborer is trapped in a cycle of working to live, and has lost their sense of land-based identification.

Chapter Two: Place, Identity & Capitalism

In this chapter, I argue that capitalism as a cultural change impacts identity formation by changing an individual’s relationship with the landscape through the process of primitive accumulation. Capitalism and its resulting culture are outlined in three parts: the first defines how a system is categorized as capitalist, the second frames capitalism as inherently patriarchal, and the third argues that the culture of capitalism is perpetuated through administrative forms of place-making. By changing our relationship with the landscape, the capitalist market-society changes our perceptions of time and space as well, further separating us from our environment now framed as a backdrop for capitalist functions.

In the face of this obstacle, individuals now build their identities through the consumption and collection of commodities. Supermodernity and its inversion of modernity
allows these commodities to become identities which an individual can own, rather than being indicative of identities. This separation of people from the landscape cleans the palimpsest of previous places, detaching future places from the phantomic past. These non-places as the antithesis of place are symptomatic of this social shift towards the culture of capitalism. Capitalism and its requirement of consumption has brought about supermodernity, which creates places designed for transport, convenience, and efficiency in creating profit rather than places created through embedded meaning. The explorations of capitalist supermodernity set up Chapter Three: Place, Identity & Capitalism in Suburbia, where I analyze this stage of modernity and its impacts on suburban identities.

What is Capitalism?

*What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know About Capitalism* defines capitalism as an “economic and social system in which the owners of capital (or capitalists) appropriate the surplus product generated by the direct producers (or workers), leading to the accumulation of capital—investment and amassing of wealth—by the owners” (Magdoff & Bellamy Foster 2010, 38). Working with this definition, it is necessary to pull out the characteristics that are indicative of a capitalist market-society. The first would be that capitalism is all encompassing in human systems and livelihoods, involving not just the economy but also the society in which that economy functions. Secondly, the surplus created by the labor of workers must be appropriated by the capitalist owners. And lastly, this accumulation of wealth for the capitalist leads to growing inequality between social classes, with the rich continuing to get richer and the poor getting poorer due to the loss of their capital base as a result of primitive accumulation separating individuals from their ecological base.
In thinking through the Appalachian example of incorporation into global capitalism from the previous chapter, these three characteristics of capitalism are seen through the formation of the state of West Virginia by the owners of coal mining companies. The first fragment of Magdoff & Bellamy Foster’s characterization is that capitalism is all encompassing in human systems and livelihoods, seen in the West Virginia case through the creation of capitalist working and living environments through housing their workers. Companies were then able to keep an eye on those in their employ along with their families, have them produce food for themselves on the land that the company owns, and the newer sense of Appalachian ‘community’ in these settlements bordering slums was dictated by the connection to the capitalist owner at the top. Mountaineer life quickly became centered around the culture and economy of coal mining, which fulfills the social and economic requirements described above.

The second criteria requires that the surplus created through the process of labor increasing the value of a commodity be controlled by the capitalist owner of the coal mines. Surplus is managed however the owner likes, but as long as they are in control of surplus distribution, the system falls into the capitalist category. In the West Virginian case, the owners of mining companies were the few supporters of West Virginian incorporation as a version of state-sanctioned land grabbing (Stoll 2017, 133). Through this process of insider state-speculation the oligarchic capitalist heads of West Virginia made it possible to appropriate surplus on a much wider geographic scale, rather than being limited to the land that they owned individually. Most commonly, this surplus is reinvested into the coal mining company, turning the surplus into capital. In order for money to be considered capital, it has to be used with the goal of creating economic growth for a business, or in some way
benefiting the company, as capitalism requires constant growth and reinvestment. In the Appalachian case, capital was reinvested back into the owner’s mining companies, and with the introduction of company-supplied resources through housing communities and the promotion of gardening, even more of the surplus went right into the wallets of the capitalist oligarchs as they no longer had to pay their employees liveable wages to ensure their survival.

Finally, the third criteria gleaned from Magdoff and Bellamy Foster’s definition centers around the growing inequality that is a consequence of this uneven distribution of surplus that is encouraged by the capitalist system. The appropriation of resources and surplus by the owners discussed above leaves the employees of Appalachian mining companies with very little money to be able to support themselves without the aid supplied by these companies. Continued employment through these companies only increases the reliance on the capitalist owner, and while this reliance increases, so does the difference in the capitalist's wealth versus the wealth of an employee. With no way to save up money to buy land, build a house, and survive until another job becomes available and has a more equitable distribution system, the employee’s only chance of survival is continued exploitation by the capitalist at their own expense.

**Capitalist Administration & Place**

To understand the impacts of capitalism on the sense of place, the capitalist market-society will be framed as an administration with the power to restrict certain performances of identity. While capitalist functions are easily identifiable in the West Virginian case study, these effects took form everywhere that the capitalist ideology spread,
and have had long-lasting global effects. A similar division of people from the land that made them who they are has been in process for the Native Hawaiians since the start of United States colonization (a process that is still unfinished). Through the power of state capital and research aims, the potential of geothermal energy capture put the sacred site of Pele’s home at risk and threatened to destroy the connection between the Kanaka Maoli and their deity mother. Pele has made her home in the Halema'uma'u Crater of the Kilauea Volcano, which was scouted some years ago for plans to build a geothermal power plant over the opening of the volcano (McGregor & Aluli 2014, 183). As Pele’s home and sacred place, the Kanaka Maoli fought for the right to their and their family’s ancestral land. While the plans for the geothermal plant at Pele’s home have been halted, there are also plans for another telescope bigger than the Hubble on the peak of Mauna Kea. Having fought against this project for multiple years, it is hoped that construction will be halted on these plans as well (McGregor & Aluli 2014, 197). Realizing that the root cause of place-making conflicts is based in differing perceptions and ideas of landscape, it is necessary to resolve these issues in a way that respects Kanaka Maoli culture and doesn’t result in the physical and cultural degradation of their landscape.

This example highlights conflicts caused by the threat or practice of primitive accumulation in the form of forcibly separating people from their land, which is the primary precondition for capitalism. The disconnect from the physical landscape and the relationship with it that allows for communal survival is quickly replaced by the promise of wage labor. Now with capitalism’s claws sunk into the individual, there is very little an individual can do to delink from that cycle around them.
Through the process of primitive accumulation, the supposedly free market cleanly scalpels the identity molded and nurtured by the land. Compartmentalization of space in this way made city planning and settlement organization simple, especially in the creation of road systems and neighborhood zoning. Spatial organization of settlements quickly became centered around convenience, both for the market itself and for its consumers. For the market, straight roads were created that stemmed from a central point, allowing all areas of the town to be easily accessible by road, making navigation easier through the use of the grid system (Scott 1998, 75-6). Through navigation and transportation systems growing leaps and bounds in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, capitalism achieved the convenience through efficiency that it desired. While this was good for the market, it also benefited administrative aims as well. Controlled environments designed for convenience also allow for easy surveillance and military movement, exhibiting the ways in which controlling place-making processes includes being able to restrict the agency of those who live with and utilize the land (Scott 1998, 75).

Surveillance of people through administrative compartmentalization attempts did not end with road organization. Parisian street redesigns motivated by the need to control popular insurrections within the outer suburbs of the city is one of the prevalent — but not only — examples of changing road designs oriented towards capitalist ideas of modernization (Scott 1998, 60). In addition to being blatant reminders of power such as this, city redesigns often forced lower classes and those considered undesirable towards the outskirts of the town, creating a class division in many cities attempting to display their modernity, rationality, and capitalist ideals (Scott 1998, 63). The attempted categorization of people became commonplace in state organization. Census taking and the creation of official last names
became more common throughout Europe with the rise of administrative states. The categories were based on individual profession rather than familial ties at their genesis, and was the beginning of primary identifiers being based in the wage-labor in which an individual participates. Surnames passed down through bloodlines were not seen until years later, but still aided the state in the quest towards official legibility (Scott 1998, 65). The power to name is seen as one of the greatest powers, and has been granted to an economic system as a “form of standardization” (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 1).

Capitalist Administration & Time

Not only does capitalism alter our relationship with the landscape and the places created through it, but it also changes the way we view ourselves in relation to the temporal scale. The transportation connections that the market requires to move its products creates a web of connections that lead to eventual and exponential globalization. To increase the efficiency of this transportation process it was necessary to rely on long-distance transport to move both materials and laborers on their way to productivity, and trains were the obvious answer. The passenger train grew in popularity with the growth of the suburbs (and also made that growth possible) as commutes began to get longer and more consistent (Schivelbusch 1974). Commuting created new concepts of modernity and ideas of the ways we relate to our landscapes. This includes the reduction of spatial barriers, where space is no longer the measurement of travel. Travel has shifted towards using clock-and-calendar time to measure a trip, which prioritized the accumulation and use of time as the central commodity in society as opposed to how land historically held this position (Anderson 1983, 24; Schivelbusch 1974, 43-4). Time has become one of the most important organizational
tools in our rational society, but many in American society would also let you know that in addition to a tool, time is money. Separation of workers from their time has replaced land dispossession as the most prevalent form of modern primitive accumulation, now that much of Earth’s land has already been pulled within the control of the global capitalist system.

In this way, capitalism shifts both our view of space (and therefore place), time, and money. Passenger train travel coming into being alongside the advent of film changed the way that people view themselves in relation to the landscape. Train travel is the fastest many people at that point in time had ever traveled across a landscape, and being able to watch nature go by outside in such an endless rush led to a feeling of watching a film outside the window of the train (Schivelbusch 1974, 42). This separation created by the lens of the imagined film camera led to the further disconnect of an individual from the land as a place. The space surrounding a train track became background scenery of no importance or value to those traveling through it.

This change in the perception of a landscape twisted the connotation of the word, now having it represent an externalized pleasing view rather than a continuing project made possible through human-environment interactions. Unable to recognize meaning or history of the land as you’re speeding through it leaves it empty and not worth connecting to, forcing the population of laborers who take the commuter train to work to be much more distanced from the space through which they travel than before the origin of the suburban home and subsequent commute (Schivelbusch 1974, 35-6). The commute does more than simply disconnect an individual from the space that they take up and travel through, but also affects the way that time functions, the reason for its standardization, and the way we measure time. Connecting train schedules across cities and countries are the reason that we have time zones
and standardized time today (Schivelbusch 1974, 44). By having trains cross great distances due to the growing connections of capitalist markets, it became necessary to be able to know exactly when you were arriving at your destination in both your home and work time. This led to time zones to know whose time would match up, and how much time needed to change based on location to remain on the same 24-hour system to unify these zones through a normalized pattern.

Cleaning the Palimpsest: Capitalism and the Individualization of Experience

Historically, places have been created through their role in facilitating human connections and distilling meaning, either between humans themselves or between humans and their landscape. Within the global capitalist paradigm, the goal of landscape creation is profit through efficiency, convenience, and transport. This differing relationship with the land has interesting consequences for place-making as a process, and has even led to the antithesis of place becoming possible through landscapes designed to facilitate this efficiency. Contrasting the concept of place is the idea of the non-place, which is “a space [that] cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Auge 1992, 63). While development and use of the land usually leads to the creation of places, this is not always the case if meaning is not embedded within the change to the landscape. Changing the landscape does not always lead to a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the environment, and if the creation of meaning is ignored or maldeveloped altogether, a non-place will be formed.

Disconnected from the temporal history of places, a typical non-place does not build upon the palimpsest of places that were in that space before, but instead only creates an affect
of the current place and time (Auge 1992, 63). The non-place is a form of infrastructure that was designed not to create relationships and social networks, but to facilitate the movement of people within an organized society, most often centered around market capitalism. These non-places most often take the form of travel hubs such as airports or bus terminals, and are characterized by the impersonality of interactions and the disconnect of the current use of the location from previous history and place in time.

The nature of non-places is highly subjective, and differs based on the relationship an individual has with the location. For example, a mall would be a non-place for a shopper, but would not be categorized the same way by someone who works at a store in the mall. This is because the employee would have historical and continuous ties with the shopping center that help build a part of their identity. Being a worker in this location is a part of who they are, and the mall has a shared sense of meaning for the laborer and their coworkers, therefore making the mall a place for them. This subjectivity of place can also be seen in the interactions between tourists and the monuments they visit, seeing them as a photo opportunity and fleeting in relation to the individual, rather than acknowledging their historical impacts and continuity through the vertical timeline (Auge 1992, 70).

Non-places are particularly interesting in the context of identity studies, as it is required to prove your identity in order to be able to enter the non-place (Auge 1992, 82). This can take the form of a train or plane ticket, or showing your government issued identification in order to enter the airport security line. Preliminary organization such as this is required to maintain the disconnect that comes once the non-place is entered. Counterintuitively to proving your identity on the doorstep, once an individual enters the non-place they become anonymous, now in an environment of “solitary contractuality”
(Auge 1992, 76). The nature of non-place architecture is made to promote the capitalist ideal of efficiency, and the actions of the individuals inside are motivated by this same ideal. Relationships are not built in these spaces due to this onset of anonymity, leaving the processes of non-places free to sort, and have individuals sort themselves, into categories based on destination, career, or agenda.

In a non-place an individual does not have the ability to interact with the meaning and history of a place that has been erased. By breaking this relationship that allows place-making to impact identity, it separates their meaning and characteristics from the person as well. Non-places are landscapes without accumulated meaning, and while interacting with these landscapes individuals become people without land, leaving their identity in a strange liminal area between the outside world of place and the space of the non-place. Identity returns to the individual when they return to a place with accumulated meaning, even if the individual returns to a capitalist workplace and an identity based in labor.

In the capitalist system, this type of categorization may be the closest to identity one can get if they are not connected to the land they live with and on. Having traits assigned to you based on outward characteristics or commute distinguish people within non-places, but this distinction is hardly ever necessary. Non-places have the goal of functioning interchangeably, much in the same way that most McDonalds look, taste, and feel the same. When in these spaces, humans also become interchangeable which is why anonymity within non-places is necessary. Capitalism, and the changes it has made to our perceptions of space and time, have made these non-places of transportation possible. Through our creation and
maintenance of non-places, we have made ourselves into parcels, commodities that are merely transported through the systems of production and convenience.

The Uprooted Cry for Roots: Capitalism and Dispossession

Primitive accumulation as the catalyst of capitalist place-making processes returns us to the Tanzanian villages, where the farmers who were forced to leave their ancestral lands behind were also forced to abandon their local knowledge of farming as a whole. This separation removed a chunk of the Tanzanian farmer’s identity, one that was sustained through his relationship working with the land and the land provided and gave back, but now the identification as a farmer was torn away along with the ancestral fields (Scott 1998, 251). Now in villages that were little more than marking posts along the road, the farmer is no longer a farmer and is forced to learn new land to build a home, to find food, to survive.

This uprooting also occurred in the Appalachian mountains, especially to those who were involved with the founding of what is today called West Virginia. The voting to join the Union that took place making West Virginia a state was not public and was heavily influenced by the coal mining capitalists who wanted to buy up land from the state-to-be for their own profits (Stoll 2017, 134). Once formally admitted to the Union, the coal companies did just that, and suddenly all those living in the mountains were living on newly privatized property, created to promote West Virginia’s economic growth through capitalist-driven resource extraction (Stoll 2017, 135). To solve this problem, the coal companies offered housing, a small plot of land, and the promise of planting a home garden to coerce Appalachians into working for them (Stoll 2017, 221). Left with only the option of working
for an exploitative and deadly industry or death, those who once found solace in the hills were incorporated into the system of capitalistic reliance.

In the West Virginia case this delinking of commons and resulting incorporation into capitalist land-use relationships was referred to as the loss of their “ecological base” (Stoll 2017, 74). No longer able to rely on the land for hunting, shelter resources, and agricultural fields, the mountaineers did their best to maintain the lifestyle they were used to, but were unable to stop themselves from being drawn into the capitalist cycle by the promises of wealth and resources hiding a shadowy capitalist future. While affecting mountaineer development economically, primitive accumulation in Appalachia also had major effects on mountaineer identity. Through their removal from the land that allowed them to be perceived as the barbaric, anarchist, self-sufficient people that made up Appalachian identity until this point, the settlers were left in a state of social and economic limbo that removed them from the places that they had created, and the landscapes which they knew and loved. With an amputated identity such as this, it was necessary to search for the nearest replacement, most commonly offered through the culture of capitalism.

**Idolatry of Economic Man**

In addition to the three requirements of capitalism at the beginning of this chapter, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. The capitalist market-society is inherently patriarchal as its future is dependent on the exploitation and ignorance of women’s unpaid labor. Women are tasked with the majority of care work in Western societies, and perform the social reproduction that instills capitalist ways of thinking in the next generation of laborers (Bahn et al., 2020, 698). In this way, capitalism promotes
traits framed as masculine while restricting an individual’s agency to perform traits perceived as feminine. The Economic Man as an ideology embodies the culture created within the capitalist market-society.

The Economic Man is rational, focused on utility, and is in search of his own wealth and interests, and he most often takes the form of capitalist owners or wealthy elites (Godkin 1891). By adopting these values, capitalism attempts to break down community bonds through the promotion of individualism and self-interest (Marglin 2008). While performing your individual identity and having the agency to act in your own self-interest, you must push aside the values of the community, responsibilities to others, and the possibility of the consequences of your actions affecting those around you. Due to the promotion of individuality, the false belief of a meritocracy became part of the culture of capitalism and productivity became centered around individual profits. Care work performed by women is pushed to the side because it does not align with capitalist values, rather women’s work is typically community centered and done at the expense of the individual (Bahn et al., 2020, 696).

Maintaining this hierarchy of productivity through the hegemonic power of capitalist patriarchy and its implementation through administration leads to the erasure of women as producers in the market-society. It is because of this systematic erasure that I have chosen to focus on the creation of masculine identities within the system of global capitalism, rather than attempt to make generalizations about women’s performance within this system. Not to say that the patriarchy has no effect on women’s performance, as it can lead to the adopting of masculine traits by those who perform feminine identities as a way to reclaim a bit of their agency within a system that aims to invalidate them, such as the examples of female CEOs
and politician Hillary Clinton. However, even with women adapting to the capitalist patriarchy in order to exercise their agency, masculine identities are pushed to the top of the capitalist hierarchy and are the intended product of the culture of capitalism, while the same cannot be said for feminine identities.

Capitalism, as a rule, is always self-centered rather than group-oriented. This contradicts at a fundamental level the connections built through interactions and an identity based in a shared use of space, and a common understanding of the meaning within that place created through collective action. The problem of community-oriented living and its resulting identities was solved by the severance of primitive accumulation, and capitalism picks apart the newly incorporated landscape to suit its own needs. Often this comes in the form of dividing and selling, but if an individual was lucky enough (and white enough) they might receive an allotment from the state granting them access to a sliver of the commons available to an individual before state possession.

This sudden focus on individual ownership and territory as a concept broke down the ties that living together with and on the land had historically built and maintained through the creation of landscapes. By revoking access to the commons that sustain the ability to continue the process of place-making, people are separated from the land that has built their identity. Moving forward, how does an individual form their identity within this culture of capitalism?

**Build Your Laborer: Identity as Commodity Conglomerate**

The first way identity is created within capitalism is through adherence to capitalist values being presented as commodified traits. While the standardization of time is an
organizational tool used by both the state and the market that it aims to support, adherence to this categorization is treated as a characteristic, a sliver of a person’s individual identity. We view people through the lens of the capitalist market-society system, and consequently we judge people based on the traits seen as valuable to this system. Being punctual, for example, has been given a good connotation within this paradigm as running late is inefficient and will impact hypothetical profits. Taking a day of rest now is seen as lazy, as the capitalist War on Sloth cemented ideas of downtime as being unproductive soon after the Industrial Revolution (Perelman 2001, 9). However, anthropologists have argued that the ability to be lazy shows that all necessary production is completed, survival is guaranteed, and rest is now the only priority (Sahlins 1972). Our perceptions of character traits are embedded within a market-society system that strives for efficiency and profit growth, causing us to judge others and their identities as a sum of characteristics in the same way the market would. Performance of such traits impacts the perception others have of our external identity, and at the same time situates an individual and their value within the capitalist system of productivity. The audience reaction to this performance solidifies this aspect of identity, but it also has the ability to create a shift in performance in order to align with capitalist values.

The second way identity is created within capitalism is through the close association between a person’s identity and the job that person performs in society. It has become common for the second question you ask a person to be “what do you do for a living?” right after asking for the individual’s name. Tying identity so closely to employment devalues those who are in-between jobs, unemployed, or working in a job for survival rather than an exercise of passion. Jobs have become so central to North American livelihoods that many of our names are centered around ancestral occupations, the most obvious being the surname
‘Smith’ in reference to the blacksmith of a village. Through this prioritization of career, we are able to judge others in two of the ways that the market society does: through adherence to capitalist values and through employment.

While the previous two changes in identity impact our interpersonal relationships on a daily basis, our choices as consumers are the third form of capitalistic changes to the process of identity formation. Since place-making within a system of land privatization cannot rely on shared understandings of meaning, we are offered a new way to create identities for ourselves through commodities holding a semblance of meaning. Consumer choices reflect the identity of the consumer, whether it be clothes, cars, games, talk shows, etc. These material commodities aim to support the performance of identities in a way that makes our internal identity match up with our perceived identity, especially in relation to acceptance from others who hold the same identities that an individual is attempting to convey.

This acceptance from others who share an identity with an individual has been termed as being part of an “in-group” in studies of relationships between social identity and uniqueness motives in consumer choices. Through consumption aligned with an in-group “consumers can satisfy desires for assimilation and differentiation within a single choice context by satisfying different motives in different choice dimensions” (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012, 561). There are different (sometimes conflicting) goals that are working together in every single choice that a consumer makes. On one hand, the consumer aims to be perceived as part of the desired in-group and be associated with them even when standing alone; such as wearing a Ralph Lauren Polo branded shirt to indicate that the wearer is preppy, put-together, and more than likely financially well off. On the other hand, the consumer aims to distinguish themselves from others in the desired in-group due to the
individual desire for uniqueness and recognition. This could take the form of buying a pair of Nike shoes, but in the less popular red color rather than the blue because you don’t want to be seen as following the crowd.

While these desires appear to be conflicting, both of these goals are accomplished through the action of a single choice (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012, 563). Identity formed through material commodities still functions through the foundational principle of inclusion and exclusion, but rather than being based on physical boundaries and borders, it is now based on social boundaries and cliques. While uniqueness motives drive choices within in-groups, the level of commodity differentiation with the aim of creating uniqueness does not have an effect on the recognition of group-inclusion from those outside the group (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012, 565). This indicates two differing levels of identity that come into play through consumer choices, the first being the level of in-group versus out-group differentiation, and the second being the level of differentiation within the in-group itself.

Social grouping is often based on other aspects of an individual’s identity such as gender, sexuality, race, or class. Consumer choices take on identifying meaning depending on which primary identifier that the choice is attempting to convey, and becomes especially interesting when dealing with commodities designed to indicate gender.

Clothing is one of the easiest performances of gender that we each take part in every day. The way we dress can indicate our likes, interests, and hobbies beyond gender as well, but gender is an easy category in which capitalism can manufacture commodities based on perceived collective needs or wants of that in-group. Teenage girls are often targeted through advertisements to keep up with the new trends, to share the same wants as their friends, and to make their social standing known through these commodities that ‘guarantee it!’.
fashion industry made the performance of identity through wearable commodities more accessible for the working class, and in its high rates of production and turnover led to new levels of waste and exploitation both in the production process and from the consumer’s cyclical purchasing (Anguelov 2016).

Consumer choices such as this one are especially important to unpack due to the environmental implications of these choices. Environmentalism is often associated with femininity, and this association is only aided through ideas of Mother Nature and her renewable properties (Merchant 1980). There is a strong relationship between unsustainable practices and masculinity, and it has been found that “men’s consumer choices were shaped by an unconscious bias against femininity and, in turn, against more eco-friendly behaviors” (Guidi 2021).

On the other hand, those who identify with femininity also present their identities through their consumption choices. However, women’s commodification of identity is not as simple as it is for the performance of masculinity. There is a dual nature of women’s identity through commodity consumption, where the woman is “inscribed as both consumer and commodity, purchaser and purchase, buyer and bought” (Roberts 1998, 818). The woman, as a wife, is a commodity that her husband keeps as his property, but she also exercises her agency through the performance of his identity. She makes the choices that determine her husband’s perceived identity, such as the furniture in the house, what he eats, and often the ways that his children look and act. The woman as wife must “consume “conspicuously,”” that is, purchase valuable goods for herself, her husband, and his household — goods that provide evidence of his wealth and dominance,” building her own identity through the consumption
of her husband, and he in turn builds his identity through the consumption of the wife as commodity (Roberts 1998, 819).

Through the study of increasing commodification, certain commodities “in modern consumption are used to objectify, and thereby understand, the nature of modernity as social experience” (Miller 1995, 149). Objectification of culture in this way becomes an individual’s “entry into self-conscious modernity,” in which the consumer is able to “construct a whole series of imaginative scenarios as to the kinds of people they might wish to be, e.g. more Americanized, neo-indigenized, or nationalistic” (Miller 1995, 149).

When an individual begins the process of forming a new type of identity after the amputation of their landscape-based identity caused by capitalist dispossession through incorporation, “communities with a particular experience of rupture and dislocation may use commodities to embody more extreme forms of modernity” (Miller 1995, 150). These more extreme forms of modernity present an individual the opportunity to pick and choose the commodities from which to build their identity, using the reach of the global capitalist system to build connections through the commodity with the transnational community built by the globalization of modernity.

Supermodernity

The shift away from landscape as the basis of identity, and instead substituting it with material commodities reflects the societal shift in the direction of supermodernity. In this arena of thought, a society has inverted the modernity for which it is striving (Auge 1992). In relation to this discussion, this takes the form of the commodity as a signifier of identity being replaced, instead functioning as the signified identity instead. Rather than having
commodities convey something about an individual’s identity, the commodities themselves have come to constitute the identity an individual is attempting to form. By treating commodities as building blocks for identity, the inversion of modernity has led us down the path of commodification of identity itself. Identity has become something that we can acquire, rather than something that we are. When the lens of supermodernity is applied to the process of place-making it further exhibits the ways in which capitalism affects our perception of the identities around us.

Having the ability to collage an identity in this way is a privilege that not all are afforded, as “the improvisation of identity is wonderful if you have the cultural and financial capital to cushion you against the traumas of postmodernity [...] but most people live out their lives in localized spaces” (Peters 1997, 91). Choosing to view North American suburbia through a supermodern lens, this quote highlights the ways in which attachment to land is a luxury that most of us are no longer afforded. This detachment is shown through the word choice of “localized spaces”. In space, you are not connected to history, culture, or the physical environment. People have their performance of identity restricted through the choices presented to them, as identities have become commodified themselves though the way they are supplied to us while we have no role in their creation. In the next section, the impacts of a supermodern capitalist society on identity formation will be examined through an analysis of North American suburban commodities and the three tenets of supermodernity: overabundance of events, spatial overabundance, and the individualization of meaning (Auge 1992, 33).
In this chapter I argue that spatial organization influenced by capitalist administrative ideologies have centered the process of suburban identity-formation around commodities as its material base through the lens of supermodernity. The economic boom post-WWII allowed suburban citizens to build an identity on the blank palimpsest of the suburbs through consumption. The transformation of the Economic Man into the Organization Man creates a perceived community of homogeneous suburban residents, along with the isolation provided by neighborhood design, and the opportunity to own commodified land in the form of private property.

I argue that neighborhood design, patriarchal car culture, and the home and its attached private property function as three of the main material bases for suburban identity formation within supermodernity. Individualization of livelihoods and routines made possible through suburban organization exemplifies the overabundance of space and events, along with the individualization of references that fit within the tenets of supermodernity. This chapter also outlines the ways in which performances of identity can be environmentally detrimental, and how identity formation with the commodity as its base within the capitalist market-society has both social and environmental impacts.

**The Origins of Suburbia**

Suburbia as we think of it today did not exist before the end of the Second World War in the United States. While the process of building settlements around a larger metropolitan area has existed for centuries, these older suburbs have influenced the organization and state processes of the authority under which they fall. However, older suburbs such as the ones in France and London did not come into being in the same context as the postwar North
American suburbs focused on in this thesis. The growth of these North American suburbs was driven by the influx of young veterans aiming for family life upon their return from war, and the economic boom that came with war allowed these sprawling settlements to quickly become associated with the American Dream.

Before diving into the ways that suburbs cultivate and create certain categories of people through the commodities required to participate in suburban life, it is necessary to understand what exactly a suburb is, how they are formed, and why this form of development was chosen to shape the future of a modern United States. As discussed by Baldessare in “Suburban Communities”, an authoritative history of the suburbs, North American suburbs contrast their European counterparts which were few in number, lightly populated and focused on agriculture and trade, while American suburbs went through a different process of suburbanization which ended with suburban demographic dominance through rapid population migration and suburban industrialization (Baldessare 1992, 476). Early industrial suburbs were characterized by the prevalence of “bedroom communities”, which became the homes of commuters who split their lives between the suburb and its city, and were homes for those who held white collar jobs in urban industry (Baldessare 1992, 477). In the North American case, suburbs aimed to be the family home away from the urban center, a welcome refuge from the frenzy of urban industrialism and heterogeneity.

This idea of the division of home and work became tied to the idea of the American Dream and land ownership, leading to the formation of a perceived homogenous utopia for those recovering from the trauma of the Second World War through the creation of the modern homeowner caricature. This distance from the metropole center was made possible through the infrastructural growth that was produced by governmental economic growth
throughout the war. The interstate highway system was built to facilitate cross country travel in addition to supporting the booming automobile industry at the time (USDOT FHA, 2022). By building a transport system that connected suburbs to their urban centers in the most direct way, the federal government gave their stamp of approval for suburban development, backed by the petrol companies that made this exponential rise in automobile usage possible.

**Appeals of Suburbia: Land, Isolation & Perceived Community**

Suburban pull for the American public had three main parts: land ownership, a perceived homogenous population, and the benefit of isolation. First, land ownership has become one of the strongest tenets of the American version of freedom, and this was readily available for those returning from—and benefiting those who stayed and profited off—the war. This ownership of the land (even if only through a fleeting residency in the suburbs) instilled a sense of authority over landscape and place within an individual, allowing this ownership of house and land to build a sector of the individual identity through the acquisition of these commodities. Secondly, the homogeneity of the suburbs drew many families into this perceived utopia. Suburban families often had similar characteristics such as being white, lower-middle class, and including only the heterosexual nuclear family (Baldessare 1992, 481). This created a perceived community made possible due to the classist and racial barriers that controlled entry into many American suburbs.

Within this perceived homogenous population, the black suburban population was growing, but in no way was it proportionate to the white suburban population. This led to segregation between urban centers and suburbs, but also within suburbs themselves. Certain neighborhoods will have a high population of minorities, while others will have no minority
populations at all due to redlining, mortgage practices, and classification of housing models (Baldessare 1992, 482). A similar differentiation exists between class stratification as well, with increased industrial production in the suburbs allowing the suburban population to get richer while the urban population continues to struggle economically. It was also common for different neighborhoods in the same suburb to indicate class status, with the wealthy owning larger Pennsylvanian homes while the lower class population was resigned to the simplest Cape Cod style homes that became the stereotypical image of the suburban house (Marino 2014, 491).

Finding those with similar socioeconomic characteristics within the boundaries of suburban development was simple, but it was also very easy to shove off those connections and build a life of isolation for yourself within the plot of territory an individual was able to own. In addition to the mechanisms of private property, isolation was also promoted through other channels such as neighborhood design and the popularity of the family car (or sometimes two). Suburban neighborhoods are notorious for their winding roads and curving corners that prevent a straight line of sight, these roads were termed “curvilinear” (Marino 2014, 497). The combination of roads and discontiguous settlement designs are perfect for the single person car, allowing the individual to travel apart from those around them. This isolation is now maintained for the suburban resident through their house, their transportation, and the design of their neighborhood; a sense of homogenous community is created in the abstract, but in practice this community only exists during moments of its reference (Auge 1992, 77).

The conflicting appeals of land, perceived community, and isolation in the suburban arena led to a sort of discontent in those who chose to live in these developments, grumbling
of false advertising. The incongruence between a resident’s initial ideas of what life in a suburban community would be versus the reality of that life has become known as the ‘suburban crisis’, which highlights the incapability of the present governmental structure to support the infrastructure necessary for sprawling suburban regions (Baldessare 1992, 483). Viewing this issue from a different perspective, the government is doing their best to care for these settlements through the parameters of the capitalistic market-society, and the attempt is failing.

Suburbs function as a form of postwar healing, and are capitalism’s solution to caring for the American masses (Mullins 2021, 138). Through this lens, consumerism leading to identity formation in the suburban arena is a civic responsibility and the suburban community promotes this consumption at every turn. Through media such as LIFE magazine, product advertisements and even real estate fliers, the necessity of consumerism was highlighted and promoted through the suburban lifestyle (Mullins 2021, 139). This sense of suburban subjectivity and norms is maintained through the promotion of certain consumption and the rejection of others, but this differentiation is only recognized within the boundaries of a singular development, and sometimes even on a scale as small as a single block of a neighborhood.

Through this isolation of the individual, and in some cases the nuclear family, it becomes necessary for those within suburbia to create routines to fit within the capitalist ideologies perpetuated through this infrastructure, seen in the Monday-Friday commute to the urban center for work. In the previous chapter the ways in which capitalism has influenced our perceptions of both space and time are discussed, leading to the standardization of time, along with the introduction of timezones and time being uniform between different cities.
(Schivelbusch 1974). In the North American suburbs commutes are mainly done by car, but are still done with the intention of keeping the standard cycle of production and labor going to create economic growth and profit. Through the isolation they provide, suburbs allow individuals to block out all aspects of life that deviate from their perception of normative identity and routine, building an imagined bubble of sameness within the unacknowledged differentiation of the suburb.

**Technology’s Return from War**

Advances in infrastructure were aided by advances in technology, and their combination made suburbia possible. The Second World War mechanized warfare, and this technology came home with its soldiers and engineers. Suburban development would not have been possible without the mechanized earth-clearing machinery influenced by war technology. While private property furthers the disconnect between the homeowner and the larger sense of landscape as place, this disconnect is exacerbated through the sheer amount of natural destruction that is required to develop these settlements. This took the form of mass landscape destruction never before seen by the American public (Mullins 2021). The World Wars represented the transition from interpersonal to mechanized warfare, with huge amounts of landscape destruction as the consequence of nuclear warfare and growth of earth manipulation. This culminated in knowledge stemming from warfare being applied to housing developments, with particular inventions such as the bulldozer becoming popular after the end of the Second World War.

The destruction of nature in postwar North America was so brutal that it has been referred to as a “culture of clearance” which was made possible by “accelerated cycles of
clearance, destruction, rebuilding and excess” playing out on the suburban landscape (Mullins 2021, 136). These landscape clearances were made possible through military engineering and the rise of heavy machinery able to effect the transformation of space.

Levittown’s origin was no different, with the *Saturday Evening Post* stating that “as it now stands, with its large areas of skinned earth and its almost-endless vistas of too new, too bare, too similar houses, Levittown offends the aesthetic sense of many visitors” (Thompson 1954, 27). The destruction of fields and forests were felt surprisingly hard by the American public, who were then able to aim their ire towards the bulldozer, which functioned as the personification of this military efficiency in creating empty space, this step before the development of a subdivision creates an overabundance of space while fulfilling the growth imperative of capitalism.

In order to build the materialities necessary to form suburban identities natural systems were sent into chaos, and the destruction of the landscape for development’s sake, along with the bulldozer, began to serve as a “symbol of humans’ disregard for nature” (Mullins 2021, 137). Many viewed nature as spoiled through these processes and aimed to prevent further environmental harm through anti-bulldozer policies. In a Washington D.C. anti-bulldozer case, an ordinance was put into effect to prevent “wholesale tree stripping which leads to erosion, muddied streams, pollution, [and] an unattractive countryside” in an attempt to reverse the growth of suburban developments along the East coast (Mullins 2021, 137). However, it is important to realize that much of this environmental destruction is not limited to suburban development, running parallel to the landscape changes made for the sake of mechanized agriculture.
The suburbs and agricultural production both make drastic changes to the landscape in the name of bettering human lives. While suburban development focuses on the necessity of shelter, agriculture focuses on the necessity of food. Having land only able to be used for one of these purposes leads to heightened tensions between farmers and developers. While it may seem that developers and farmers are in conflict with each other, in reality two different sectors of capitalist production are in conflict over land-use and place-making processes. Capital now functions as the intermediary between labor and land, which places a lot of power in the hands of farmers as they control the means of production ensuring our survival.

Farming is one of the remaining professions that allows an individual to connect physically with the landscape, as many corporate jobs are remote and done from anywhere in the world. Farmers work both with the land and through the land, allowing them a distinct perspective on the relationship between capitalism, land, and labor. The suburban sprawl has slowly been eating away at arable land since its genesis, swallowing once-productive agricultural fields (Comninellis 2019). Locations of settlement development were chosen in relation to the farming land that surrounds the city center, but with the outward growth of suburbs much of this prime farming land is being hidden underneath housing developments and subdivisions (Comninellis 2019). It is estimated that around 6% of North American land is arable for large scale farming, and much of that is now being used to secure housing foundations. These pre-suburban land conflicts foreshadow the conflicting place-making processes within suburban developments.
Economic Man 2.0: The Organization Man

The Organization Man is the Economic Man of the North American suburbs. While these people are not necessarily men, they do follow the patriarchal framework of capitalism and have adopted the masculine characteristics of the Economic Man. Whyte argues that these people are “the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions” (Whyte 1956, 3). These institutions can range from government administrations, to universities, to businesses with their only limitations being that the organization men fall between the low level laborers and the upper level of CEOs and the owners of production.

While these institutions promote the individualism valued by capitalist mechanisms, they build a working collective referenced through the language of individualism (Whyte 1956, 5). The Social Ethic is the new form of collectivism made possible through the capitalistic market and societal system, and therefore determines the resulting social response to the performance of identity (Whyte 1956, 6). By adequately justifying the necessity of the individual supporting the needs of the collective, the discourse controlled by capitalism and its elites has managed to twist community-centered living in a way that supports the existing system, rather than recognizing that accommodations for the collective are only truly made possible beyond this system.

The organizational collective is built through ideologies similar to the Social Ethic, or what your production does for those around you, which Whyte argues has come into being as a transformation of the American Dream (Whyte 1956, 6). Through this newly realized Social Ethic, the organization man orients his production to benefit “growing
accommodations to the needs of society” along with the “growing need to justify it” (Whyte 1956, 8). We cannot make the mistake of misinterpreting this collective as referring to society as a whole, but rather the collective that Whyte identifies is contained within the organization itself (army, government, business, etc.).

While capitalism has twisted the language of the collective to support its individually-oriented processes, both the Organization Man and the Social Ethic align with capitalism's short term viewpoint of environmental consequences. The organization and its men view their betterment of the collective in the short term, and it is common to only focus on effects on the present temporal scale (Whyte 1956, 9). This enables the continued extraction of resources without concern for generations years in the future, choosing to focus on the commercial benefits of resource use for the organization in which they work. By situating collective ideologies within the discourse of individuality, the organization cannot be held responsible for whatever future damage they have caused, causing all externalities to fall on the organization men and laborers below them.

The suburbs are crawling with these organization men, as this manipulated community of sameness is the driving force behind demographic distribution based on class, race, and even gender within the suburbs. Building this sense of community through the ideology of the individual allows for individual agency to be acted upon while benefiting the collective. Veterans returning from war fall into their own section of organization men, but no matter what field an individual associates themselves with, these people still understand the individualist perspective of the collective that all organization men share. This allows conformity to run rampant within the manufactured boundaries of the suburb. Conformity influences every consumption decision, whether it takes the form of which model of house
your family purchased, the car that transports the Organization Man to and from the urban center, or the identities that determine the location of a specific family within the sprawling subdivisions of suburbia. While this conformity aligns with the ideals of the Social Ethic, it contrasts the meritocracy promoted by the American Dream and early capitalistic motivations creating conflicting senses of place within the suburbs.

**Suburban Individualism as Organizational Conformity**

Framing the individual and their acceptance of capitalist ideologies as being in constant struggle against the Social Ethic brings to light the internal struggle that comes with conformity, and will end with the activation and performance of individualism. Conformity is an acceptance of the current system, but individualism only challenges conformity on the surface level, while in actuality the performance of fighting against the organization can strengthen the pull of conformity and the organization itself (Whyte 1956, 10). Performative push back (not in the sense of Butler, but in the sense of insincerity) is “often a mask for cowardice, and few are more pathetic than those who flaunt outer differences to expiate their inner surrender” (Whyte 1956, 10). The conflict between the internal self pitted against the perceived external self brings the performance of organizational and capitalist ideas to the forefront.

This force of conformity is incredibly strong in suburban neighborhoods, and the showing off of outer difference by its residents exemplifies the inner surrender of the Organization Man to the organization for which he works (Whyte 1956, 13). Through this attempt to secure individuality through consumption, the Organization Man follows the
process outlined by uniqueness motivators, unintentionally having his push back lead to further consumer conformity to the capitalist system (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012).

When looking at the neighborhood, the car, and the suburban home it becomes necessary to embed identity-forming practices in their material forms in order to create a complete picture of suburban life, otherwise the risk of misrepresentation of suburban life becomes much more likely, as Mullins says, “public discourses that superficially represent or simply ignore the concrete materiality of suburban life risk fixating on our revulsion for an imagined domestic materiality rooted in popular rhetoric more than everyday material experience” (Mullins 2021, 133). Unpacking conflicting place-making processes and their roots is necessary to build a full understanding of suburban lifestyles and discontent, with focus on the physical materiality of suburban neighborhoods, automobiles, and homes and their impacts on identity formation.

**Together in Isolation: Suburban Compartmentalization of Neighborhoods**

The first material form that will be unpacked to examine its role in identity formation within the suburban arena is the geographic organization of the neighborhood. The neighborhood and its design promote the capitalist ideal of individualism, and illustrates the isolating features of the subdivision. Necessary to define in this discussion is the difference between the subdivision and the neighborhood. Moving forward in this section, I refer to the largest geographic scale of suburban development as the subdivision. For example, Levittown would be a subdivision, an area manufactured the same way, with similar characteristics and designs. Neighborhoods fall within subdivisions, but rather than being the development as an entirety, neighborhoods are smaller distinct areas of space that function as
a smaller community within the boundaries of the subdivision. Neighborhood can refer either to the built environment of homes and manipulations of the landscape, as well as the network of relationships that function within that built environment. Subdivisions are made up of discrete neighborhoods that each reflect the identity of those who reside within them.

Looking at Figure 3.1 it is immediately apparent that suburbs are not randomly designed, with the original grid-like formation of streets that was popular during the original push for easy access and governmental control of territory making a return here. From Figures 3.1 and 3.2, the breakdown of subdivisions into neighborhoods is obvious, with each individual neighborhood breaking off perpendicular to the main road. These neighborhoods function as the sub-compartments that combined make up a total view of the subdivision.

Isolation and the view of the individual functioning as a self-contained whole is pushed by the ideologies that make up our market-society, and they are mirrored in the
carefully organized suburban development. The most obvious example of this is the cul-de-sac. In previous organization strategies, having roads lead to dead ends and forcing the traveler to backtrack constantly would go against the praxis of convenience and efficiency. While the grid system of road design is still common in urban areas, the grid begins to warp the further from the city you go. Cul-de-sacs are the furthest extent of the ‘curvilinear’ roads that suburban areas prefer, as the gentle “curve and twist” of suburban streets is punctuated with the dead ends of cul-de-sacs and roads that lead to nowhere (Marino 2014, 497). Streets such as these were created to block paths of sight between houses and different sections of the neighborhood, allowing suburban residents to ignore the existence of those around them. The term ‘subdivision’ has its roots in this same isolationist idea, as it references the ways that suburban neighborhoods function as isolated settlements within larger developments, their only connection is through being built off the same main road (Marino 2014, 497). Creating this labyrinth of interwoven roads often led to a disorienting effect for both those who live in the suburb and those who are visiting it, but for very different reasons.

The isolation promoted by suburb road networks works in two different ways, depending on your degree of belonging within the suburban neighborhood. Firstly, for those who do not live in the suburb and are driving through to visit a friend or colleague, the complex and abstract layout is intended to disorient those who do not live within the subdivision (Marino 2014, 497-8). If someone is not easily able to navigate an area, the chances of a visitor returning at a later date or planning to live there become much lower, with the streets acting as a sort of independent gatekeeping mechanism for the neighborhood and its community. A similar mechanism is put in place for residents of the neighborhood,
and occurs when residents visit other neighborhoods within the subdivision that are not their own.

![Figure 3.2: Cul-de-sac organization (trekandphoto, 2022)](image)

Secondly, for those who live in the suburb, the curving roads are used to maintain individualism through privacy for both themselves and their neighbors living in different sections of the subdivision. As shown in Figure 3.2 above and identified by Marino 2014, subdivisions stem from a central main road and the appendage-like roads reaching out in either direction all end in cul-de-sacs. This image illustrates the isolation promoted between divisions of a suburb while at the same time showing the disconnect between these divisions through the spatial choice of cul-de-sac usage. Passage through other divisions of your own suburban neighborhood is not encouraged, and often prevented through this style of neighborhood design. Suburban landscapes are tailored around where a resident is allowed to live and travel, which is dictated further by the labor and class associations of an individual.
This layered isolation and individualism of suburban neighborhoods matters because it determines the acceptable forms of socialization that can occur within the organization of the subdivision, while also physically manifesting the capitalist ideologies that led to suburban formation after the Second World War. Isolation promotes the individuality that the capitalist market-society preaches, while also creating a bubble in which the individual can create their own placelet (embedded, of course, with meaning only for themselves) within this larger development. Along with the identities that come from the location of the house within the suburb and the reflection of class stratification back onto the homeowner, this navigation of the neighborhood space based on your perceived identity allows these categorizations to be unuestioned despite the geographic differentiation of the neighborhood.

**Suburban Sprawl & Overabundance of Space**

The individualist isolation of the suburban subdivision illustrates a tenet of supermodernity: the overabundance of space. By compartmentalizing land based on individual ownership, the overlapping systems of land-use that occurred within the commons is no longer possible. Creating shared boundaries rather than shared landscapes increases the geographic scale of human land-use exponentially. Spatial dispersion in this way creates a much larger range of environmental consequences, which only promotes the further spread of land-use and resource extraction in order to maintain the bounded, but not overlapping, system of spatial organization. In this way, the boundaries between property delineate the grid of spatial quantitative organization of the suburban subdivision.
Framing suburban developments through the lens of supermodernity (comparing them to non-places) becomes even more compelling when dealing with gated-communities. One of the main features when defining the non-place is the requirement to prove your identity to enter, and the consequential relinquishing of identity for anonymity once in the non-place (Auge 1992, 82). In the case of gated communities, you are required to have either a code, card, or fob in order to access the neighborhood. By affirming the suburban identity through this process, the isolation that is promoted through road design, house location, and car commuting turns to anonymity for the suburban resident. This isolation is only made possible through the reaffirmation of individual identity to enter, and at the same time this anonymity has the peculiar effect of reinforcing the individual identity of the resident through the presentation and proof of suburban consumption.

Even with this ethos of isolation around which the suburb organizes itself, communities still manage to establish themselves within suburban neighborhoods. One way this occurs is through building in- and out-groups based on commodity consumption, with reference to specific commodities and the communities fostered through this consumption. Mullins argues that a meaningful social life cannot be created or maintained through “standardized architectural forms and landscape plans, competitive spending and performative consumption,” but I am not sure if I agree with this assessment (Mullins 2021, 140). The next section explores the relationship between commodities, community, and identity formation through the case study of Ford F-150 culture and how this builds capitalist masculine identities around the car as a commodity in North America.
Beep Beep!: Car Culture & Identity Formation in Capitalist Patriarchy

The car facilitates a performance of masculinity that aligns with the individualistic and extractive values of the capitalist patriarchy. While consumption promotes individuality through the presence of uniqueness motivators, collective senses of meaning embedded in cars and their features allow the formation of communities around the ownership of the car as a commodity. Owning a car initially functioned as an indicator of wealth and a way to flaunt your class status. When cars became more readily available, the model and specifications of your car began to matter more in tandem with the introduction of luxury brands and additional features. But in recent years there have been identities assigned to the owner of a car based on its make and model, becoming almost equivalent to a horoscope sign. Examples of this permeate pop culture with videos titled “What the car you drive says about you” or the line “drives a PT cruiser/ God he’s such a loser” from the Broadway musical Be More Chill (Traczs, Michael in the Bathroom). On a broader level, through the framework of supermodernity and its inversion of modernity, trucks and larger polluting vehicles have built up American masculinity and perceived masculine traits. Opposing this, smaller electric vehicles are perceived as ‘girly’ or assigned feminine features in an attempt to degrade those who drive them. Capitalism’s restriction of agency through removing greener choices presented by the market-society maintains the performance of masculinity and in this way promotes ecological unsustainability as the way to build American masculine identity.

The car has both isolating effects and community-building effects. Within the realm of suburbia, the car is necessary for the work-week commute. This ritual is performed by an individual, and the car secures this isolation for the entirety of the two-way trip, reinforcing the identity of the individual in this way through the lack of social connections available
during the drive. At the same time, a car builds community in the same way that any commodity does, through the creation of in-groups and out-groups through variations in car makes, models, and features (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012). As the similarities between cars are recognized, and through the lens of supermodernity where the commodity begins to define us, the similarities in identities built from these commodities are recognized as well, making the subsequent community built through ownership vital in creating the American masculine identity.

This individualism made possible through car ownership in turn drives the extractive processes of capitalism, and the case-study of Ford F-150 culture is a starting point to understand the relationship between suburbs, masculine identities, capitalist patriarchy, and environmental degradation. The original pickup trucks were marketed towards those migrating to rural and suburban areas over the last half century, and cars made the existence of suburban sprawl and overabundance of space possible (Greene 2004). Capitalistic functions rely on the extraction of gasoline for the commute back and forth from the workplace, made possible by the individually owned automobile. With the majority of Americans living in suburbia after the Second World War, owning a car became a normalized part of suburban life and the car became yet another commodified building block through which to perform identity. This quote is from The Great American Truck Survey 2020, a yearly study conducted by Ford Motors to show off the social media posts, quantitative data, pop culture references, and additions to Ford history over the course of the past year.

“America loves trucks because they connect us to an enduring American cultural truth about the resiliency, hard work, and undaunted determination of Americans to tame frontiers, build big things, and overcome adversity – needs that have come to the fore today. Trucks have earned their iconic status by giving builders and dreamers the
Ahuvia clearly states that Ford ties together multiple characteristics in their attempt to establish the identity of Ford truck owners, and therefore produce a certain type of Ford consumer as a consequence. Ford argues that their truck owners are “dependable and feel personal responsibility to take action to help their family, friends, and community” (Ford Media Center 2020). To back up this claim, Ford states that 94% of truck users have used their truck to help others, and that 34% help others with their truck on a weekly basis (Ford Media Center 2020). Through these statements, Ford associates their truck’s potential with these descriptors and through consumption the Ford owner is able to apply those characteristics to himself (Miller 1995). While the sample size was limited to 2,000 truck owners, the helpful identity of Ford truck owners presented through this survey is built by the collectively recognized meaning and responsibility that has become associated with Ford truck ownership.

In more recent years, Ford has taken a step that could potentially shift the performances tied to the F-150 as a commodified identity. Ford has chosen to look toward the future, and more specifically towards the Ford F-150 Lightning that entered the market during the 2022 car season. At the time of publication, Ford was working on marketing this truck to their usual demographic, typically men (15% with Ford truck tattoos) and those who use their agency as a consumer to perform their identity through the materiality of their truck and the values that align with that materiality (Ford Media Center 2020). Out of the 2,000 Ford owners surveyed, only 40% of truck owners were excited about “the idea of an electric pickup” (Ford Media Center 2020).
The reception of this shift highlights the way that the performance of masculinity relies on the relationship between the commodity and its environmental degradation, making building a more sustainable identity in relation to their trucks very difficult with the type of consumer Ford has created. According to the Ford F-150 Lightning presale data, 160,000 electric trucks were ordered after their market debut (Tucker 2021). There are currently 16.1 million Ford F-series pickups currently on the road, with Lightning drivers being .99% of Ford pickup drivers (Foot 2021). The main concerns surrounding the Ford F-150 Lightning voiced by truck owners involve the compromise in power that comes with electric vehicles, places to charge their electric vehicle, and the projected maintenance costs of electric vehicles, but this performed pragmatism by Ford owners in order to support the environmentally-degrading masculine identity is not the only issue with the turn towards an environmentally-oriented automobile industry (Ford Media Center 2020). Lightning models do not compromise on power of the truck, and charging stations for electric vehicles have become more common in many public spaces (Ford Media Center, 2021). These discontents are a form of identity-protection cognition “through which people seek to deflect threats to identities they hold, and roles they occupy, by virtue of contested cultural norms” that allows the continued performance of masculinity while externalizing the consequences of those performances (McCright 2011, 1164).

American masculine identities based in the capitalist market-society centered around actively avoiding environmentally-friendly behavior have continued to prove harmful to the environment beyond resource extraction for production and the consequential pollution that comes through automobile use. Identifying with and embedding yourself in masculine ideologies can also impact views on policy direction, especially in relation to climate change.
In studies that focus on the relationship between white males and climate change, it has been shown that white men are more likely than other Americans to endorse climate denialist media and reports (Di Chiro 2017). To go even further than this, studies conclude that white men who believe themselves to be confident in their knowledge of climate change are even more likely to engage in climate denialist beliefs and conversations (McCright 2011). This denial is rooted in identity-protection cognition, a reaction towards the threatening of capitalism and its embedded patriarchy through environmental protection policies and green commodities. These men aim to fight back against these perceived threats in order to protect the identity in which they are comfortable.

American masculine identity is performed through consumer agency in relation to their cars, and looking through the lens of supermodernity, the car in turn begins to define these men through their driving, modifications to, and love for their truck. Monster truck rallies serve as an arena for car culture, capitalist patriarchal ideologies, and the commodification of identity through the materiality of cars. These rallies are framed as the peak performance of American masculinity, supported by the capitalist patriarchy that in turn exploits the requirement of consumption in building masculinity. Through this exhibition of souped up trucks like Megalodon (Figure 3.3), masculinity is given a stage to show off the “clouds of black smoke and the noise” that you’ll find at rallies and tailgates (Guidi 2021). Through exorbitant ticket prices, Monster Jam — the company who organizes these rallies — is able to commodify the identity of rural American masculinity through the shows of “self-sufficiency sustained by unbridled male power” (Guidi 2021).
The Feminization of Environmentalism

Through these gatherings, the collective of masculine identities creates a community of like-minded people who are then able to police the social norms of masculine identity performance, therefore reproducing the identities built through the capitalist patriarchy in a collective sense. Both men and women associate caring for the environment to be a trait linked closely to feminism, causing men to orient their consumer choices around an “unconscious bias against femininity, and in turn, against more eco-friendly behaviors” (Guidi 2021). This rejection of the eco-friendly has become central to masculine identities in North America, and these are put into action through higher rates of meat consumption,
gasoline use, carbon emissions, larger trucks, and attending monster truck rallies (Guidi 2021).

In this arena of capitalist power, men are given the chance to express their emotions in relation to this commodified form of patriarchal identity. Having this performance made available in this space when the capitalist patriarchy normally restricts masculinity to the performance of rationality rather than emotion leads men to do all they can to maintain these places and the trucks that make them possible through the motivations of identity-protection cognition.

Attempts have been made to shake the association between environmentally-friendly praxis and femininity, but most take the form of placative military budgeting attempts to reduce their carbon footprint or half-attended classes designed to teach men eco-friendly practices (Guidi 2021). Rather than degrade the link between femininity and the environment, I argue for the building of a connection between masculinity and the environment. Through this change, no matter their gender identification, people will have a stake in the caretaking and reproductive labor that aids in environmental protection; no longer pushing it onto rural women with which this work is currently associated. In order to build the connection between masculinity and nature we have to question our beliefs surrounding gender as the basis of labor division in the market-society, working to unravel gender roles in every aspect of our lives and rethink our entire conception of gender identity.

**Home is Where the “NO TRESPASSING” Sign Is**

The last major commodity involved in creating the suburban identity is the house and its associated land as private property. In the suburban neighborhood all land is categorized
by use and who has the ability to use it, whether that be for the home, for the car, for the yard, for the road, or even for the pedestrian. Dividing land use in this way maintains order and builds the structure of capitalist efficiency within the suburban arena. The land allotted for housing is divided into ultimately uniform plots, each having their own compartment within the grid of space on which the homes of individual families sit, creating a package unit of meaning composed of the home and the land. This association of meaning with such a small unit of land creates placelets, or small places created through individualized meaning embedded in that property, forming the patchwork of meaning that is hidden through the forced conformity of the neighborhood. If you participated in the exercise at the beginning with me, reader, my childhood home that I described as a place in which I belong is actually a placelet within the neighborhood’s much larger patchwork of meaning. There is an internal contradiction between the house as a place and its disconnect from the landscape and any larger sense of meaning. This division exemplifies conflicting place-making processes between landscape creation and capitalist resource control occurring in suburbia.

The suburban home is simultaneously thought of as one of many, a mere replica of the houses around it, while also at the same time being the embodiment of a family’s values, livelihood, and identity. Prior to Levittown and large scale suburban development, Sears took their own stab at mass-producing housing after the end of the First World War and the impending housing shortage in the United States. To meet this need, Sears (along with several other less successful companies) aimed to sell, build, finance, and market these prefabricated homes to a wanting population (Cooke & Friedman 2001, 53). Selling these homes through mail-order catalogues seems foreign today, but a century ago this was the most convenient way to purchase and customize your family’s next home. Starting in 1908,
Sears included these homes in their catalogues, alongside all of the products they already sold to make sure the consumer could have the comfortable life they desired within the confines of their Sears house, supported by Sears appliances and products (Cooke & Friedman 2001, 54). This business model differed from companies providing similar products due to the wide reach of the Sears catalogue, and their use of railroad transport rather than local sales that allowed the sale of these prefabricated houses on a large scale.

While the Sears’ model of housing through vertical integration eventually failed due to the decline in housing needs in 1924 and the inability to predict an economic downturn, it still functions as a predecessor for the Levitt’s model of home building that made Levittown and other suburbs possible (Cooke & Friedman 2001, 53). Starting in 1957, Levittown sellers offered seven base models of homes to their prospective residents, moving past the previous dichotomy of designs centered around the Ranch and Cape Cod homes. These included the Budgetteer, Levittowner, Country Clubber, Jubilee, Rancher, Colonial and Pennsylvanian (listed from cheapest to most expensive), aiming to cater to any and all needs of the model suburban family (Harris 2010, 221). While the model of home spoke to the owner’s identity (usually in relation to their class status), the potential upgrades allowed for a wider range of identity-indicating commodities, and consequently helped cement this differentiation through material means. These indicators included picture windows, bamboo sliding doors, and even room placement within the home.
Figure 3.4: Levittowner model (The State Museum of Pennsylvania, 2003)

Figure 3.5: Country Clubber Model (The State Museum of Pennsylvania, 2003)

Picture windows and room placement within the home function as two sides of the same coin. While picture windows exhibit the interior of the home and allow for the showing off of possessions and interior design choices, they quickly became indicative of lower-class styles of housing. The more the housing model cost, the further back the living room would be located within the home. Picture windows at the front of the home became synonymous with the lower-class, as they did not provide the privacy that was desired by those who could afford it (Harris 2010, 230). The rich prefer privacy in their entertainment and show off their possessions through the relative opulence of their home, while those who cannot buy an impressive home must show off the possessions that they store within the home instead. The relationship between room placement and class influenced many of the features included in these Levittown homes.
In addition to being indicative of class status, the picture windows allowed for constant surveillance of those living in that house. The potential for voyeurism made possible by these windows goes both ways, with those living in the home looking out at their neighbors while those same neighbors are looking into the home (Mullins 2021, 139). Such a possibility of constant surveillance forces adherence to the behavior expected by those who are perceived as proper white homeowners. This dilemma is summed up perfectly by Erma Bombeck in her work *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank*. Satirically laying out the timeline of picture window purchase, she starts with the purchase of the picture window, as a suburban home “without at least one picture window was considered un-American” (Bombeck 1976, 36). Only two days later, she tells her husband she will be covering up the window due to abrasive sun rays so strong the “dog is beginning to tan” (Bombeck 1976, 37). Since the window cannot be closed all the time “or people will think you have something to hide”, naturally the next course of action is to cover the furniture displayed through the window, due to worries of it not being good enough for the neighbors (Bombeck 1976, 37). This outlines the near absurdity of suburban material consumption and focus on commodities as identifiers leading to the commodification of identity itself through the inversion of modernity, while also laying out the very real possibility of neighborhood surveillance and constant judgment to maintain the proper kind of organization man within the home.

With the same class significance, bamboo sliding doors were included in the lower-priced Levittowner model, opening up the kitchen into the living area which was advantageous when entertaining company (Harris 2010, 220). However, this particular feature also speaks as much to gender identification and performance as it does to class
indicators. Entertaining within the suburban home quickly became synonymous with domesticity, usually centered around the woman’s role within the home. By designing homes to perpetuate these gender roles, and pushing household responsibility onto suburban women, these homes acted as the stage for the performance of domestic femininity. While suburban women are afforded the same social standing as the rest of the family, the home has become synonymous with womanhood through the centrality of this performance to both family and social life (Harris 2010, 220). The repetition and later expectation of this performance leads to the gendered ideas of women as both household entertainers and belonging in the kitchen.

For wealthier women, this performance takes place in a different material setting: the garden room. The garden room was the *piece de resistance* of the Country Clubber model sold in Levittown, designed for “solidly middle class families whose incomes allowed for more flexibility and could go for the step above the Levittowner” (Harris 2010, 226). This room was usually located towards the back of the home and was intended to function as a secondary indoor-outdoor entertainment area. The garden room worked much in the same way as the bamboo sliding doors did with their goal of creating the same kind of “desirable informality” but in a higher class setting than the Levittowner (Harris 2010, 229). Allowing the homeowners the privacy that they desire was a motivator for the inclusion of the garden room in many housing models.

The suburbs are not merely selling houses, they are also selling livelihoods and identities (Harris 2010, 237). Through the collection of objects, features, and varying combinations of rooms, people are able to showcase commodities that have come to represent the identities that they want to share, while also hiding the aspects that they are not so keen to share. Suburban houses function as a framework in which the occupants express
their identities through the building blocks of possessions. Links between identity and interior design became commonplace, especially in relation to class and ethnicity. While the rich and white tended towards aesthetics of minimalism and “modernity”, many Polish and Italian houses were described as being filled with “lots of goop” (Harris 2010, 209-10). While on the outside suburban life appears uniform despite its isolation, the diversity of suburban neighborhoods lies within the home itself, a manifestation of identity and character.

This idea of modernism and the appropriate placement of an individual on the vector of social evolution quickly became a catch-all in reference to whiteness and was a powerful force in regulating the performance of suburban identities, continuing the evolutionary way of thinking that often lies below the surface of discussions concerning gender, race, and class. Modernity tied to evolutionist ideas forces individuals within the suburbs to perform in accordance with modern ideas or risk being seen as primitive or less than their neighbors. These modern homeowners became a distinct yet impersonal group of people with “exceptional taste who were solid American citizens, confirmed and strengthened by their home in an exclusive suburb” (Harris 2010, 242). Whiteness became more of a status than a racial category, leaving those with varying skin colors and ethnicities to hide these differences in order to be considered part of this uniform group of white homeowners (Harris 2010, 204). Threatening the label of white, in turn threatens the label of homeowner, forcing conformity of external performances while internal identities were expected to remain hidden within the home and out of view of the picture window.
Placelets as an Individualization of Meaning

The exaltation of the homeowner ideal is intrinsically tied to the idea of private property and the ability to own and manipulate land. While the homeowner does have a connection to the land bought with their home, they are only embedding meaning understood by that singular individual into their property. It is easy to mistake this connection as one to the landscape due to its material basis being the landscape, but rather this is a connection to land as territory not a connection to land as place. Identity is then able to be built through the maintenance of territory, only made possible through the commodification of land through the process of primitive accumulation. By breaking down the land into these individually-owned chunks, there is no collective sense of place that is created. Rather than a large sense of place, many placelets are created which function with their own actors, ideas of meaning, and boundaries. It is more accurate to view the suburban subdivision as a conglomeration of placelets, rather than a cohesive place.

In viewing suburban territories as placelets connected by the boundaries created through the gridded organization of space, the home and its private property illustrate the individualization of meaning that is found within the paradigm of supermodernity. These placelets and the meaning embedded within them can only be understood by the individual or nuclear family who organize their lives around that territory within the space of the neighborhood. Working with the idea of placelets, capitalist organization now occurs on an individual level and not through a collective sense of national belonging or identity. The most prevalent theoretical framework used to analyze this new version of organization is called spatial syntax, which aims to understand the relationship between the material form of developed settlements and the social role that each individual settlement plays within the
larger subdivision (Jeevendrampillai 2015, 97). Suburban developments are orderly, clean, and put together based on the homogenous architecture of their assembly line-like construction (Marino 2014, 494). These divisions maintained through suburban architecture are present in the social structures that create the individual identity that has become indicative of the suburban lifestyle. It is impossible to build a singular common understanding of place in the suburbs, and conflicting place-making strategies lead to the continued destruction of the environment and community for the sake of profit.

Conclusion

This thesis outlines the ways suburbia functions as an arena in which place, identity, capitalism, and supermodernity come together to illustrate the building of identity from the consumption of commodities, and in turn the commodification of identity itself. With commodity consumption now oriented towards “constructing a whole series of imaginative scenarios as to the kinds of people [an individual] might wish to be,” suburban materialities are combined to create a sense of individual identity within the system of capitalism (Miller 1995, 149). This shift in the material basis of identity occurs through the process of primitive accumulation, the chain of incorporation, and eventually embeds an individual within the system of global capitalism (Perelman 2000, Bryant 1998).

Supermodernity has been the framework through which this thesis studies the place-making effects of capitalist processes, and features of this paradigm are shown through this exploration of suburbia. While suburbia does not function as a non-place, it does reflect the capitalist values and processes that make non-places possible. Through the breaking down of landscapes into individually owned squares of space, the individualization of
references and meaning are applied to territory in the form of private property. In this way placelets are created without a cohesive sense of place being formed within the landscape. Additionally, the suburban sprawl shows the overabundance of capitalist spatial control. With no cohesive sense of place in the suburbs, neighborhoods and subdivisions function within the framework of space rather than place. This shift towards space driven by capitalist functions impacts our perspective and inclusion within the landscape around us, leading to the standardization of time as well as the alienation of place.

Multiple places can exist within the same space, and is very common as people have different relationships with and embed various meanings in the same physical forms. This fact is complicated when dealing with private ownership and resource management. The power to restrict performative agency granted to some people and not to others through perceived normative identities gives certain individuals, groups, or companies control over space and who is welcome within that space. This power has the ability to erase all physical remnants of the places that came before, leaving only space and earth to be used for economic gain. In the suburban example, bulldozers and their environmental destruction removed all affects of the past palimpsest, replacing it with the phantasmic built environment of the administration. The singular control of multiple places within the same space in turn gives power over those whose identity is centered in that place, whether that be the Kanaka Maoli, suburban homeowners, or farmers. Places built by those with power thrive, and grow to absorb the places built by those who are not granted the power and ability to exercise their agency within the capitalist system.

However, the erasure of the places that came before in that same space leaves the landscape and resulting developments devoid of the temporal history that actually creates an
anthropological place. By cleaning the palimpsest in this way, suburban developments atop cleared ground and ignored history do not have the chance to create their own sense of place. These conflicting affects and perceptions of place do not only lead to land-use tensions, but also have major impacts for the physical and cultural landscapes that are being formed in relation to these processes. Existing as they are in the present only, untouched by both the past and the future, suburbs allow those who live there to live in their individuality of meaning, rather than a collective sense of place and landscape. The affects of the phantomic places that came before (and were subsequently erased) are no longer felt, and the suburb functions as a space without history. The disconnect between placelets allowing residents to live isolated lives maintains the suburb as a uniform space, functioning the same way no matter its location or the identities of its residents.

Place-making processes are incredibly important in thinking about the conflicting identities that they produce. In viewing land-based conflict as a form of identity conflict, we can then also view economic conflict within the capitalist system as a form of identity conflict. The economic forces in play, whether they are individuals or companies, are trying to perform their identities through these capitalist systems of resource extraction, land development, and the communities that are built atop cleared earth. While these identities are reinforced and perpetuated through land-use conflicts, would the internal identities of those involved feel and function the same way without this tension that makes defining the self relatively easy?

When reflecting on my own identity, I feel that my identity would be a lot more abstract without the tie to my home as both a place and as a material object. However, my tie to land is not one that is contested, making the resulting identity more flexible than one
created through conflict that highlights the boundary lines between identities. This phenomenon repeats itself with the manufactured tensions between commodities, and without the boundaries of in- and out-groups to define identity based in commodity ownership, simply owning a commodity would no longer be enough, as it would no longer be functionally interchangeable in the way commodities must because there is no longer anything to exclude from the in-group.

Through this research, I have argued that any form of positive identification is created in relationship to the landscape. By physically creating a landscape that worked for the settlers, and using this landscape that benefitted both themselves and the ecology around them allowed Appalachian identity to center around independence, opportunism, and knowledge of their mountain landscape. This positive feedback loop changed the landscape, and in turn changed the identity of Appalachian residents, leading to a human-nature relationship that continued to grow and strengthen both Appalachian individual and collective identities. Looking relatively recently at the temporal scale, it has been made impossible for many of us to build identities for ourselves as individuals and communities in this way. Relying on material commodities as building blocks of self-identification fully encourages the manufactured tension between the options the market presents to us.

The small differences between products become canyons that separate one option from another, despite how a car performs the same function no matter how many doors it has, or the amount of horsepower under the hood. Differences in specifications are exaggerated to allow consumers to satisfy their need for uniqueness while also fitting into the larger group with which they want to associate themselves. This process occurs within every purchase we make, allowing us to create a sort of conglomerate identity out of the commodities which we
own. Compared to identity based in landscape, commodity-based identity is relatively unstable, not based in relationality, and requires constant consumption to maintain the individual identity that is desired. Collective identity in this way merely means the ownership of the same product, and the recognition of this similarity by others, and does not lead to shared understandings of meaning and history that come from creating and sharing a place together. Commodification of identity in this way requires a basis of privilege, both economic and social, in order to be able to purchase commodities which function as identifiers while also gaining access to in-groups through their recognition of your commodified identity.

Consumption ultimately builds the individual identity over a sense of collective identity, and this has been shown through the suburban example. With identities functioning on a multiplicity of small scales in the suburban arena, no larger sense of place will ever be possible due to the inability to instill meaning on a scale larger than the individual, ensured by the processes of isolation and individual ownership. It is unlikely that there will be a cohesive plan for land use, or goal to create collectively managed land for the good of the neighborhood in an attempt to form a positive collective identity. Suburbs maintain isolation and anonymity, and are antithetical to building a collective sense of identity through its capitalist processes. This compartmentalization of suburban life, and its support of place-making conflicts will continue into the foreseeable future.

A final resolution to land-use conflicts is highly unlikely, as that would break down the sense of identity that is located within certain spaces, whether it be the supermodern experience of the suburbs or the farmer’s agricultural field. Maintaining this conflict builds the tension necessary to create identity through commodified materiality. Through this push,
capitalism has secured its own future by centering identity around consumption and making
land-based identity nearly impossible to create, and much harder to maintain in the long term.
Securing profits through the system of efficiency allows capitalism to grow stronger the
longer that people are forced to buy their identities.

And now a farewell to my reader. I hope I have not ruined your perceptions of the
place in which you belong, as my aim was to make you question the commodities that have
formed your own identity. My childhood home, as an example from our introduction,
functions as both a commodity and a place, embodying the continuous conflicting
place-making processes that will continue as long as capitalism and identity-formation do.
When I began this process I was slightly scared of the potential my findings had to warp my
perception of my home and the memories that I have built and continue to build by making
my family’s territory into a place. This did not occur, and something similar to its opposite
actually took place: by having commodities be central in identity formation processes within
global capitalism, I am able to tie myself to my home through more than just embedded
meaning. I do not believe that the performance of identity through commodity ownership is
lesser or worse than performing identity through place-making and interactions with the
landscape, but can actually function as a secondary way of identity formation alongside
place-making. Through this dual lens, individuals gain the opportunity to perform their
identities in more ways than before and can help adjust an individual’s perceived identity to
more correctly align with their internal identity.

Commodity-based identity formation is not detrimental to the individual and their
identity performance, but the consumption and production required to build these identities is
detrimental for the environment. In Chapter Three: Place, Identity, and Capitalism in
**Suburbia**, I outline the ways in which the performance of American masculine identities through car culture leads to the avoidance of environmentally-friendly behaviors and active denial of climate change. The commodified identity within capitalism is the issue, and without making drastic reform to the market-society and its focus on production and consumption, or taking the leap into revolutionary action, the performance of identity based in consumption of commodities will continue to degrade the environment while simultaneously ignoring its degradation.

While I have few suggestions for an alternative to commodity-based identity-formation within this system of capitalism, I will leave you with a few commodities that I view as integral to my sense of identity at this moment and hope that you think about the way your own consumption has built (and simultaneously restricted) the performance of your identity. The first is my water bottle, adorned with stickers expressing my likes, political leanings, and sense of humor. With years of stickers layered on the sturdy plastic, it functions as my own sort of palimpsest of identity. The second is my yellow yoga mat, as it conveys my favorite color, an attempt at mind-body spirituality, and my positionality within the colonial nature of yoga practice. Lastly (and most simply) is the brand of sweet tangerine tea that I drink every morning. What do your commodities say about you and the identity created through your consumption?

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