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**THE IRONIC VOICE AND SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD OF
PUBLIC RADIO PROGRAMMING**

A Dissertation in
Speech Communication

by

David Dzikowski

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The dissertation of David Dzikowski was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Thomas W. Benson
Sparks Professor of Rhetoric
Dissertation Advisor
Chair of Committee

J. Michael Hogan
Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences

Jeremy D. Engels
Assistant Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences

Matthew Jackson
Associate Professor of Telecommunications

James P. Dillard
Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences
Head of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

Through a rhetorical analysis of irony in *Car Talk*, a critique of contrastive epistemics in *All Things Considered*, and an examination of the superintending ideology of Urban Agrarianism found in *A Prairie Home Companion*, the rhetoric of public radio programming emerges as ironic, constituted of coherent incompatibilities, and productive of critical thinking about art, science, and politics. Public radio programming is in a subjunctive mood, emphasizing the contingency and possibility of public judgment.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A dissertation is the product of many debts: to colleagues and professors, to family and financial institutions, to those who wrote before. Some debts can never be repaid, but a few should be acknowledged. I will be paying back my wife, and my daughter, and CitiBank for the rest of my life, but that is a personal matter.

In scholarship, however, the debts are public. Of the many conversations that sustained this work through the graduate program, those with Steve Martin and Marlin Bates were the most constant. I discovered that my friends who were studying rhetoric were asking the same questions that I was asking about radio.

Thomas W. Benson, as a dissertation director and friend, has always been the most encouraging, and he helped me to see in rhetoric a discourse that moves past simple Manichaeism without stalling in “insipid centrism.”¹ He also introduced me to the dangerous idea that the closer we are to persuasion, the further we are from rhetoric. Steven H. Browne, J. Michael Hogan, Christopher L. Johnstone, and Matthew Jackson, beyond rounding out the dissertation committee, have encouraged my work through their enthusiasm for it, and they have inspired it through their own work. When time had come to finish and defend the dissertation, Drs. Browne and Johnstone were leading study-abroad programs, but Dr. Jeremy Engels was willing to join the committee, and for that I am grateful.

¹ Thomas W. Benson, “Beacons and Boundary-Markers: Landmarks in Rhetorical Criticism,” Landmark Essays on Rhetorical Criticism, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1993) 32.

Part of Chapter Two was presented at NCA 2002 and I am grateful for the comments of the respondent, Matthew McAllister, now at Penn State University. Part of Chapter Four was presented at NCA 2004 and I am grateful for the comments of the respondent, Gary A. Copeland, a Penn State Speech Communication Ph.D. Part of Chapter Five was presented at WSCA 2006, and I am grateful for the comments of a Penn State undergraduate, Dana Cloud, who completed her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa.

In scholarship, some friends are known only through their work. Take, for example, Peter Hagen. Another returning adult student in the Penn State program, he wrote a dissertation on verbal irony that was singularly helpful in launching my ideas about irony in public radio programming.² Our mutual friend, Herman Cohen, and I agree that his was a beautiful dissertation, and it is worthy of more emulation than I have managed. Thanks to Dr. Hagen, I was introduced to Wayne Booth's *A Rhetoric of Irony*, which proved foundational for the claims in chapter two regarding *Car Talk* and the ironic voice of public radio.

Thanks to another friend, Lisa Hogan, I had the opportunity to teach Wayne Thompson's essay on juxtapositions to students in the Basic Course.³ This essay suggested the extraordinary power in bringing together ideas that, although incompatible, are nonetheless coherent for the audience. This notion, given further scaffolding from Carroll Arnold's essay on successful American political discourse as a tri-partite

² Peter L. Hagen, "The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Verbal Irony," Ph. D., The Pennsylvania State University, 1992.

³ Wayne N. Thompson, "Barbara Jordan's Keynote Address: The Juxtaposition of Contradictory Values," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 44 (1979).

combination of pragmatism, transcendentalism, and doctrine, and from Tom Benson's essay on rhetoric as ways of doing, knowing, and being, became important background for chapter three.⁴ Here, I make claims about the pluralistic structures in *All Things Considered*, for example. Making claims about the coherent incompatibilities found in the programming became the organizing principle of the dissertation as a whole.

On Mike Hogan's suggestion, I read David Danbom's work on urban and rural life during the Progressive Era to discover, among other things, that the notion of "urban agrarianism," which I had coined for myself as the superintending manifestation of irony and juxtaposition in public radio, was already a term of art in historical sociology.⁵ Perhaps it is the peculiar American genius of being successful by moving in opposite directions simultaneously, a character reflected in and sustained by public radio programming, that is an audience characteristic that accounts, in part, for the formal appeal of public radio. Public radio programming, in its journalism and, more obviously, in the cultural programming that is a counterpart to that journalism, pluralistically embraces urbane values and agrarian virtues, not in some indiscriminant muddle, but with a true objectivity that gives voice to opposing points-of-view. The interplay of program form and journalistic content is the main arena for these productive contradictions.

On the topic of journalism, much has already been written from a historical and structural perspective regarding the workings of radio in America, generally, and public

⁴ Carroll C. Arnold, "Reflections on American Public Discourse," *Central State Speech Journal* 28 (1977), Thomas W. Benson, "Rhetoric as a Way of Being," *American Rhetoric: Context and Criticism*, ed. Thomas W. Benson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).

⁵ David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

radio, in particular, and news, specifically. I am indebted to friends in the College of Communication at Penn State whose seminars in mass media and telecommunications history and criticism have introduced me to the literatures of journalism, and particularly, to the literatures of historiography and the “rhetorical turn” in journalism. In the History and Comparative Literature departments, I am grateful to those professors who have indulged my obsession with radio and rhetoric. From off campus, the efforts of Michael McCauley, Jack Mitchell, and other historians, the chronicle of the growth of NPR in journalistic outlets, and the structural critique of NPR by Tom McCourt (and of media, at large, by his mentor, Robert W. McChesney)⁶ provide a foundational element Mike Hogan has identified as supporting rhetorical education in the academy: rhetorical history. And those who have offered the structural critiques of media have done the heavy lifting that is required to problematize the apparently normal, natural, or organic appearance of cultural institutions like the media as historically situated. In parallel, Anthony Giddens’ notion of structuration observes fissures in otherwise hegemonic systems that allow for historical perspective without too much historical determinism.⁷ My contribution is in the somewhat different area of rhetorical criticism, but it is made possible, in no small degree, by the existence of histories and structural critiques that, in all common sense, must be written first. For their trailblazing, I am grateful. For

⁶ Michael P. McCauley, NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), Jack W. Mitchell, Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2005), Tom McCourt, Conflicting Communication Interests in America: The Case of National Public Radio (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999), Robert Waterman McChesney, Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁷ Ira J. Cohen, Structuration Theory: Anthony Giddens and the Constitution of Social Life (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

purposes of this study, I rely on the definition of rhetorical criticism offered by Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson: “the ability to explicate a text and bring to the reader new insights and understandings about how a particular text functions as rhetoric—as a symbolic form whose structure and context lead the audience to think, feel, believe, understand, or act in an arguably predictable way.”⁸ For the seminars in rhetorical criticism, I am grateful to the faculty and students of the Penn State rhetoric program.

The third foundation of rhetorical education that Mike Hogan observes along with rhetorical history and rhetorical criticism is rhetorical theory. Toward the end of this dissertation, I speculate on rhetorical theory in my effort to account for the rhetorical effectiveness of public radio programming. And, throughout the dissertation, I have drawn on rhetorical theory to attempt to explain the dynamics of that programming as an historically situated form of American public address. For the exposure to the breadth and development of these theories of language and argument, I am grateful to those friends and faculty who introduced me to the history of rhetoric: Christopher Johnstone, Rosa Eberly, Michael Svoboda, Cheryl Glenn, Jack Selzer, Gerard Hauser, Herman Cohen, Thomas Beebee, Djelal Khadir, Tony Lentz, Jon Torn, Stephen Belcher, and countless others who publish or present at conferences under the auspices of the American Society for the History of Rhetoric. Thanks to my studies with these and others, I have been able to come to terms with ancient and contemporary concepts of rhetoric and politics that help explain, for me, the workings of public radio programming.

⁸ Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson, Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Pub. Co., 1984) xx.

Two theoretical aspects of rhetoric have helped to shape my understanding of the rhetoric of public radio programming. From Aristotle, we have the end, purpose, or function of rhetoric: judgment. Although rhetoric is “the faculty for observing, in any particular case, the available *means* of persuasion,” the end of rhetoric is judgment that is reached as a result of deploying the available means. With persuasion as the means to judgment, the speaker’s method is persuasion, but the intention is judgment. Rhetoric is what a speaker does, and a public is brought into being out of the raw material of an audience as it makes a collective (but not always unanimous) judgment, informed and inspired by the speaker or speakers.

Rhetoricians attend to the mechanisms that get us to judgment, but the judgment itself, as far as rhetoric is concerned, is deferred indefinitely. Here, Professor Black picks up the thread of rhetoric’s indeterminate *telos* when he defines rhetoric as “hope.”⁹ We persist, in our persistent use of rhetoric, to perform our hope that the right words make a difference. Despite many disappointments and desultory successes, we continue to hope and to believe in the work that is done through rhetoric. This hopefulness is the source of the hopeful tone in this dissertation.

I offer an optimistic reading of public radio programming, not just because it provides highly regarded journalism and cultural content, but because I believe it is a socially useful resource in making political and personal judgments. Yet, much of its usefulness lies within its formal structures as much as in its content. As Stephen Browne has said, the work of rhetorical criticism is to slow the text down so that we can see what

⁹ Edwin Black, “Response to Being Honored,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 4.3 (2001).

is actually happening inside it, and my intent is to slow down, say, an episode of *All Things Considered* and look closely at how the various parts of it work and work together. To that end, I have taken James Boyd White's book, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, as a model for suggesting a way of listening to public radio programming that attends to the formal shape and the rhetorical dynamics of the programs as well as to the journalistic and cultural content.¹⁰

This project has incurred many debts. It might seem that the scholarly debt outweighs the personal, but that is only because in these few pages I have relied on the extensive bibliographic record-keeping apparatus that scholarship demands. Personal debts rely on memories, and I am sure I have forgotten to mention someone—but thank you, just the same. The people who make public radio, perhaps, have contributed the most to this work by providing the grist for my mill and in providing a remarkable service for millions of people. In attending to public radio programs I neglect to talk much about the exertions that goes into them; I am grateful for public radio as it is, and not just because it gives me something to write about. I have had the opportunity to work with many fine people in public broadcasting, and I hope they can hear, within the critical apparatus, my affections for them. They, my parents, family, friends, and kind strangers have helped in ways beyond recounting. Many people have contributed to manuscript, some I have neglected to mention, and some would be embarrassed to be mentioned, for they are probably unaware of the influence they have had. Yet, for all that help, flaws remain, and for them, I take full responsibility. Mistakes, and mistaken ideas, however,

¹⁰ James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

have their uses. I do not anticipate that any public radio practitioners who might happen to read this will unreservedly see themselves in my account of their rhetorical practices. Conversely, those who like their listening pleasures unadulterated by criticism might reject the effort as pedantry. Those hoping to find confirmation that public radio had a particular political bias and was, after all, just so much “rhetoric” (in the pejorative sense) will be disappointed, although I would maintain that, in terms of rhetorical style, partisans of almost any politics will find comfortable forms, if not content, in public radio programming. Certainly, I would enjoy hearing back from readers that this or that point was, now that someone has mentioned it, an accurate insight into how they listen to or will listen to public radio. I would find equal pleasure in being corrected, if it means that someone else had attended to the rhetoric of public radio long enough to see it another way.

Omissions are necessary, given the enormous quantity of public radio programming. Perhaps other critics can consider other programs; perhaps listeners will engage these and other programs more critically as part of their daily routines; perhaps these ideas can encourage similar but better critique of programs I neglect to mention or to consider in depth. I admit to making opportunistic choices in finding examples that help demonstrate my ideas and in focusing on programs that are the most obvious specimens of the rhetorical structures I hope to uncover. But my limitations, and the limitations of this dissertation, do not reflect the limitations of public radio programming. It has its own limitations, to be sure, but observed from the perspective I am offering, let us consider how those limitations help make public radio strong, good-looking, and above-average.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This study looks at the appeal of public radio programming by examining *Car Talk*, *All Things Considered*, and *A Prairie Home Companion* as rhetorical texts. As significant programs with significant audiences, these are appropriate objects of rhetorical analysis. Moreover, they suggest a model for rhetorical practices that can, in turn, suggest criteria fruitfully used to examine other rhetorical texts.

Irony, the superintending trope of the “Four Master Tropes” in Kenneth Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives*,¹ is the key to understanding the rhetoric of public radio programming, for it is the dialectic of irony that gives public radio its particular voice. The programs are metonymic reductions of reality in manageable pieces and synecdoche for representing the world in ways that listeners can use to make judgments. Through the verbal devices in which one thing represents another, as in metonymy, or a part represents a whole, as in synecdoche, larger clusters of meaning form. Whether the topic is dead batteries, political campaigns, or the news from Lake Wobegon, the events and relationships worked through in these programs stand in for larger social patterns that shape and are shaped by our collective judgments. Multiple perspectives (or “metaphors,” in Burke’s terms), particularly incongruous ones, provide subtle tools for

¹ Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

producing both/and, rather than the either/or, claims in the programs. Such an ideology enables judgments without prefiguring what those judgments will be.

As a type of irony, Metonymy, another of Burke's master tropes, plays a specific role in understanding the rhetoric of public radio program. Through a series of reductions that start with metonymies of "being" contrasted with metonymies of "doing," Burke distinguishes "poetic realism" from "scientific realism" in his discussion of metonymy, and he privileges literature—"poetic realism"—as the better descriptor of human relations.² In public radio programming, however, both poetry and objectivity are treated, and the more-or-less evenhandedness of this treatment produces the ironies that provide the ideologies that invite, but do not predetermine, listener judgments. Burke, of course, is not merely looking for examples of verbal devices; he sees the relationships that are the focus of metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor (the seeing of one thing in terms of another thing), and irony developed more broadly in literature. The overarching relationship among these concepts is irony in its many forms. Public radio programming is a literature that can be interpreted ironically.

Description

"Public radio" is the term used to describe the loose confederation of non-commercial radio stations licensed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to educational institutions and community foundations. This class of radio stations is prohibited by federal regulations from selling airtime to for-profit advertisers. Although

² Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 505-07.

non-commercial, public radio still operates in a market environment, raising funds through listener contributions, grants, and endowment, paying for facilities, staff, and resources, and competing for market share.³

Traditionally, the stations have provided alternatives for the marketplace failures of commercial radio. In the main, this has tended to include the preservation of content and formats that have been abandoned by commercial radio, such as the less popular styles of music and long-form news and documentary programs. Public radio stations are non-commercial, educational stations. The station licensees, underwriting grants, and listener contributions provide financial support for local broadcasts of locally produced programs and of nationally produced programs, such as *Car Talk*, *All Things Considered*, and *A Prairie Home Companion*. National distribution is funded through underwriting and fees paid by the member stations of National Public Radio, American Public Media, and other distribution networks, which include *The Pacifica Affiliates Network*.

Public radio programming is, increasingly, news and information, and it is, less so recently, also cultural entertainment. The news and information includes *Morning Edition*, *Weekend Edition*, and *All Things Considered* and talk programs, such as *Talk of the Nation*. The cultural entertainment includes music programs or streams (classical, folk or acoustic alternative, and jazz are the most identifiable) and fun features (*Car Talk*, *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Wait...Wait...Don't Tell Me*, *This American Life*, and *Whad'Ya Know*). Admittedly, these are intended only as news and cultural entertainment

³ Bob Lochte, "U.S. Public Radio: What Is It--and for Whom?," *More Than a Music Box: Radio Cultures and Communities in a Multi Media World*, ed. Andrew Crisell (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004).

programs, but the many rhetorical studies of popular culture suggest that riches lie below the surface.

Yet, as constructed texts, they have rhetorical dimensions open to critical analysis. The rhetorical aspect of public radio programming, distinct from its compositional or propositional content (yet closely tied to it), lies in the habit of mind found in most programs that brings together mutually exclusive ideas in productive juxtaposition. The appeal of the programming, in addition to the compositional and propositional content, also lies in bringing together mutually exclusive ideas in productive juxtaposition.

Thesis, Justification, and Method

The appeal of the programming, as well as its political and social significance, lies in its rhetorical processes. The conspicuous rhetorical process in public radio programming is the subjunctive mood. A verb is in the subjunctive mood when it expresses a condition that is in doubt, counter-factual, or hopeful. Public radio programming, similarly, perpetuates a conditional quality in the news and cultural programming that provides the audiences with resources for making judgments, and yet it does not prefigure what those judgments might be.

This subjunctive mood is manifest in the ironic voice of the programs. Burke, in the “Four Master Tropes,” did not limit himself to discreet instances of verbal devices. He saw larger relationships in literature that had the same tenor as the specific tropes. The subjunctive mood is not just a grammatical condition, but is a way of being in the

rhetoric of public radio programs.⁴ Overall, the programs express the contingent, the possible, and the hopeful, and insofar as they empower judgment in the public sphere, they are in the subjunctive mood.

The irony appears in the language of the programs, in the arguments formed by juxtaposition of segments, and in the Urban Agrarianism of the superintending ideology of public radio. The ironies of language, juxtaposition, and ideology help produce the rhetorical effect of enabling audience judgment (as well as the aesthetic effect of an audience participation in the construction of the programs that accounts for some of the appeal of the programs). Thorough inspection of the programs reveals an overarching irony, at times overt, but at other times quite subtle, as the predominant voice in public radio programming.

An examination of *Car Talk* and its verbal irony, *All Things Considered* and its cosmic irony, and *A Prairie Home Companion* and its romantic irony, uncovers an old-fashioned strain of liberalism in the programs. Although public radio has been accused by its critics of being liberal and embraced by some fans for the same reason (while criticized by other listeners as not being liberal enough), public radio programming makes a liberal argument in the sense that it encourages thinking that is free enough to make room for political and social liberalism and for conservative republicanism.⁵ The argument is reinforced by the utopian strain in the three programs, which is more

⁴ Benson, "Rhetoric as a Way of Being."

⁵ Bernard L. Brock, Making Sense of Political Ideology: The Power of Language in Democracy (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

pronounced in *A Prairie Home Companion*, and by the Contrastive epistemic that is more pronounced in *All Things Considered*.

The goal of this project is to provide a single complex answer to a single complex question: what is the rhetoric of public radio programming? The assumption is that rhetoric has a specific end – distinct from the ends of philosophy, of art, of propaganda, or of persuasion – and that the end of rhetoric is judgment.

The method in this project is rhetorical criticism of specific, prominent texts within the public radio programming stream. Specifically, I have listened for prominent rhetorical structures and, having observed recurring features that fit the several kinds of irony, I studied irony to find out whether that interpretive framework was useful in explaining the appeal of and the appeals within the programs. Episodes of the programs are examined in close detail to bring out the formal qualities often obscured by the entertainment and journalistic virtues of the programs that predictably are the primary reason that ten percent of the American population listens to public radio. No effort is made in this study to assess the engineering validity of the automotive advice offered in *Car Talk*, just as no attempt is made to judge the validity of the journalism offered in *All Things Considered*, or the quality of music and comedy on *A Prairie Home Companion*. The claims here are about rhetoric apart from propositional content.

This study makes claims about the appeal of public radio programming. The usual list of Uses and Gratifications apply, of course.⁶ But beyond these, the appeal lies in the rhetoric of programs. Providing the resources for judgment, the programs provide

⁶ Thomas E. Ruggiero, "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century," *Mass Communication & Society* 3.1 (2000).

the pleasure of making judgments. This is different from the pleasure of having one's prejudices reinforced. And it is different from cinema, which provides perhaps greater motivation for judgment, but not always the resources.

The conclusions reached in this project tell us something about the nature of rhetoric, and they tell us something about the programs. Most significantly, they tell us something about the way public radio programming can be used to make judgments – some of them political judgments. Another assumption is that criticism improves on the usefulness of the programs, with the work of the critic adding to our appreciation of the programs. Public radio programs have already been the subject of productive criticism.

In considering irony, juxtaposition, and contradiction, this study clearly makes a formalist analysis. Some have rejected formalist criticism. This study adapts formalism by considering, in the texts, the radical particularity of *kairos*. Public radio programming is not timeless literature (except for some of the music that is played). It is ephemeral, it must be constantly refreshed, and it must stay current with immediate audience concerns. It is a form of Public Address that must respond to the moment and to the audience, and its formal qualities are never ahistorical.

Irony is the master trope for public radio programming. Other historical, social, and even linguistic perspectives are available, of course, for an inquiry into public radio, but this study focuses on irony, for it is the perspective that emphasizes the rhetorical. Irony takes a variety of forms, and the different forms all appear in public radio programming. To greater and lesser degrees, all of the programs contain the verbal irony of saying one thing, yet meaning another, cosmic irony in the recognition that the universe does not conform to human expectations, and the romantic irony of self-

contradictory individuals. Sub-varieties of irony, such as the dramatic irony of the audience knowing something that the participants in the discourse do not, also help understand the ironic rhetoric of public radio programming.

This study focuses on the most conspicuous example of the ironic voice in public radio, *Car Talk*, the most prominent example, *All Things Considered*, and the most ideological example, *A Prairie Home Companion*. The utopianism and Contrastivism in these programs are taken as extensions of the ironic voice of public radio programming. The irony is utopian because it generally compares the real with an ideal to comment on the discrepancy between them. At the same time, the truth claims made in the programs are Contrastive as they imply, or actually contain within the claims, an opposing point of view. A peculiar feature of the utopian and Contrastive qualities is that the programming avoids dogma and skepticism by embracing the reversals between contested concepts. Any selection of programs would do for such an analysis, but these are the most purified examples. Examination of any of the public radio programs (with notable exceptions, such as those produced by the BBC), would afford study of irony as the master rhetorical trope in the national programming. BBC programming, including *The World Service*, which many stations schedule as overnight programming and *The World*, a co-production of the BBC and WGBH in Boston, is more syncretic than it is ironic. The superintending attitude in these programs is one that favors reconciliation and even erasure of difference, whereas the attitude of American public radio programming is one that maintains and embraces productive difference.

Huge swaths of public radio programming do not receive specific analysis in this study. This, actually, has little to do with space limitations. My goal is to consider

exemplars of figures of thought characteristic of public radio programming. This is just a prototype for listeners, including myself, to use as they consider the rhetorical structures of the surface content in these and other programs that they listen to while doing errands on a Saturday morning, driving home after work, or fixing dinner on a Saturday night. With these case studies at hand, any listener could conduct a similar inquiry, picking any program or taking any path through his or her local station schedule. Even the idiosyncratic listening habits that most of us have – patterns that bring us into contact with some programs and not others – would provide cases for similar and further critical listening that considers the specific rhetorical energies of juxtaposition in the programming.

Each of the programs considered here—*Car Talk*, *All Things Considered*, and *A Prairie Home Companion*—is treated in separate chapters. *Car Talk* is produced by National Public Radio (NPR) and distributed to member stations that have elected to purchase and air the program. In chapter two, after describing the program and providing some basic background on the concepts associated with irony, I analyze the 8 January 2005 program (also drawing on other programs from the spring of that year). After discussing the play of irony in this episode, I turn to four programs broadcast in 2001 to trace the evidence of ageism in the age related discourse in the programs as an example of the formation of a proto-public sphere for the issue through the ironies produced in the program.

All Things Considered is another NPR program, and in chapter three I examine the juxtaposition between news stories in the body of the program. An irony emerges as the segments are taken together that can best be described as a Contrastive epistemology,

one that makes knowledge claims in the form “this, not that.” Since the structure of the program affords a pattern of “this, not that” followed by another story that claims “that, not this,” more than one approach to a topic is given full-throated endorsement. Such a pattern affords opportunities of judgment by the listeners. The programs appeal to listeners who appreciate such opportunities and who rely on the programs for the exercise of these abilities. It is not even necessary for the listener to notice the effect, much as a racquetball player exercises muscles while ostensibly playing a game. The *All Things Considered* program from 17 December 2003 is examined to show the play of contrasting claims are held in productive ambiguity within the framework of the program.

In chapter four, I examine *A Prairie Home Companion*, produced by American Public Media. The ironic voice is prominent in this program, too, and so is the overarching ideology of Urban Agrarianism. *Car Talk* and *All Things Considered* also reflect an ideology of Urban Agrarianism, which is an embrace of the conflicting and contradictory virtues of city and country, modern and old-fashioned, liberal and traditional, but *A Prairie Home Companion* with Garrison Keillor is the quintessential specimen of this ideology that runs across public radio programming. I analyze two programs from January 2008 and explore the utopian strains within the programs.

Concluding with chapter five, I summarize the preceding chapters and offer an example of public address, Barack Obama’s 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, “The Audacity of Hope,” to show how the ideas from the previous chapters apply to more conventional public address. The appeal of Barack Obama, as he appeals to “red states and blue states,” is similar to the appeal of public radio programming: the

ironic voice produces a subjunctive mood indicating the possible and encouraging judgments that are not pre-figured in the text.

Beginning with the verbal irony of *Car Talk*, then moving up a level of abstraction to the epistemology of contrasts in *All Things Considered*, and concluding with the ambiguous ideology of Urban Agrarianism at a higher level of abstraction in *A Prairie Home Companion*, this study observes the ways in which these different, but not mutually exclusive, ironies complicate the programs. These complications have rhetorical effects as listeners, whether they are aware of it or not, are provided with models for deliberative thinking as well as the *matériel* of judgment in the propositional content of the programs. Using the ironic voice to produce a subjunctive mood, public radio programs produce “perspective by incongruity” so that listeners have the resources to make judgments as needed, but without pre-figuring what those judgments will be.

Chapter 2

The Ironic Voice of Public Radio Programming

Having two ethnic, working-class characters as the most successful part of an institution often accused of elitism and being too Middle Class is deliciously ironic. In “Four Master Tropes,” Kenneth Burke offers synecdoche as one of the tropes that is essentially ironic and distinctive because it traffics in representation of one thing for another. In “noble synecdoche,” the part and the whole identify with each other.¹ In politics, according to Burke, one part of society represents the whole, and yet Tom and Ray Magliozzi are ironic representatives of public radio. In synecdoche generally, and in art specifically, Burke values such reversals. In specific substitutions (“before for after, implicit for explicit, temporal sequence for logical sequence, name for narrative, disease for cure, hero for villain, active for passive”), the direction is typically one way for “scientific realism” and two way for “poetic realism.” *Car Talk*, replete with ironic reversals, deals with the scientific realism of physics, mechanics, and other technical fields related to car repair, and it deals with the poetic realism of human relations. In *Car Talk*, poetic realism and scientific realism are brought together in such a way that each is shown to be the superior form *within* its specific domain. *Car Talk* provides overt verbal irony and more subtle synecdochic reversals. These include ironies of class, education, ethnicity, and age.

¹ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 508.

Car Talk is a weekly call-in program about car repair. It is, of course, anything but a simple fix-it show. Its superficial appeal is through raillery—the bantering and jesting of the hosts—which fixes it as humorous entertainment. The popular appeal of the program depends on the self-deprecating humor of the hosts, brothers Tom and Ray Magliozzi. Ostensibly about cars, the program is primarily observational humor with an emphasis on word play and irony. The irony, however, produces rhetorical effects.

Thesis, Justification, and Method

The conspicuous rhetorical device in *Car Talk* is irony. The verbal irony is stable and easy to interpret as entertainment. The overt, stable irony is a gateway to subtle, unstable ironies in the program that encourage judgment by the listener. The unstable ironies are open to multiple interpretations, and this produces a potentially political rhetoric. Irony produces a subjunctive mood, and in producing the subjunctive mood, the irony invites consideration of what is possible. The rhetorical appeal of *Car Talk* lies in this ironic voice as it primes the audience for making judgments.

Irony in *Car Talk* is a form of the carnivalesque; it disrupts conventional attitudes, making unconventional attitudes more possible.² Verbal irony in *Car Talk* is the prototype for irony in public radio programs, but Socratic irony also describes the stylized self-deprecating humor of the hosts. As representatives of public radio, their manner is a Romantic irony, and many of the problems they solve involve cosmic irony.

² Paul "Pablo" Martin and Valerie R. Renegar, "'the Man for His Time:' the Big Lebowski as Carnavalesque Social Critique," *Communication Studies* 58.3 (2007).

Romantic irony is, characteristic of some individuals, a contradictory persona “consciously subjective, enthusiastically rational, and critically emotional.”³ Suspicious of the whole idea, D.J. Enright nonetheless admits, “Most of us are, in our more modest ways, divided souls. Perhaps ‘romantic irony’ is simply having it both ways—infinity/finiteness, angel/ape, passion/reason, power/impotence, praise/lament, all those ancient dichotomies—on a grander than usual scale.”⁴ To my ears, this sounds like *Car Talk*.

The stock rhetorical device most prominent in *Car Talk* is irony: “saying that which is not.” The self-deprecating humor and bantering between the brothers “says” that they are inept mechanics, clumsy intellectuals, and barely civil social creatures. Successful ironic reading of the banter, of course, reveals them to be the exact opposite.

Examples of banter and self-deprecation are common in the program. They include, for instance, a passing reference during a call regarding a driver’s problem with a manual transmission. Tom asks the caller whether he experiences a series of “jerks or one jerk—like the hosts of *Car Talk*” (*Car Talk*, 7 April 2001). This is an example of verbal irony. During another program, Ray concludes his discussion of supposedly true answers given during court proceedings by saying, “if you think those answers were lame, you ain’t seen nothing yet; maybe we should give those kind of answer—no, we already do,” implying ironically that they provide similarly inept answers, but clearly signaling that the opposite is true (*Car Talk*, 14 April 2001). This is an example of

³ Douglas C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969) 200.

⁴ D. J. Enright, *The Alluring Problem: An Essay on Irony* (Oxford [Oxfordshire]; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 14.

Socratic irony. A regular feature of the program, “Stump The Chumps” was, in one episode, introduced as an effort to determine whether the answer to a previous question was “iconic, ironic, or moronic” (*Car Talk*, 14 April 2001). This is self-consciously ironic, and it reflects an historical shift in the understanding of irony that runs from verbal devices in a text to satire that is ironic throughout the text to irony as a worldview, or as John E. Seery describes it, “a shift from words as objects to speakers as subjects” in the literature on irony.⁵

The literature on irony is vast, and a number of useful works have undertaken to explore the historical development and the taxonomies of irony. Included in this literature is a debate over the locus of irony; my reading of public radio texts sides with Lars Ellestrom’s conclusion that irony is an interpretive strategy.⁶ Ellestrom argues that authors sometimes intend to be ironic (and even then, they interpret their own words as ironic), but readers cannot reliably infer intention. Similarly, he says, texts are not ironic, for if the reader does not take them as such, they are not ironic. Instead, irony is something one sees or hears interpretively. This opens irony to charges of being impressionistic or something that the reader imposes on a text. Typically, however, there is evidence in the text that would lead to general, if not unanimous, agreement of interpretation. Paradoxically, overt irony sometimes produces the greatest consensus, for

⁵ John Evan Seery, *Political Returns: Irony in Politics and Theory, from Plato to the Antinuclear Movement* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990) 165.

⁶ Lars Elleström, *Divine Madness: On Interpreting Literature, Music, and the Visual Arts Ironically* (Lewisburg [Pa.]; London; Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press; Associated University Presses, 2002).

all mature readers agree in specific texts that the author means only the opposite of what is said.⁷

Some key points for understanding the ironic voice in public radio, especially in the *Car Talk* program, include distinguishing verbal irony from other types of irony, distinguishing among types of verbal irony, distinguishing irony from other closely related concepts, and distinguishing irony from other forms of humor.

Irony

The verbal irony in *Car Talk* is most evident in statements, such as “Well, you’ve wasted another perfectly good hour listening to *Car Talk*.” This simple irony is easily interpreted to mean its opposite, for it invites the listener to disagree with its literal meaning. It is not so different from Marc Antony observing of the assassins of Caesar that “they are all honorable men.” Both examples are verbal devices, and for much of the history of rhetorical studies, irony was considered to be nothing more than one of many verbal ploys.

As literature matured, along with the criticism of it, other kinds of irony were identified. Socratic irony describes the trait of a character in prose or fiction to claim ignorance when the character is not. Socrates is the classical example, the wisest of men because he knows he is not wise. Detective Columbo in the American television police procedural from the 1970s was Socratic in that he appeared inept and was underestimated

⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

by friend and adversary, but he was ultimately correct. The presentation of self by the *Car Talk* hosts as ignorant immigrants is Socratic irony.

Part of the pleasure in *Columbo*, and in *Car Talk*, is that despite appearances, the audience knows what other characters do not. Knowing the answer to the automotive question when the caller does not, or knowing the answer to the puzzles that are a weekly feature of the program, or knowing the ironic interpretation that might evade other listeners is a way of actively participating in the program. This sort of irony, Dramatic Irony, rewards audiences for knowing and thinking through evidence presented in the dramatic material. The material need not be fictional, for part of the pleasure of listening to *Car Talk*, for some, predictably lies in knowing what other participants do not know.

There is an epistemic pleasure in this sort of dramatic irony. Quiz programs, on television now and once popular on radio, reward listeners who know the answer to questions. The formal structure provides a gap between the on-air question and answer such that the audience can blurt out the answer before program participants can answer. The TV game show, *Jeopardy*, is brilliant in this regard: by ruling that contestants must answer in the form of a question, the program provides the home audience with a few more seconds to answer before the contestants in the studio.

Car Talk is not just amusing, informative or pedagogical, although it is those as well. It is rhetorical, in its dramatic irony, as it invites listeners to make judgments, provides them with resources for judgment, and, importantly, provides motivation for judgment. The motivation could be dismissed, linked as it is to entertainment, but as practice in making logical, evidence-based judgments, it rehearses judgments with more political import. Like the *Columbo* detective series, the “Puzzler” segment of *Car Talk* is

an inverted detective story: often, the answer is provided first, but the puzzle lies in figuring out “how” rather than “whodunit.” Even when the “Puzzler” is presented as a problem requiring a solution, the structure of the program delays the solution so that participants in the audience can enjoy the dramatic irony of knowing the answer (or anticipating it).

Verbal irony, which is saying one thing while meaning something opposite, and Dramatic irony, which is the knowing of something that others do not, rely on interpretation. Tragic irony is a species of Dramatic irony in which the characters in the text do or say things that are ironic, given what the audience knows. (This is tragic rather than comic because of the price the culture enacts for ignorance, but Kenneth Burke emphasizes the comic frame of acceptance in both/and pairings rather than the tragic frame of rejection in either/or pairings.⁸ Burke and the Magliozzis have much in common on this point.) Cosmic or Situational irony is the interpretation that two events in the world are somehow at odds with each other. Despite the lofty phrasing, cosmic irony operates on the human scale: it is the difference between what we have and what we want, between the way things are and the way they “should” be. It bears some relation to the tragic, insofar as the contradiction is often bad. For example, in *Car Talk*, it might be considered a tragic irony that the hosts hold advanced degrees from MIT and yet they are, among other things, “just grease monkeys.” Another interpretation, of course, is delightful: notwithstanding the burden of education, these two have found a way to make a living that they enjoy. Cosmic irony can be lofty and produce profound

⁸ See Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 37-44, passim.

epiphanies, but Situational typically involves wry humor. Lightweight doom is the signature “cosmic” irony in *Car Talk*, as the hosts expect things to go wrong in usually insignificant ways: “wash your car—it rains” is both situational and cosmic in that it is grounded in the material situation and it pretends that the interpretation is at the center of the universe.

In Romantic irony, the text is not exactly what it appears to be: it does not just mean the opposite of what says; rather, it means what it says (or is interpreted this way) and, at the same time, it means the opposite.⁹ The Romantic irony of *Car Talk* includes the self-deprecating embrace by the hosts of their character as intelligent, educated manual laborers not very different from the “push cart operator Ph.D.s in Harvard Square.” As a parody of radio conventions, *Car Talk* is also Romantic irony on the whole. Another public radio program, *Whad’Ya Know?*, also flouts radio production conventions, but the irony is more difficult to interpret, for it offers itself more as incompetence than as mere claims of incompetence.

All irony is interpretation, and although authors might produce texts in which ironic interpretation is perhaps hoped for, the irony exists in the interpretation rather than in the text.¹⁰ The hosts of *Car Talk* use obvious wordplay that is, for most listeners, obvious in its intentions. But the irony happens only through the interpretation of the listener; a listener who despises *Car Talk* because the hosts laugh at their own jokes might be so disenchanted as to be impervious to any other inducements to enjoy the

⁹ Raymond Immerwahr, “Romantic Irony and Romantic Arabesque Prior to Romanticism,” *The German Quarterly* 42.4 (1969): 665.

¹⁰ Elleström, *Divine Madness*.

program or to deploy its epistemic tools. Such a listener would agree with the literal interpretation of “Well, you’ve wasted another perfectly good hour listening to *Car Talk*.” This remains, nonetheless, an interpretation. Other listeners could enjoy the entertainment value of the programs so thoroughly that any other function that the programming might serve becomes negligible. After all, people who do not even own cars listen to the program for its entertainment value. All of these varieties and conditions of irony appear in *Car Talk*, and specific examples are provided in the analysis later in this chapter. Although the classical forms of verbal, dramatic, and Romantic irony rarely emerge in *All Things Considered* (cosmic irony being more prominent there), these forms are also prominent in *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Car Talk is a gateway program for fans of public radio: listeners come upon it, find it amusing and keep listening, and over time discover other public radio programs to listen to. Similarly, *Car Talk* is a gateway program in developing maturity in the interpretation of irony. Of course, some listeners will come to *Car Talk* and other public radio programs already mature in the use of irony. But regardless of experience and maturity, listeners will become accustomed to the range of irony in *Car Talk*. Some of the irony is obvious and some is unstable.

Wayne Booth distinguishes stable and unstable irony.¹¹ The obvious, overt irony in *Car Talk* is stable irony. The irony is clear and, barring momentary inattention or genuine verbal immaturity, an interpretation of the meaning that is shared by the speakers and listeners is reliable. Stable irony is not necessarily inevitable irony. Those not

¹¹ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*.

mature in irony and the intended victims often do not “get it.” Once we do “get it,” according to Booth, “we are not invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions.”¹² Irony can, curiously, produce some of the least ambiguous statements when word play makes all but one interpretation impossible except for the most gymnastic of casuistries. As Wayne Booth notes, “we should marvel, in a time when everyone talks so much about the breakdown of values and the widening of communication gaps, at the astonishing agreements stable ironies can produce among us.”¹³ Unstable ironies are those that provide unclear clues regarding when to stop looking for unstated meanings.

Irony is rhetorical, not because it commands compliance (that would be force, or, if verbal, persuasion), but because it invites judgment without prefiguring what that judgment is. The irony at the end of the funding credits leading into a station break (“— and even though listeners have their I Heart NPR tattoos removed whenever they hear us say it, this is NPR, National Public Radio”) is stable at the verbal level, it is less so at the Socratic level, and even less stable as Romantic irony. No judgment is required to understand the verbal irony, but social judgment is required to negotiate its less stable aspects. The verbal irony is certainly useful practice for navigating the other forms. Irony is inherently dialectical, as it traffics in saying one thing and meaning another or in saying one thing and implying another while meaning both. In bringing both meanings into conversation with each other, the text calls for interpretation.

¹² Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* 6.

¹³ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* 82.

Paradox is one of several concepts related to irony that are available for interpretation in *Car Talk*. In paradox, the dialectic is particularly pronounced because what is said and its opposite turn out both to be true. Paradox is the more tightly circumscribed version of Romantic irony. Engineering problems are rarely paradoxical, but the human equation often is. A caller, for example, who wants to protect an elderly parent from the physical harm that can come from driving with impaired faculties also wants to avoid hurt feelings; this is a paradoxical conundrum that is part of the automotive advice offered in the program.

Parody is another concept related to irony. The original and the parody coexist within the listeners' interpretive framework. The parody evokes the original *and* what it is not, or it evokes what the original is not in homage to the original. *Car Talk* is a parody of a call-in advice program. The mechanical advice is beside the point of much of its entertainment value, and the hosts present themselves as incompetents as well as experts, and yet, the program does contain objectively useful information. *Car Talk* is not, however, a Satire; it lacks the bitterness of satire insofar as most of the humor is self-deprecating. On the occasions when the hosts do have specific objects of derision, Sarcasm is used. The *Car Talk* "Hang Up and Drive" bumper sticker is such an example.

Puns are conspicuous elements of humor in the program, and they serve dual purposes. Many of the puns are low humor of the sort described by Joseph Addison as "False Wit" or humor based on the similarity of words. In the ritual production credits for the program, "Picov Andropov" is named as the staff Russian chauffer. The low humor of noting, in reverse, that foreign names can sound like native words (in this case, English), passes for cleverness. The quality improves somewhat for the Head of the

Working Mothers Support Group at *Car Talk*, insofar as “Erasmus B. Dragon” is a low pun based on the way the made-up name sounds like a vulgar description for exhaustion. In addition to the false wit of the similarity of words, a little “True Wit” based on the similarity of ideas creeps in: the genteel sounding department within the menagerie of offices at *Car Talk* is predicated on a real predicament. Complex social commentaries can be activated and interpreted in a juxtaposition of hierarchy with base, of euphemism with reality, and of male with female. The crudeness amplifies the comparison.

Irony is also fun. “Click and Clack” are, in the least complicated interpretation, using irony to be funny; they are not being funny in order to be ironic. These are, however, distinctions without a difference because we enjoy irony for itself. Kathryn Olson and Clark Olson describe irony as being both “ordinary” and “pure persuasion,” borrowing terms from Kenneth Burke.¹⁴ Ordinary persuasion might or might not benefit from irony. Pure persuasion, however, is part of the appeal of irony.

Underlying the irony, paradox, and parody of *Car Talk* is incongruity. Incongruity is one of the major theories of humor and comedy, and it is the most generally applicable.¹⁵ Although irony is the prevailing trope in *Car Talk*, other forms of humor appear. For example, the last piece of advice in each program is “Don’t drive like my *brother*,” to which the other brother responds, “Don’t drive like *my* brother.” This verbal slapstick is also peculiarly ironic, for it relies on identical sets of words to produce radically different meanings (made possible by the situational irony that the program

¹⁴ Kathryn M. Olson and Clark D. Olson, "Beyond Strategy: A Reader-Centered Analysis of Irony's Dual Persuasive Uses," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90.1 (2004).

¹⁵ Marcella Tarozzi Goldsmith, *Nonrepresentational Forms of the Comic: Humor, Irony, and Jokes* (New York: P. Lang, 1991) 32.

hosts also happen to be brothers). Physical comedy is audible in the guffaws and snorts of the hosts laughing at their own jokes. Jokes are vehicles for communicating the humor invented or observed by the jokester. Jokes, according to Marvin Minsky's Theory of the Mind, are ways for the brain to learn nonsense.¹⁶ Nonsense is essential to the production of paradoxes that are the distillation of great truths.¹⁷ *Car Talk* in its stable and unstable ironies is a platform for practicing the transcendent nonsense that is essential for all learning and judgment: both involve letting go of what *has been true* in order to see what *is now true*.

As a result, there is Utopianism in *Car Talk*. Utopianism in public radio programming is more pronounced in *A Prairie Home Companion*, but the utopian impulse is clear in the contrast between the real and the ideal that appears in *Car Talk*. *Car Talk* imagines a social rather than a political utopia. Slightly cynical about people and their motivations, the hosts nonetheless can imagine a world in which cars run properly and in which people behave properly. The hosts do not advance a philosophical or political treatise on improved or ideal operations in the community. *Car Talk* is a literary utopia, which is to describe the type of discourse rather than its content and its function as a "mode for critical intelligence."¹⁸ *Car Talk* is neither dystopic nor anti-topian because the ratio of positives to negatives is greater for the positive attitudes.

¹⁶ Marvin Lee Minsky, *The Society of Mind* (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

¹⁷ Stephen Booth, *Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on His Children, and Twelfth Night* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), Elleström, *Divine Madness*.

¹⁸ Kingsley Widmer, *Counterings: Utopian Dialectics in Contemporary Contexts* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988) 79.

The program is hopeful, despite evidence of the impossibility of the perfectibility of man, that improvements can be made. This partial perfectibility is based on epistemology (or an understanding of knowledge) and deontology (a morality based on duty). The scope of its epistemics is limited to “cars, car repair, and the people who drive them,” although the approach is the same as that employed for a greater number of topics in *All Things Considered*. The morality of the program is based on the principle that, if people know what they should do, they will do what they should do. To avoid the skepticism that is inherent in irony and deontology, public radio programming employs Contrastivism as its epistemic style.

Contrastivism is more prominent in *All Things Considered*, given its broader mandate, than in *Car Talk*, but the cheerful irony and utopian criticism of *Car Talk* is made possible by its Contrastivism. Contrastivism is an epistemology that says, “this, not that.” The juxtapositions of stories in *All Things Considered* invokes a “this, not that” epistemology that is balanced by the next story, which says, “that, not this” is also true. *A Prairie Home Companion* is slightly dystopic in the ironic distance it maintains from both the urban and the agrarian, so it has a Contrastive epistemology of “not that, this.” In the verbal irony of *Car Talk*, the ideal goes unsaid in the articulation of self-deprecating humor: “Oh, no, not that!” The underlying epistemic, however, remains, “this, not that,” just as it does in *All Things Considered*.

Rhetoric is, of course, epistemic.¹⁹ It is normative, rather than descriptive, not of the content produced in its epistemic work, but in the ironic voice of asserting the truth of

¹⁹ Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," Central States Speech Journal 38 (1967).

mutually exclusive positions. *Car Talk* relies on ironic assertions that produce certainty because only one interpretation seems sensible, for the stable irony is unequivocal. The unstable ironies are introduced when the hosts make claims about serious topics, but the listener is left to judge whether the claim is forthright or ironic and whether the claim is justified or not. A specific case study of the unstable ironies of ageism in *Car Talk* provides examples of these rhetorical processes, and I turn to that after some background information on the history and production of weekly *Car Talk* episodes.

Description

Car Talk is epistemic because it produces knowledge, and not just about cars. It is educational, and it rightly belongs on radio stations licensed as “noncommercial, educational” stations. Educators and researchers assume that learning can occur while someone is listening to a *Car Talk* “Puzzler.” For example, the December 2005 issue of *The Physics Teacher* (published by the American Association of Physics Teachers) recommended the “Puzzler” from the 21 February 2005 *Car Talk*, “The Creepy Case of the Haunted Car,” to help explain Faraday’s Law in the classroom.²⁰ An article in the July/August 2001 issue of the *Journal of Andrology* (published by the American Society of Andrology) used a “Puzzler” concerning the amount of water in a 100 pound bag of potatoes to illustrate the counter-intuitive concept of relative comparisons.²¹ Richard Whelan and James Kauffman, in a monograph published by the Council for Children

²⁰ John E. Carlson, "Faraday's Law and the Constant Velocity Car," *The Physics Teacher* 43.9 (2005).

²¹ Stephen D. Simon, "Understanding the Odds Ratio and the Relative Risk," *Journal of Andrology* 22.4 (2001).

with Behavior Disorders, go so far as to suggest the “*Car Talk* Model” of scientific problem-solving as a future direction for their discipline.²²

The scientific problem-solving that *Car Talk* engages, dealing with physical conditions in a material world, enjoys the high degree of certainty that empiricism affords. Of course, even the scientific method relies on the contingent quality of induction. Contrastivism is apparent in the irony of the program, for irony always says “this (not that).” Moreover, as the conversation in each call or segment in the program shifts between “poetic realism” and “scientific realism,” each kind of realism is presented as a “this, not that” truth claim. They appear together, and they are endorsed by the hosts equally, so even the larger philosophical truth claims are as contrastive as the analytic ones. For example, in the 16 April 2005 episode considered here, the scientific question of operating an internal combustion engine at very cold temperatures eventually turns to judgments about living in “a reasonable part of the country” instead of northern Minnesota, in one call, and, in another, the medicine of carbon monoxide poisoning is as important as the rhetorical strategy in telling someone that he has been poisoning himself without public embarrassment. Not as obviously as in *A Prairie Home Companion*, *Car Talk* has an Urban Agrarian ideology, pursuing agrarian values (such as community and the role of the individual in it, a sense of place, and patience) within a context of modern technological and social institutions. Not surprisingly, since the technology and the social relations break down, *Car Talk* is a form of Utopian literature, one that comments

²² Richard J. Whelan and James M. Kauffman, *Educating Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: Historical Perspective and Future Directions* (Reston, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1999).

on the failings of this world by imagining, quite realistically, a world that the hosts might describe as “only a little less screwed up.” Epistemic and informative, *Car Talk* is educational, at the level of mechanical repair; it is rhetorical at the social and political level.

Notwithstanding such grand claims, the program is just another radio program, albeit, a successful one. *Car Talk* is a one-hour weekly program distributed by National Public Radio (NPR). More than 500 stations in the United States broadcast it, as does the Armed Forces Radio Network. Approximately 3 million weekly listeners hear the program. Produced by WBUR-FM in Boston, *Car Talk* originated as a segment in another call-in talk program. Favorable audience response prompted the station management to expand this segment into its own program. National distribution of *Car Talk* began in 1986. For many public radio stations, *Car Talk* has been successful in attracting listeners as well as financial support through underwriting and listener contributions. Early versions of the program emphasized straightforward answers to questions from listeners, but the natural humor employed by the hosts eventually predominated.²³

In many ways, *Car Talk* is similar to other call-in programs on commercial and non-commercial stations. Listeners call with questions related to car problems, and the mechanics who host the program attempt to provide useful answers. The unique aspect of the program is the banter between the hosts and with the callers.

²³ Joel Stein, "Four-Wheel Expertise," *Time* 3 July 2000, Stephanie McCrummen, "Since We're on Public Radio, We Might as Well Have Fun," *Current* 19 June 1995.

Tom and Ray Magliozzi have hosted *Car Talk* since 1977. Both are graduates of MIT, and were at one time a high school teacher and a corporate engineer. Together, they owned and operated the “Good News Garage” in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when they were contacted by WBUR-FM. Tom now teaches marketing and business management at Suffolk University, while Ray runs the garage. Efforts to entice the brothers to host lucrative commercial radio programs have been unsuccessful because “it’s too much work.” An unsuccessful television situation comedy, loosely based on the hosts, aired on CBS in the 1994-1995 television season. According to the brothers, who were listed as creative consultants, this series failed because, “We said it sucked and would you like for us to tell you how to fix it? And they said, ‘No, we're professionals, and we're perfectly capable of ruining the show all by ourselves.’” Ten episodes of an animated series bearing some resemblance to the characters and on-air personalities of *Car Talk* were broadcast weekly on PBS beginning in July 2008 to poor reviews.

Irony begins in the production design, as the program is produced to sound exactly like a live call-in program, even though it is not. The program is a parody of call-in help programs, in its technical manifestation and in its ideological posture. It sounds like a live call-in, but it is not, and it sounds like an expert-advice program, but it is not. If you call the number given during the program, you are connected to an answering machine, not the live hosts, and told to describe your car problem.

About one dozen callers receive call-backs on Friday evening, and the hosts talk live with the callers. Overnight, the program is edited to fit about eight callers and all other production elements into 59 minutes for national distribution on Saturday morning. Despite self-deprecation, the hosts and production staff are professionals who fulfill their

contractual, professional, and personal obligations very well. Tom and Ray profess to produce a lousy radio show, but the work is of the highest quality. In contrast, Michael Feldman, as the host of *Whad'Ya Know* (a humorous entertainment production of Wisconsin Public Radio and Public Radio International), overtly flouts broadcasting conventions to produce a cheerfully error-ridden weekly broadcast.

The current structure of the program follows the industrial standard. Every twenty minutes, the program restarts after a 90 second break for local station content. The hosts field an average of eight telephone calls per episode. Were *Car Talk* a regular call-in advice program, a caller would exchange brief greetings with the hosts and describe the automotive problem, whereupon the hosts would diagnose the cause, suggest repair solutions, and exchange farewells with the caller before taking another call (the University of Wisconsin public radio station in Madison broadcast just such a program for many years and caused considerable audience outcry by replacing the program with *Car Talk*).

Car Talk mimics—and all but satirizes—the conventions of radio call-in advice programs. Along with the conventional calls, the hosts add self-deprecating humor and lighthearted banter. The most conspicuous element of the program is its conclusion, in which genuine production credits are mixed with highly-stylized, yet genuine, credits along with completely fabricated staff credits (such as the staff Biblical Scholar Vera Lee Isay). Other regular features include the “Puzzler” and “Stump the Chumps.” All program elements occur within a scheduling structure known in the radio industry as “the clock.” (Each program element can be represented graphically on the face of an analogue clock, and this would indicate where and when, in each hour of a program, an element

would appear.) Other production elements include the stock opening to the program, the hand-offs to station breaks and the returns afterward, the underwriting acknowledgments, and the ritual production credits.

About four minutes at the end of each 59 minute production of *Car Talk* is devoted to saying goodbye. Beyond discharging the formal and legal obligations to acknowledge labor and funding contracts, valuable airtime is invested in cracking wise. The ending of the program crystallizes the ironic voice of the program. One of the marks of rhetoric, in the older traditions, is spaciousness.²⁴ Ray Magliozzi produces an overflow of word play to close the 8 January 2005 program and makes its ironic voice unmistakable.

Well, look, it's happened again, you've wasted another perfectly good hour listening to *Car Talk*. Our esteemed producer is Doug "The Subway Fugitive – Not a Slave to Fashion – Bongo Boy" Berman. Our associate producers are Louise Cronen the Barbarian and David "Rainman" Green. Our engineer is John Carpin Carote. And our senior web lackey is Douglas F. Meyer. Our technical, spiritual, and menu advisor, just back from the Crested Butte, celery root, bamboo shoot, smoked chucrute, eye of newt, sauce velouté, and kiwi fruit, 21-meal salute is John Buggy Lawlor. Our public opinion pollster is—this gets harder every week—Paul Murky [music sneaks in] of Murky Research, assisted by Statistician Marge Innovera. Our Customer Car Care Representative is Haywood Jabuzoff. Our Personal Makeup Artist is Bud Tuggli. Our Personal Hygiene Advisor from

²⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (South Bend, IN: Regnery, 1953).

the Tokyo Office is Oh Takashawa. Our staff Bicycle Tester is Maya Certz. Our anger—[Anger Management Consultant: Joanne Slowburner] uh, no, I'm not doing that one. Our Russian Chauffeur is Picov Andropov. Our Directors of Quality Control are Les Thomas and Nomar Raymond, and the Head of our Working Mothers' Support Group is Erasmus B. Dragon. Our chief counsel from the law firm of Dewey, Cheetham and Howe is Hugh Lewis Dewey, known to the post-doctoral snow plow drivers in Harvard Square as Hughie Louie Dewey. Thanks so much for listening. We're Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers. (Don't drive like my brother.) (Tommy: Don't drive like my brother.) Happy New Year. We'll be back next week. Bye-bye.

Music continues for 19 seconds to allow local funding credits over music.

Network funding credits end the program, and all are straightforward, except for the twist on the Standard Out Cue. Funding credits segues into Ray's tapes and website pitch: "Tapes of this show, which is number 502, along with clothing, CDs, and other *Car Talk* junk are available at 888-CAR-JUNK or by going to the Shameless Commerce Division of our website: <cartalk.com.>, where you could also log on and get answers to your car questions from other listeners on our bulletin boards. (Tommy): You mean you could type a note and some educated *Car Talk* listener will chime in with a thoughtful answer. No insulting comments about their car, no asking how to spell their name, no prying personal questions about their relationships. (Ray): That's right! (Tommy): We're done for!" Ray concludes: "*Car Talk* is a production of Dewey, Cheetham, and Howe and WBUR in Boston. (Tommy) And even though Corey Flintoff really regrets the night he

tattooed the NPR logo on his left butt cheek whenever he hears us say it, this is NPR, National Public Radio.”

Stable irony is evident in the first words of the routine closing to the program: “Well, you’ve wasted another perfectly good hour listening to *Car Talk*.” This irony takes many forms among the ritual elements in the program. The ironic humor in these elements comes from knowing that the real message is different from the actual text. These include standard beginnings and endings to program segments, regular transition features, and, prominently, the closing production credits. For example, Ray ritually introduces the second segment of each program by saying, “Welcome back to *Car Talk*. We’re Click and Clack, the Tappett Brothers, and we’re here to talk about cars, car repair, *an-duh* the answer to this week’s puzzler.” Over emphasizing the correct pronunciation of the word “and,” Ray mimics the habitual speech patterns of individuals who, having acquired some education, over-enunciate a word that they had previously pronounced as “an-.” Ray implies ironically that he is one of these individuals, although he, in fact, is not.

The end of each program segment leading into a break in the program for local station announcements ritualistically concludes with Ray invoking the image of one or another of the well-known participants in other public radio programs distancing himself or herself from *Car Talk*. For example, after announcing the required identification of program underwriters, Ray says, “And even though Bob Edward wants to sleep later on Saturday mornings every time he hears us say it, this is NPR, National Public Radio” (*Car Talk*, 14 April 2001). Leading into each station break in the hour, the brothers typically joke ironically about the need to take a rest from their exertions.

It seems fitting that a program that has become a fixture on Saturday mornings would include songs about cars. The determined lack of comment on the songs by the hosts invites listener comment. The wordplay between car tunes and cartoons is readily available, but only if the audience contributes it. Despite a love of puns, the hosts never refer to the musical production elements, somehow resisting the temptation to become tiresome in introducing the “Saturday morning car tune/cartoon.” None of the production elements is mentioned by the hosts, including the opening theme.

Written by Dave Grisman for a 1983 album, the opening theme music for the program is titled *Dawggy Mountain Breakdown*, itself a pun on the title of the more famous Flatt and Scruggs *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*. It is obviously incongruous that a bluegrass tune be used as thematic music, for bluegrass has no evident connection to automotive topics, Boston is urban instead of country, and there is no ethnic connection to the hosts’ Italian heritage. The prominent mandolin, which is also used in popular Italian songs such as *Non Dimenticar* or *That’s Amore*, might have been appealing to the hosts without giving the program a misleading Italian-American theme.

Nonetheless, the hosts parlay ethnic identity itself into irony. As members of a historically maligned ethnic group, they have inverted social hierarchies to become “opinionated corporate and cultural icons.”²⁵ They are urban agrarians, using and valuing modern institutions while retaining agrarian characteristics and values. In contrast to the Urban Agrarian enacted by Garrison Keillor, they seem happily comfortable with their

²⁵ Christopher Newton, "From 'the Prince Macaroni Hour' to 'Car Talk:' an Evolution in Italian American Radio," *Italian Americana* 14.1 (1996): 15.

contradictory natures; Keillor, in his radio persona, seems discomfited by trying to embrace mutual exclusive value systems.

The combination of ritual, reasoning, and irony creates an environment conducive to judgment. As such, the program is rhetorical, even if judgment is deferred. *Car Talk* is an example of educational radio through its efforts at the development of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, in its “students.” Rhetoric teaches *phronesis*. The humor, however, is not the source of the persuasiveness of the message. A meta-analysis of humor in mass media reported that humor did not increase such measures as source credibility or distraction from counter-arguments.²⁶ This study, however, approached mass communication through a “transportation” model of senders, receivers, channels, and interference with regard to messages. In a “rhetorical” model of communication, in which the end is not efficiency, but judgment, humor contributes to the development of practical wisdom.

Through the self-deprecating humor and the ritually stable regular features, the program requires an ironic reading by listeners, which in turn, promotes ironic readings through frequent practice. This is but one of the ways in which *Car Talk* promotes the use of higher level critical thinking among its listeners. Routine production elements, car advice, social advice, and self-deprecating, observational humor comprise most of the content of *Car Talk*, but it is humor that has rhetorical functions.

²⁶ Charles R. Gruner, "Wit and Humour in Mass Communication," Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications, eds. Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (New Brunswick, N.J., U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1996).

The humor in *Car Talk* is different from other rhetorical forms of humor. Peter Hagen defines satire as a “mode of address or argumentation that seeks to call attention to some sort of moral outrage” and “uses irony as one of many devices.” Although the Magliozzis occasionally indulge in what they term “rants and raves” over poor automobile design and manufacturing or the dangers of driving while talking on a cell-phone, their primary goal is to solve callers’ problems regarding specific cars. Ironic humor is their preferred style, not Sarcasm, which Hagen defines as “vituperation with or without ironic twist, with or without intent to make the world a better place.”²⁷ The “rants and raves” are clearly vituperative, but genuine disdain (as opposed to the pretend disdain that comprises much of the program) is reserved for others, such as corporate villains and “jerks,” not the callers and listeners engaged in the program.

Ironically, the car advice is the most overlooked and surprisingly useful element of the program. In the 8 January 2005 program, listeners learn some genuinely useful information from the answers to caller questions. For example, except in polar conditions, it is not necessary to warm up a car engine (contrary to popular wisdom). Older cars can induce carbon monoxide poisoning through faulty exhaust systems. Noises don’t always come from where we think they come from. Undercoating is unnecessary. Faulty universal joints in the steering mechanism are life-threatening. Used car dealers are sometimes untrustworthy (and why). Battery problems are caused by bad batteries or by insufficient charging (which might be caused by a bad belt or by not driving enough). Through the detective work of asking questions of the caller and the

²⁷ Hagen, "The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Verbal Irony," 19, 20.

years of automotive experience that allow them to recognize precedents and similarities, the hosts are able to puzzle out likely explanations and possible solutions for the caller's problem. This kind of reasoning models a method for solving social problems that also comes up in the program. The hosts reject the extremes of modernism and do not embrace "machine aesthetics" that dehumanize.²⁸

In addition to the ironic humor that is the most obvious characteristic of the program discourse, direct critical apprehension and problem solving is modeled within the program. Throughout the program, the hosts demonstrate the application of critical thinking skills to everyday problems. For example, a caller's description of a noise associated with making left, but not right, turns and only at certain speeds prompted the brothers to ask increasingly detailed and refined questions. As a result of this investigative method, they were able to determine that the noise was not related to problem with the car's brakes, as they and the caller had originally suspected, but that the noise was caused by a wheel rubbing against plastic inner fender liners. The call concluded with the hosts teasing the caller about being an unemployed art historian, but the teasing was resolved by reflections on "the intrinsic value of art history" and that "too many [people] do things in life just for the money" (*Car Talk*, 7 April 2001). Juxtaposed with the inquiry into the true nature of the noise in the car, this series of remarks similarly reflects on the true nature (according to the hosts) of scholarship. The modeling of critical thinking by the hosts first addresses a concrete example of the value of inquiry in

²⁸ Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric of Machine Aesthetics* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1999).

solving an automotive problem and then extends this attitude toward inquiry into the larger social value of academic inquiry.

During another call, the hosts demonstrated an extra-ordinary use of logic in determining the cause of the problem for a woman who replaced her automobile radiator several times within a single year. Deducing that the problem was not with faulty radiators, but that a bad head gasket was producing nitric acid, thus corroding the radiator, here again, the hosts directed the caller to discover the true source of the automobile problem. After showing off their command of both chemistry and logic, the hosts, however, make fun of themselves. Referring to their collaboration on solving the problem, Tom remarked that “each of us has half a brain,” and Ray retorted that his brother’s alma mater (MIT) should “ask for your diploma back” (*Car Talk*, 7 April 2001).

Although not teachers in a formal sense, the Magliozzis teach critical thinking by discourse and by example. Public radio grew from an older “educational radio” model, and it retains the conditions for licensure of “non-commercial educational radio stations” established by the Federal Communications Commission to offer educational programming. *Car Talk* continues the tradition of educational radio, but does so in a discursive practice that is not overtly pedagogical or didactic. It, nonetheless, establishes through public discourse a proto-public sphere in which the ordinary is discussed critically. With these intellectual capabilities in the audience exercised, listeners are better equipped to discuss other, more political matters.

Having begun as a modest helpful-hints program, *Car Talk* evolved into a personality-based entertainment program that all-but-incidentally continues to offer car advice. *Car Talk* is now more than a weekly, one-hour, call-in car repair program. It

reflects and reproduces an ironic voice that is characteristic of public radio programming. Through stable ironies, it rehearses simple rhetorical strategies with the audience.

Analysis

The *Car Talk* episode from 8 January 2005 is much like any of the other programs in the series. It is overtly ironic, it follows the pattern of taking calls and dispensing advice both automotive and social, and it performs critical thinking in a mode appropriate for the public sphere.²⁹ Although radio programs are not the site for legislative judgments, they are dialogic opportunities for deliberation because the ironic voice invites and stimulates audience participation in the production of meaning.

As always, the program begins with national funding credits, theme music, and the standard greeting. The funding credits (for All State Insurance and for Travelocity) are announced in a straightforward fashion by the hosts, Ray and Tommy, taking turns. The convention for National Public Radio programs is that someone other than the hosts read the underwriting credits. Not only does reading the credits afford the hosts the opportunity to inject humor into this formal aspect of the program, it serves to demonstrate the irony that the clowns are conventionally professional.

The program theme music begins, and Ray greets the audience: “Hello, and welcome to *Car Talk* from National Public Radio, with us, Click & Clack—the Tappet Brothers—and we’re broadcasting this week from—” (music fades on “Plaza”). The

²⁹ Rosa A. Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

hosts begin the ironic parody immediately by not divulging their names. Instead, Ray identifies the pair by nicknames.

One common image of brothers, particularly in areas where they could have differing opinions, is that sibling rivalry is a significant relational dynamic. Tom and Ray Magliozzi do perform sibling rivalry in the program in different ways, but the greeting announces them as a unit. Any disagreement that appears later in the program will be subordinate to their partnership as the onomatopoeic “Click & Clack.”³⁰ Relationships are the primary object of repair work in the program, not the automobiles that are ostensibly the subject of *Car Talk*.

The greeting continues by announcing the grandiose department that is the site of the program for this week within the hierarchy of the fictional *Car Talk* empire. (Ray): “—broadcasting this week from the Confessional here at *Car Talk* Plaza—actually, once again, from the Confessional here at *Car Talk* Plaza.” Every broadcast originates from a metaphorical (and imaginary) office, department, or division within *Car Talk*. The area title comments obscurely or sarcastically on the first comedic bit in the program. In the 8 January 2005 episode, Tommy goes on to explain the meaning behind the short-term running segment based on collecting listener confessions associated with automobiles, which allows the hosts and listeners an opportunity to laugh at someone else’s foolish behavior.

³⁰ A tappet is a lever that is moved when another part of a machine taps it, thus transmitting (and in the case of a cam shaft, changing) the motion. In an internal combustion engine, the valve that is moved by the explosion of gas in a chamber strikes the cam shaft tappet to turn vertical motion into rotational motion. In an older automobile, loose bearings allow the gap between valve and tappet to increase; the strike of the valve against the tappet becomes audible, and this tappet noise has a distinctive click-clack sound.

On the 5 March 2005 broadcast, the program originated from the “Hope Springs Eternal” Department. On the 16 April 2005 program (a repeat), the broadcast originated at the “Groaner” Department. Typically, the first segment in each program is a shaggy dog story: long, involved, detailed, and dramatic with a low humor punch line. The “department” title is a wry commentary on this first gag. The 5 March 2005 joke sets up in detail a familiar joke: an elderly man tries to pick an age-inappropriate woman in a bar, but instead of asking, “Do you come here often?” he asks, “Do I come here often?” The listener contrasts the expected line with the unexpected twist, and the incongruity added to the embarrassment/insult humor at the expense of the elderly provokes a laugh. Even if one disapproves of humor based on the cruelties of age-infirmity, the cognitive surprise of “getting the joke” is a predictable pleasure. The department is ironic commentary on the joke as it sets up an opposite expectation.

On the 16 April 2005 program, the “Groaner” department title is an accurate prediction and depiction of the kind of jokes that will follow. Another “shaggy dog” build-up mines history merely to bring the words Nun, Huns, Writs, Eros, and Base into play, which allows the punch line: “No Huns, no writs, no Eros, and nun left on base.” The impressive (but false) erudition of the set up contrasts with a familiar baseball expression. Tommy follows this example with a description of Mahatma Gandhi who, barefoot and vegetarian, was a “super-calloused, fragile mystic, hexed by halitosis” (16 April 2005). Most listeners would recognize the baseball reference in the history story and the reference to a song from *Mary Poppins* in the Gandhi joke. The word play is, as Joseph Addison calls it, False Wit, or the similarity between words. These programs, in short, start with a joke.

Before the conventional structure of starting with a joke can take place on 8 January 2005, self-deprecating irony appears. (Tommy): “And if you’ve been listening regularly—and we know you haven’t; I mean, why wouldja? So, I guess I should say, ‘Since you *haven’t* been listening regularly,’ we’ve been asking listeners to send in automotive confessions. And we’ve been reading some of the ones that made us laugh.” This passage indicates a habitual pattern in the speech of the two brothers: non-ironic statements that presume any positive attribute about the hosts or the program are immediately followed (or interrupted by) self-deprecating irony. This pattern of thinking is not unexpected among those with immigrant roots. The sense of hierarchy, expressed in a mocking construction of imaginary hierarchy, has as a counterpart a sense of one’s place—not at the top—within a hierarchy. The self-awareness, along with boldness mixed with and deflated by ironic self-deprecation, models a particular kind of agency for problem-solving and knowledge-building in the world. It suggests that one can be a political actor in the world but admit to fallibility and yet make judgments anyway. This enacts a manner of agency that is appropriate for judgment-making in the public sphere.

Car Talk, of course, is not political science; it is entertainment. The joke (as distinct from the humor) that begins each program is typically a “shaggy dog story,” but on 8 January 2005, the long, drawn-out narrative recounts a nominally true story. Ray provides a short example of an automotive confession: a listener was curious about the bolts on his Porsche, so he took them out, and the engine fell on his toe. The hosts laugh at the man’s foolishness, which invites listeners to laugh at his foolishness, but the hubris is both extended and contained by Ray’s observation that, “it made me feel better about *my* skill set.” The longer “shaggy dog” story that follows describes a listener’s

experience with bad decision-making through a combination of illustrative details and human error (that result in setting a van and the surrounding woods on fire).

As Tom begins to introduce the “confession,” he first wonders whether the writer’s last name should be mentioned, but immediately decides to go ahead and say it. Ray objects that “it may be too embarrassing” and recommends that Tommy should read the letter of confession first, “and then, we’ll decide.” Either in scripting this moment, through editing a longer debate afterward, or displaying a talent for on-air brevity, the introduction to the letter completes a debate that concludes with kindness. Although irony typically has a victim, *Car Talk* avoids intentional cruelty. In this way, *Car Talk*, as an institution, meets Richard Rorty’s definition of a “liberal ironist” as someone for whom cruelty is the worst thing that we can do.³¹

The “Confessional” letter describes a family trip in a not-late-model Winnebago some 25 years previously. During the trip, the fuel pump begins acting “dodgy” according to the author. Ray puns: “That means ‘like a Dodge?’” “Dodge Caravan,” Tom puns in response before continuing with the reading. The low wit signals the prevailing ironic voice. As Tommy reads, Ray injects additional “shaggy dog” elements: laughing at the writer’s bad luck and adding “stormy” to the list of adjectives describing nightfall (which prompts a quick exchange about the infamous “dark and stormy night” descriptor that Tom and Ray have adopted from a bad novel, a bad-writing contest, and a comic strip elsewhere in popular culture). The ability to detect patterns in language is as

³¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 74, 89. This puts *Car Talk*, by Rorty’s reckoning, in company with other liberal ironists: Christianity, Marxism, and Utilitarianism.

valuable in problem-solving as the ability to detect patterns elsewhere in the world, and humor is part of a reward system for developing pattern recognition.³² Both hosts play with language, producing humor, by noticing and extending patterns—a valuable resource in public deliberation modeled here.

The confession writer notes that his father, the driver of this ill-fated Winnebago, prided himself on solving problems with “limited resources.” Ray injects: “just like us: limited *intellectual* resources.” Cleverly restarting the stalled engine by draining gasoline via the fuel pump and pouring it into the carburetor, the father less-cleverly neglected to re-attach the fuel pump line. It sprays gas, the vehicle catches on fire, fires are extinguished (including the small forest fire started by all of this), and the family hides when firefighters, having seen the smoke, arrive to put out the blaze. General laughter along with ironic interjections from the hosts accompanies the story. The educational lesson, of course, is to pay attention to details. Ray pays the writer, a combat medic at Fort Drum, ironic complements and proclaims, wryly, “And we *won* the war,” but also says, “Can I *see* it? I could have *done* it!” Embracing fallibility, Ray reinforces the value of the idea of thinking through problems, making judgments, experimenting with solutions, and recovering quickly from inevitable failures by sharing in the failure. This not only accepts failure, it reinforces the idea that all solutions are contingent, and that all judgments are open to revision.

The opening sequence that includes a shaggy dog story and self-deprecating irony instructs the audience as to how the rest of the program will proceed methodologically.

³² Alastair Clarke, [The Eight Patterns of Humour](#) (Cumbria, UK: Pyrrhic House, 2009).

First, irony will feature prominently, both as a set of verbal devices and as a type of personality. Moreover, hierarchy and criticism assume differences in quality, and the general tone implies an ability to see the world as it and as it might be; not only is this ironic, it is utopian. Finally, the kind of problem-solving that will be displayed will involve a particular epistemology or theory of knowledge. Rather than make straightforward claims about what goes wrong with the world (after all, no one would call an automobile advice program of any sort just to talk about how well one's car runs), the hosts make Contrastive claims: this, not that. But since they also use irony, they typically imply "this" by saying "not this" (or, more colorfully "Oh, no! Not that!"). The use of humor and the avoidance of a totalizing skepticism combine to produce answers that are never just simple assertions, but are assertions over and against competing assertions. Since the assertions are made by means of irony, the unequivocal meanings can be interpreted, but at the same time, ambiguity enters in because even the most stable ironies introduce the potential for instability. The easy, unequivocal ironies are present, but so too are equivocal ironies and thus the listener must always be aware that the opposite interpretation might be true. One might conclude from the confession of setting the Winnebago on fire that the prudent judgment is to wait for a tow truck. The kind of scientific and mechanical problem-solving that co-exists comfortably with stable ironies of unequivocal interpretation is the kind of answer that requires expertise rather than judgment. But in this case, judgment—even bad judgment—is necessary when night is falling, the children are getting hungry and frightened, and outside help is not coming. The relationship problems that are also undertaken to solve are unstable and require the expertise of judgment when simple, mechanical answers will not suffice.

Ray invites listeners to make their own confessions at the program website or “to confess right now you can give us a call. The number is triple-eight-*CAR TALK*, that’s, eight-eight-eight, two-two-seven, eight-two-five-five.” This introduces the first call, but it is also part of the parody of the program. Ray intones the phone number in cadences exactly like those used by hosts of “live” call-in programs, but the program is not live. Nonetheless, Ray imitates the language of a live call, and the first caller reciprocates by not breaking the fiction, implicating herself in the production of irony.

Ray exchanges greetings with the first caller, Amy from Ely, Minnesota. Calls typically begin with the hosts overtly getting the caller’s name and town correctly. In contrast to other radio call-in programs, in which the host takes such information in stride or even neglects it, Tom and Ray make a habit of treating listeners as individuals.

Typically, this greeting and exchange of information is an opportunity for the hosts to comment on the name or location. Since Amy is calling from Minnesota, this prompts the recurrence of a running gag of asking the caller whether he or she knows Les Block from Minneapolis or Dave from Bemidji. (These two men are friends of the hosts, and whenever someone calls from Minnesota, the hosts ask whether the caller knows their two friends.) This gag satirizes the easy intimacy of small towns in which everyone knows everyone else. Born and raised in Boston, the hosts ironically insist on misunderstanding the mid-West. Not satisfied that Amy does not know John or Dave, Tommy encourages her to try to find Dave on her next trip to Bemidji because he is “a day’s worth of laughs.” Sensing that this has been an overlong exchange of greetings and basic information, but disguising this conversational and broadcasting error by ironically assuming that it must have been the intended substance of the call, Tommy says, “Well,

thanks for calling, Amy!” as if that were the end of the call. This kind of irony protects the hosts from criticism, but it also respects callers, apologizing for wasting time by embracing the error. Tom and Ray use this and other tactics to establish self-deprecating images as lazy, time-wasting employees—which they might or might not be.

Amy asks about cold weather protocol. She asks about moving a car a short distance while warming it up in -25 F cold weather and whether moving it will do damage. The hosts add colorful embellishments to her description of the cold, and assure her that if the temperature is below zero only hard acceleration on the highway will do damage. Tommy adds, “We’ve done that.” The rest of the conversation assures Amy that she is doing no damage to the car. Ray generalizes to provide useful information for the listening audience, “people who live in a reasonable part of the country,” that they do not need to warm up their cars, except to warm the interior.

After thanking Amy and saying farewell, Ray transitions to the next call by repeating the phone number. Kevin from Gardena, California reports that, after driving his ’62 T-bird more than 45 minutes, he gets sleepy (this has happened throughout the seven years he has owned the car). Ray asks, in a way that is not interpreted innocently, but as an ironic diagnosis of the disease of elderliness, “How old are you?” Tom, Ray, and the caller laugh, but age is dismissed as a cause. Ray, half-seriously, suggests that such a car induces a euphoric state—or carbon monoxide poisoning. The three banter about getting tests: a parakeet to serve as a canary-in-the-coalmine, blood tests that are very painful, and a sensor inside the cabin that changes color at high levels of CO. Before getting to useful advice (the sensor and taking the car to a garage where technicians can use proper equipment to verify the suspected exhaust leak under the hood

of the car), Ray recounts his experience with arterial blood tests and his doctor's diagnosis: "He found out I was just stupid." Notwithstanding this self-deprecating irony, the three men reach a consensus answer. Irony has, as a device, the advantage of protecting the ironist from his victim, and this is particularly useful when the victim has political power. In this situation, however, Ray's irony protects him from becoming a victim of the social error of being a know-it-all. The question posed does not require great automotive genius to solve, and after seven years of symptoms, one might, moreover, reasonably wonder about the commonsense of the caller. Ray's irony, however, also protects the caller who would suffer public embarrassment if the answer were quickly pointed out. Ray adds further balm by repeating that it took him a long time to determine that he, at one point, had suffered carbon monoxide poisoning.

The genuine answer is based on experience and expertise. (Ray even mentions that this model of car has two exhaust pipes, underscoring his knowledge.) But the lesson has more to do with the public performance of judgment. In this case, the mechanical solution is easy, but the political judgment of how to tell someone in a way that increases the likelihood of compliance is a rhetorical and persuasive challenge. Gentleness solves the persuasive challenge, and irony models the rhetorical advice. It is sometimes harder to tell truth to weakness than it is to speak truth to power. To reinforce the value of the caller, Tom and Ray encourage Kevin to get the problem fixed: "we can't afford to lose any listeners!" The irony is a model for working in a public sphere where being right can do as much personal damage as being wrong.

After using the phone number to transition to the next call, Ray greets Ann from Chapel Hill, who wants a recommendation for a used vehicle appropriate for transporting

wedding cakes. Clearance, air conditioning, stable suspension, and price are factors in the decision, along with good appearance. Tom recommends a Honda Element or a mini-van, and Ann discusses her positive experience with a Windstar mini-van. Ray puns about dough and bread (regarding the cost of a used vehicle), but the solution is rather simple. Most of the discussion, rather, delves into the specific operation of removable seats in the van. Although simple, the call ends with Tommy telling Ann that she can bake the cake for his next wedding; Ray's sarcastic retort is that it will be sooner than she thinks. The brothers present themselves as barely inept mechanics, but their ineptitude extends, as they tell it, to their personal relationships as well. Tommy has several ex-wives for Ray to tease him about. This particular call had little automotive information to offer, but it did provide an opportunity for the hosts to show inquisitiveness and depth of thinking as a model for reaching judgment. The obvious answer is often correct, but other questions about implementation are necessary. And, the segment did not neglect to provide reinforcement of the host's presentation of an ironist self.

As the first third of this program draws to a close, Ray previews the "Puzzler" by feigning sympathy for Tommy's failing to keep his New Year's resolutions, one of which was to remember "Puzzlers" from week to week. The self-deprecating and lengthy list of Tommy's failures ends in an ironic contrast to Ray's solicitude: Tommy offers him cheesecake and a cigar (items from the list of New Year's resolutions to give up). The humor is not terrifically funny and the irony seems unmotivated, but it serves as a constant reminder that fallible humans are making decisions. Irony can provide distance and a superior angle of vision, and when it is historically situated, it can avoid mere

alienation and impotence.³³ Constant reminders of situated irony help keep *Car Talk* grounded.

The station break begins with a car tune (one of an apparently endless supply of songs about cars) and includes network funding credits, beginning with a fake credit and ending with ironic twist on the Standard Out Cue: “Support for *Car Talk* on NPR comes from the Vincent and Angelina Gumbaccio Foundation, providing fast and confidential relocation services, no questions asked – Capisce!?! , NPR, NPR member stations, and ...” (Legitimate automotive related underwriters) ... “and even though cats carefully cover their radios with kitty litter whenever they hear us say it, This is NPR, National Public Radio.” The break concludes with a forward promotion for Weekend *All Things Considered* and a 60-second music bed for local announcements.

The second segment begins with a reprise of the *Dawggy Mountain Breakdown* theme (3 seconds). Ray greets listeners: “Hi, we’re back. You’re listening to *Car Talk* with us, Click and Clack, the Tappet Brothers, and we’re here to talk about cars, car repair, and-duh, the answer to last week’s Puzzler.” One of Ray’s duties on the program is to re-write any “Puzzlers” that are submitted by listeners, and he refers to his editing ironically as “obfuscation.” A listener from Portland, Oregon submitted one that was, Ray reports thankfully, “pre-obfuscated.” Continuing a pattern of using ironic self-deprecation to protect other members of the public sphere, Tommy injects, “You know, I remember!” Ray chortles, “A little late now!”

³³ Ruth L. Smith, "Morals and Their Ironies," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26.2 (1998).

The answer to this week's "Puzzler" begins with a repeat of the "Puzzler" posed the previous week. It resembles the "shaggy dog" story that opened the first section. At length, the scenario describes the details of dead batteries in many vehicles—except one—waiting in traffic stopped by an accident ahead. The one vehicle did not have air conditioning, but the A/C and other accessories drained the batteries of the stopped vehicles which were not being charged by the alternator not moving for several hours. This models the relationship between the observation of details and problem-solving, an important component of judgment being taught in this proto-public sphere.

Listeners can submit their answers to the "Puzzler", and one is selected at random, as Tommy ironically puts it, "from *all* the correct answers" (implying that the program quality is so low that very few would bother to contribute). The self-deprecating prize was "a 26 dollar gift certificate to the Shameless Commerce Division at CarTalk.com, and with that certificate she can *almost* get a brand new *Car Talk* stainless Steel thermos." Too cheap to pay for the entire prize, the Shameless Commerce Division (self-deprecating itself) provides an ironic version of customer service. The irony in the program to this point has been focused on managing the image of the hosts. In this moment, however, the bite of irony is directed toward an aspect of the culture: commerce. This unstable irony involves Tom and Ray; after all, it is their website. But it is also self-critical and not just self-deprecating. Self-deprecation returns and erases the cynicism as Tommy describes the thermos: "It says '5W30' on one side and on the other side it says 'pure Massachusetts crude' on the other." Ray laughs, and repeats, "That would be us."

Having finished with last week's "Puzzler," Ray forward promotes the new "Puzzler" and invites more calls with the phone number. Colin, "from right next door in Somerville," complains about the noise his 1995 Mazda Protégé makes as he shifts from first gear to second gear. Even before the problem can be identified, the caller and hosts talk about the specific part of Somerville that Colin lives in, "Tommy's favorite part of the city." This grounding in specific locations helps situate the program and its ironies to make it more than a distant double vision and help it retain agency. But when Tommy hears the problem, he undercuts the immediate agency to illustrate sophisticated judgment.

The problem seems particularly esoteric and difficult, but Tommy says, "I wouldn't worry about it, for one thing—" Ray interjects, "Well, I wouldn't, either—" And Tommy completes his thought: "I have no idea what it *is*, but I wouldn't worry about it." Tommy leads a digression into the noises in his own car: Ray suggests ironically that the strange one might be the sound of the engine (in Tommy's car, normal sounds would be strange). Then Tommy mentions another noise, and that he does not know what it is, although he is willing to explore possibilities; but Ray steers the conversation back to Colin's problem. This has the advantage of performing a deliberation about the relative importance of the issues in a judgment. Not every question can be answered, not every problem can be solved, and part of the art of judgment in the public sphere lies in knowing that and knowing when to apply it. Ray asks questions to clarify the issue and eventually settles on the possibility that the problem could be the pedal assembly rather than the clutch. It just squeaks, and has a simple, inexpensive solution, which provides a happy ending for the call.

The self-deprecating humor continues as Tommy next introduces the Stump the Chumps segment. The puns include double meanings for “dig up” a caller, and “clown” theme music. Kelly from Syracuse had a “Car – slash – relationship” problem: selling a used car to a relative. In the original call, the brothers disagreed, and Ray was able to underscore that particular paradox: “and I’m glad that we were able to help!” Kelly returns to report on how events turned out. First, the stock disclaimer: “Before we find out what happened: we have not spoken since your last appearance on *Car Talk*, is that true, Kelly?” (Tommy) “And, is it true that the answer you are about to give us here on this Stump the Chumps has not been influenced by our staff, the staff of National Public Radio, or by the free personal ad that we gave you?” The contrast between the official language and the obvious attempt at a bribe ironically brings into question the integrity of the program and proves its point by demolishing the question.

Despite the lack of clear advice from Tom and Ray, Kelly’s boyfriend bought her mother’s car, and they’re still together, and the car is still running. When this triumph is announced (to “Ta-Da” music and applause effects), the irony continues: (Tommy) “That was a very dangerous move.” (Ray) “And I’m glad we recommended it.” Kelly explained, “Well, I felt more confident after talking to you guys,” to which Ray replied cynically, “See, false confidence will always get you in trouble.” The irony permits Tom and Ray to have different opinions without Tom being damaged or Ray becoming overly certain in the process. Again, this provides a model of useful thinking in a proto-public sphere, coaching good behavior and ironic habits of mind that allow people to continue to work together in a contingent world.

The regular pattern of interrupting and interpreting capable advice with self-deprecating irony continues through the remainder of the program. It is not necessary to continue to point out these ironic grace notes, for they serve the same purpose each time, and they do not go away even if listeners habituate to them and even actually stop hearing them. They become so much a part of the fabric of the program that they suggest, normatively, that this is a sustainable mental posture. Other kinds of ironic persuasion, however, are worth noting through the rest of the program.

The next caller, John from Falmouth, Maine, had a question about undercoating. John uses some gently colorful and vivid language, which enlivens the call, and he has his own ironic world view. He knows that his Scion is really a Toyota; he describes a boxy-looking car as “Shaquille O’Neill’s shoe box” (a very big box); and he challenges the dealer’s claim about cars not rusting anymore as “an Elvis-sighting.” The producers apparently concluded in the production process that this call was consistent with the overall tone and purpose for the program, and they decided to include it in the final assembly. Presumably, this call had elements that other calls made the same Friday evening did not.

John, the caller, and Ray and Tommy, the hosts, work through an economic history of this particular aspect of automobile manufacturing. Tom and Ray explain, though a cynical view of manufacturer cost cutting, how conditions change and how good decisions are based on current conditions. John remains unconvinced, so Tom and Ray use observational evidence and cost-benefit and risk arguments to gently undermine John’s lingering convictions. That accomplished, Ray shifts the discussion to the current version of manufacturer inadequacy. Rusting, as a problem, has been solved, but

manufacturers continue to use cost-cutting tactics such as leaving out side-impact airbags. The details of the business model have changed, but the justification for Ray's continued skepticism remains. Tom lightens the conversation by saying that he would buy the car, even if it was not safe enough to drive, just because it was "cute" and he could leave it parked in front of the house. John is discouraged and suffers buyers' remorse, but Ray directs attention to the function of a public sphere: the discussion might not solve John's particular problem, but maybe this segment of the program will encourage Toyota to make the car safer for next year. Tommy finishes up the call with a wisecrack that "next year, it will be rusted out anyway" as a reminder not to take all of this too seriously and that time will remove most problems anyway. Ray bids farewell to John and previews the new "Puzzler" in the next third of the program as a car tune plays, leading into underwriting credits and a station break. Tommy introduces the routine underwriting credits with a satirical luxury: "Support for *Car Talk* come from sales of our 1983 Dom Perignon Single Vineyard sparkling anti-freeze, from NPR and—," and Ray provides an ironic reading of the Standard Out Cue: "—and even though snowmen everywhere pray for temperatures in the upper forties whenever they hear us say it, this is NPR, National Public Radio." This ritual use of irony and self-deprecation ensures that very little time passes between ironic statements throughout the program, and it makes the timing of the irony, but not its content, predictable. This creates anticipation in the listener, who, wondering what linguistic trick will be played this time, has this expectation satisfied in a formal way that Burke reminds us is persuasive.

Following the station break, listeners hear the *Dawggy Mountain Breakdown* theme for three seconds, and then Ray ritualistically barks, "Ha! We're back! You're

listening to *Car Talk* and—.” In some programs, Tommy then feigns being startled awake, but in any event, Ray’s return always implies that the listeners have been dozing. As Ray introduces the new “Puzzler”, Tommy asserts that “And I’m going to commit this to memory as you say it.” Ray laughs. “You are, eh? Well, let’s see how you do, buddy boy.” This verbal sparring continues the ongoing gag based on Tommy’s mental impairment of memory. The reason for his forgetfulness is not designated, but age is a possibility. Like cynicism about the business world (including their own implication in it, no matter how ineptly), age-related decline is a recurring theme within the self-deprecations of *Car Talk*. The stable ironies of puns, sarcasm, and parody have been unequivocal for listeners, and, as Wayne Booth has pointed out, irony can be remarkably clear even though it says the opposite of what it is interpreted to mean.³⁴ Issues pertaining to market economies and social relations, however, are introduced into the program although it remains unclear what and whether the hosts are interpreting them as ironic. This leaves the listener without some of the cues of unequivocal irony, but not without the tools for that kind of interpretation.

In beginning the “Puzzler” segment, Ray mentions that it comes from “the Wonderful-World-of-Space-Travel—kind of, sort of.” Before launching into the “Puzzler”, however, Ray “dedicates” it: “This is for all the school kids out there—and their parents, too, of course—but mainly the school kids who have been subjected to our show by their parents, you know, for all these years— (Tommy) like my kids— (Ray) and forced to listen.” This sets up an antagonism between generations, between parent

³⁴ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* 82, 91.

and child, which is open to ironic interpretation, but such an interpretation would be an unstable irony. Listeners might wonder whether this is true, generally, or personally. Forcing children to do things sounds illiberal, but it is an awkward and unavoidable part of child rearing. A stable irony within this set-up is that children have more sense than their parents to listen to such programming. But as Wayne Booth also points out, knowing when to stop is one of the problems with irony.³⁵ Do the hosts view the world this way, or are they and the listeners open to an ironic interpretation that sees family dynamics differently? On a Saturday morning, such issues might not demand attention, but the program, imagined as being situated within a leisure setting for the ideal audience, might have the time to consider the issue. A critique of parenting is up for consideration through an unstable interpretation as Ray continues to set the educational context for the “Puzzler”: “And I realize that kids are just coming off their Christmas vacation where their little minds have been idled, so I thought that this would help to get them back into the swing of things. And the nice thing about this Puzzler is: it’s brief; see that, it’s only one measly little paragraph— (Tommy) with obfuscations?— (Ray) Requires none—it’s only one measly little paragraph, it was sent in by Dave Foster—and I have no idea where Dave is from, but if anyone wants his e-mail address, I’d be happy to give it out—and I had to obfuscate, maybe, a little bit, but here it is.” Sarcasm in such a thin, even coat that it shifts into irony assists Ray as he perpetuates a running gag about contributed “Puzzler”s that need additional obfuscation (at ironic odds with general pedagogic and broadcasting principles that favor clarity).

³⁵ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* 91.

The text of the “Puzzler” is fairly straightforward, but a mystery is engaged: overheated gear on an unmanned space vehicle. Cooling fans were installed, but the problem persisted, and the question is: “Why?” Another ritual follows as Ray provides listener instructions on how to submit an answer to the “Puzzler”:

If you think you know the answer, write it down on a pair of 179 cm single camber carbide steel Black Diamond Telemark skis with Dual Torsion Bow, Densolite core, and Electra-sintered graphite base – and don’t forget the bindings – and send that all to Puzzler Tower, Car Talk Plaza, Box 3500, Harvard Square, Cambridge, (our fair city) MA 02238 or you can e-mail your answer from CarTalk.com.

The skis are real, and available on the web; producer Doug Mayer is a member of a hiking club (as per a chat room on a Telemark ski web site), and listeners can presume that the information is not invented. This grotesque exaggeration is an ironic rendering of the now trite original ironic entry form: “Send your answer on the back of a twenty dollar bill to—.”

The answer to the “Puzzler”, divulged in the next Saturday broadcast on 15 January 2005, is so simple as to invite groans similar to those that greet the puns used in the program: in unmanned space vehicles, unpressurized cabins have no atmosphere and, without air, the fans are useless.

Ray transitions to the next call with the phone number. Marilee from Mount Desert, Maine has a serious problem with a 1989 Nissan Sentra with 170,000 miles on it. Before getting to the problem, however, the brothers continue another *Car Talk* ritual. They make sure of the correct spelling of her first name, and they comment on their

knowledge of (or visits to) her hometown. Ironically, for grease monkeys who present themselves as inept, they are careful and knowledgeable. Moreover, they foreground the concern they have for people. Ironically, these mechanics are people-persons.

The brothers then banter over an individual difference between them. Ray has been to “Mount Dessert Island” [sic], but says Tommy is a “nature-hater”: “I don’t hate it too much. I’m not going to drive 5 hours to see it,” Tommy responds. Even this banter suggests, ironically, that people who do not agree on some issues can agree on important issues.

The important issue for Marilee is a clunking in the steering column of her Sentra. Tommy jokes that “Steering is not as much of a hindrance to driving as most people think. It’s okay, but it’s vastly over-rated.” Ray, however, takes the issue more seriously and the explanation is complicated, because the mechanism is complicated, but given the life-threatening nature of an impending steering failure, Ray provides thorough amplification without “obfuscation” since the reality of the danger is obfuscated enough on its own. Ray provides straightforward diagnosis of a serious, potentially fatal problem on the basis of description of symptoms with very little tomfoolery, advising Marilee not to drive it on the highway: “But otherwise, if you have to drive on the highway, have it towed, because they may be picking you up – not the car, but you”

After this uncharacteristically serious issue, Ray switches quickly, asking: “You haven’t been there long in Mt. Desert Island, have you? You don’t sound like one of them Mai..[Maine-iacs].” Using l-o-b-s-t-e-r as a shibboleth, Ray elicits the confession that Marilee was originally from Massachusetts. Ray ends the call happily: “We don’t know what kind of a fraud you are, but we’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

After the call with Marilee ends, Tom and Ray continue to discuss the appeal of nature. Tommy is a little confused: Is it a mountain; is it a desert; is it an island? Ray enjoys the natural beauty of the Acadia National Seashore Park (because it transcends such categories): “It’s the home of Cadillac Mountain—it’s the Cadillac of mountains!”

Car Talk appeals because it is ironic. This does not hold true for all listeners, and some will never find *Car Talk* appealing. Irony presumably annoys those who value certainty above all. Self-deprecating humor and tomfoolery annoy those who prefer consistency and quiet. Some listeners originally put off by Tom and Ray laughing at their own jokes (which the listener interprets as *hubris*), later learn to enjoy the program after the ironic self-appreciation is interpreted as self-deprecation. Part of the appeal lies in the clarity of verbal irony and the openness of unstable irony. But the appeal is consistent with listeners who value a democratic public sphere, as it provides practice in the skills of judgment necessary for a democratic public sphere and the performative unflappability required for democratic deliberation.

A sophisticated sense of justice emerges in the next call. Prompted by a concern over gas mileage, Derrick from Pottsdam, New York wants to know whether an accident can cause lower gas mileage. It turns out that a used car salesman had lied to Derrick about the car—it had been in an accident, but Tom and Ray assure Derrick that the low mileage is normal in the winter and unrelated to the accident. The real question is whether to confront the salesman. The recounting of the crime and the alternative explanation provide examples of detective work in the use of evidence. Throughout, Tom and Ray pepper the conversation with lighthearted use of language to keep any anger from escalating. This, too, offers a model for good public behavior. Ray, initially,

agrees with Derrick's inclination to confront the salesman, but Ray also observes, with a little sympathy for commission-salesmen, an inherent contradiction in marketplace economics: incentives for lying. Tommy, however, notes that confronting the salesman gains nothing for Derrick, and Ray is persuaded that the better course of action is to do nothing and let the dishonesty of the salesman catch up with him eventually. To confront him would be to warn him to be a better liar and, thereby, be a greater danger to the public good. Derrick offers a third way: tell everyone he knows to avoid that particular dealership. Ray exaggerates the idea to include hiring a skywriter and concludes the call on a cheerful note. Given the social significance in a political economy of the previous call, the final call in the program is easy. Not only is it a simple matter of diagnosing the cause of a bad battery, it is a "quiz" of sorts for the listeners who heard the answer to last week's "Puzzler" about dead batteries.

While dispensing car advice, *Car Talk* also advises listeners on the negotiations of social institutions. It is "poetic realism" and "scientific realism," irony, Contrastive epistemics, and Urban Agrarian. It is rhetorical in that it provides the resources for judgment and inspiration for judgment, but it does not prefigure what that judgment will be (even though the opinions of the hosts are usually very clear). *Car Talk* invites listeners to agree with it, but the irony of the program permits judgments that disagree. *Car Talk* establishes an unmistakable ironic voice in its stable ironies. But not all of the issues raised in the program are stable. For example, where does self-deprecation end and self-loathing begin when the barbs are based on age? Are the hosts being ironic when they joke about age infirmities, or are they participating in the last remaining acceptable prejudice in our culture: ageism? If they are liberal ironists, why be so cruel?

Since multiple interpretations are possible, unstable ironies appear in the program. The audience has been prepared to make judgments, but the program invites certainty only about certain issues, and age is not one of them.

Ageism, Irony, and Public Judgment in *Car Talk*

A surprising amount of age-relevant discourse appeared in *Car Talk* programs broadcast during April and May 2000. Situating this discourse within the overall ironic humor of this long-running program, I consider how the age-related discourse falls within the larger ironic project of the program, and I consider how the irony encourages habits of thinking that are directly critical of any form of received wisdom. I then consider how these habits of thinking might affect interpretations of mainstream concepts of age and aging.

The hosts of *Car Talk* occasionally make specific references to age, they make assumptions about age, and they do not directly attack ageism, but they do produce a program that provides resources for listeners that could be used to trouble ageist practices. *Car Talk* does not argue against ageism directly, but it does encourage critical thinking skills that can, and within the program, can be prompted to challenge stereotypic thinking. Any appreciation of the verbal dexterity, mental acuity, and pedagogic significance of Tom and Ray Magliozzi must be tempered by the recognition that these skills are not used to dismantle age stereotypes within the program.

Tom and Ray Magliozzi were 63 and 51 years old in 2000. They were middle-aged. The age of the callers ranges from that of traditional college students (18 to 22

years) to that of the hosts' age cohort. I estimate the age of the callers, since this information is not readily available. Research by Anthony Mulac and Howard Giles indicating that "sounding old" and "being old" are not necessarily related does not directly affect this inquiry; none of the callers in the programs studied exhibited vocal characteristics associated with the very elderly.³⁶

Age stereotypes figure prominently in the "Puzzler" for the 7 April 2000. A listener who wrote that "my father, Max" used an old lawn mower and had noticed that it had begun to use more gas to cut the same amount of grass suggested the enigma as a "Puzzler" for the program. Despite repairs, the mower still used more gas. Ray invited listeners to write to the program with an explanation of "what's wrong?" The following week, previewing the upcoming solution for this "Puzzler", Ray reminded listeners that the "Puzzler" concerned "an old geezer whose lawn mower was using an inordinate amount of gas." Then, in the "Puzzler" segment of the episode, Ray revealed the answer: "It has nothing to do with the lawn mower. At age 65, Max's seeming loss of mileage [here, the answer was interrupted with extended self-deprecating remarks concerning the hosts' declining abilities] was caused by the fact that he's walking slower." Ray adds, "all the *geezers* got this," and Tom concludes the segment by saying, "This has happened to me; I'm slower than I was 10 years ago" (*Car Talk*, 14 April 2001).

In the same episode, while attempting to ascertain that a faulty emission controller was the cause of a caller's problem with a car that continued to make noise for 30 minutes after the engine was shut off, Tom explained their difficulty in finding the

³⁶ Anthony Mulac and Howard Giles, "'You're Only as Old as You Sound': Perceived Vocal Age and Social Meanings," *Health Communication* 8.3 (1996).

answer quickly by saying that “our brain cells have been deteriorating lately.” Although the hosts do not disparage the elderly directly, their repeated references to failing capabilities reflect stereotypic notions of aging. On the surface, these remarks implicate the hosts in the perpetuation of age stereotypes. In the context, however, of a program that ironically celebrates problem-solving and demonstrates critical thinking by hosts who see themselves as entering a period of decline, the discourse “says that which is not.”

The Magliozzis say they are becoming decrepit, but they demonstrate the opposite. The irony here is less obvious than in the ritual ironies of the program, and is what Booth refers to as “unstable irony.”³⁷ The “stable ironies” in the program direct the listener toward a specific reinterpretation of the discourse as they encourage listeners to rehearse the skills of reinterpretation. The “unstable irony,” which has no specific reinterpretation implied in the discourse, draws on listeners trained in irony to perform the unguided work of interpreting ironies with no evident implied discourse available. There is no reason to assume that the Magliozzis intend to challenge presumptions about aging; in fact, their comments implicate them in those assumptions. If, however, their goal were to challenge age stereotypes, the approach described here might be a rhetorical ideal. The irony, as Booth suggests, might protect them from becoming embroiled in political and cultural debate.³⁸ Furthermore, I speculate that the underlying goal of *Car Talk* is not the dismantling of specific instances of stereotypic thinking, but of general

³⁷ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* 93.

³⁸ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* 239.

patterns of decision making “unencumbered by the thought process,” one of the ironic mottos of *Car Talk*.

The instances of unstable ironies regarding age described here are not isolated or anomalous moments in *Car Talk*. In another call, the hosts attempt to advise a caller from Boca Rotan, which they immediately interpreted as a marker that she was retired. The caller revealed, instead, that the call was about her retired mother, who was elderly and being cared for by an (apparently) older nurse who, while driving a van with a wheelchair ramp conversion, repeatedly was “bumping into things—a \$20,000 sculpture, for example.” Tom and Ray recommended, in addition to the glasses the nurse’s employers purchased for her, that remedial driver education might be a solution. They finally suggest that the caller hire a driver, so that the “nurse could sit in the back with mom and play pinochle.” Admitting, “We all have pluses and minuses,” the Magliozzis implied the declining capabilities of age, but did not develop it (*Car Talk*, 14 April 2001).

Other instances of reference to decline include two calls involving the ethical dilemma faced by a 38 year old man conflicted over letting a potential girlfriend see his unkempt car. Apart from the central issue, Tom made a point of inquiring about the caller’s appearance: “How’s the hair?” and “How’s the physique?” (*Car Talk*, 21 April 2001). Addressing the problem of a caller concerned about a “domestic dispute over a Dodge Dart” driven by her 16 year old son, who claimed that he had not added 2000 miles of joy-riding to the odometer while his parents were out of town for the weekend, Tom said that he “trusts the kid,” to which Ray retorted, “You naïve old fool!” (*Car Talk*, 21 April 2001). As part of the same call, Ray told a story about a friend who would drive his parents’ car, which they would leave at the airport parking lot during long trips. The

friend did not have to return the car to the exact parking spot where his parents had left it because “they won’t remember where it was parked—they’re old.” In a “Puzzler” segment involving statistical analysis of accidents and other factors, including “age of the driver,” this phrase was delivered in such a way to emphasize it. Ray included self-deprecating, ironic humor in part of this segment by exclaiming, “Tommy knows the answer. See, he’s not just another ugly face” (*Car Talk*, 28 April 2001). Responding to a caller’s question about the advisability of installing mud flaps on a new car, Ray remarked, “Maybe it’s just me as I’m progressing into old age, but driving in the rain, it’s harder to see” (*Car Talk*, 5 May 2001). Age is not immaterial in either the stable or unstable ironies of *Car Talk*.

In addition to their weekly public radio broadcasts, the Magliozzi’s write a weekly newspaper column. The 15 June 2001 column, syndicated nationally, addresses the issue of elderly drivers. Responding to a reader question, Tom writes,

I know we're going to get a raft of flak on this, but we can take it. Most people in their 70s and 80s know in their hearts that they're not quite as quick as they used to be. And I'm sure most of them still have everything it takes to drive a car, and that's great. For the safety of everybody on the road, what we want to do is weed out the few who really can't see anymore, really can't steer anymore, really can't judge distances anymore and really can't react fast enough in an emergency.³⁹

Similarly, in the 14 July 2001 broadcast of *Car Talk*, the brothers conspire with a caller to find ways to keep an elderly driver off the road. Their suggestions include sabotaging the

³⁹ Tom Magliozzi and Ray Magliozzi, "An Emotionally Charged Issue," [The Buffalo News](#) 15 June 2001.

car each morning by, for instance, leaving the lights on overnight to drain the battery or letting the air out of a tire each morning. The lineage of such proposals tracing back to Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* is clear. The irony, of course, is that the hosts do not seriously propose the practices; the irony works to shield them from what Ray referred to as "a third rail" issue in the 15 June 2001 newspaper column.

Various stereotypes of aging are activated in *Car Talk*. These include general views of decline, decreased sexuality and attractiveness, and the loss of physical and cognitive faculties.⁴⁰ Observing these stereotypes in *Car Talk* is not particularly difficult. The self-deprecating humor employed by the hosts makes occasional reference to their own age-related decline, and they do not hide or euphemize their references to negative images of aging and disability. They do, however, make it possible for listeners to begin to make judgments that disagree with apparent ageism in the program

Given the deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes regarding age in Western culture, the hosts would, perhaps, be ill advised to question the "common-sense" nature of age stereotyping within their particular rhetorical situation. Nonetheless, by bringing together age stereotypes and a critical public, *Car Talk* establishes a discursive sphere in which age stereotyping could be dismantled. Although the program does not overtly challenge received wisdom about age (and several other deeply entrenched beliefs), which would not be a strong rhetorical strategy, it does provide a prototypical example of public sphere

⁴⁰ Angie Williams and Jon F. Nussbaum, *Intergenerational Communication across the Life Span*, Lea's Communication Series (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001). For the extensive literature on stereotypes, aging, and communication see Jon F. Nussbaum and Justine Coupland, *The Handbook of Communication and Aging Research* (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1995), Jon F. Nussbaum, Loretta L. Pecchioni, James D. Robinson and Teresa L. Thompson, *Communication and Aging* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, 200).

discourse in which the tools of critical understanding are nurtured. I think it is important to note that *Car Talk* does not merely encourage critical thinking that can consider issues outside the context of the program; it also includes within the context of the program an issue—ageism—that many of us believe should be examined critically.

In “Age Studies as Cultural Studies,” Margaret Gullette observes that in mainstream culture, in the academy, and even in our own experience of aging, age is mystified. Age studies attempts to understand age, and, she argues, all disciplines should move “age” into a more prominent position: “We must teach ourselves to read all texts and relationships ‘for’ age as the human studies have learned to read for gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.”⁴¹ If we read the public radio program *Car Talk* “for” age, we can see how it uses irony as a primary teaching tool.

The irony of *Car Talk* (this time, contrasted with the irony in *Car Talk*) is that it demands a mature verbal skill of listeners who can participate in irony while it remains implicated in perpetuating stereotypes of age. This contradiction, a logical inconsistency, is not, however, a rhetorical inconsistency. The potential rhetorical effectiveness of the program regarding issues of age—and it is only a potential—relies on an audience, one schooled in the skills of critical thinking, autonomously engaging issues raised by the program but not resolved by it.

My analysis of the irony in *Car Talk* explores the interplay between irony and age stereotypes in the program as an example of how the program can provoke public

⁴¹ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, “Age Studies as Cultural Studies,” Handbook of the Humanities and Aging, eds. Thomas R. Cole, Robert Kastenbaum and Ruth E. Ray, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2000) 217.

deliberation on a topic through the introduction of unstable ironies. In the irony-rich discourse of the program, age and age stereotypes are not treated ironically, except when tipped with self-inflicted sarcastic barbs. Despite a tendency to employ irony in other aspects of the program such that “out of the box” thinking is encouraged, ageism is not treated with the same ironic scrutiny. The rhetorical effect, with regard to ageism in this program, is that age stereotypes are not directly attacked, but the generally critical tone of the program provides practice for listeners to consider ageism critically—if they are so inclined. The hosts of the program could, perhaps, deploy irony as a means of resistance to ageist stereotypes. Since, however, ageism is still an accepted form of discrimination in the West, direct attacks and even the indirect attacks possible through irony, are less likely to be successful. Establishing an environment supportive of critical thinking, although it does not apprehend ageism as a target, nonetheless challenges stereotypic thinking. This approach, I believe, is the most effective rhetorical response to ageism, and it demonstrates the teaching and deliberative functions in *Car Talk*.

Conclusion

Irony is the most conspicuous rhetorical device in *Car Talk*. Through stable and unstable ironies, the program rehearses deliberative strategies that prepare audiences to participate in the public sphere. Whatever truth claims the hosts make about the human condition can be seen in terms of the “this, not that” form of Contrastivism, which ameliorates skepticism and contributes to a comic frame of acceptance. In their own way, the hosts represent Urban Agrarians and share an overarching ideology with the

audience that values the modern and the old-fashioned. Although focused on what can go wrong—it is, after all, a program about car *repair*—*Car Talk* is a kind of utopian literature that imagines a better future. It just takes too much work to get there.

Humor sets *Car Talk* apart from other advice programs and other public radio programs. Its particular brand of humor is best described as irony. Hagen defines irony as “saying the thing which is not in such a way...that the auditor must constantly reinterpret...courting agreement.” The rhetorical power of irony is that “as with enthymeme, an audience mutually invested in the formation of the discourse is more likely to persuade themselves.” For Hagen, the preconditions of irony are that (1) it is different from literal speech, (2) intelligibility lies not in the message alone but in some combination of the sender, receiver, situation, and message, (3) obfuscation somehow aids clarity, (4) the discourse is most apt in a given situation and not merely entertaining, and (5) it contains some persuasive value.⁴² All of these preconditions exist in *Car Talk*. For example, part of the ritual conclusion to the program is for Ray to announce, “Well, you’ve wasted another perfectly good hour listening to *Car Talk*.” He obviously does not intend for the listener to take this literally.

The intelligibility of the program is tested by the hosts’ frequent tangents in which, for example, they tease art history Ph.D. candidates by inquiring whether their studies have adequately prepared them for careers in which they ask “Do you want fries with that?” (*Car Talk*, 7 April 2001). The true meaning of this good-natured bantering is

⁴² Hagen, “The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Verbal Irony,” 26-28.

evident only to listeners who have some inkling that the hosts, themselves MIT graduates and Tom holding a Ph.D. in marketing, are not anti-intellectuals.

Listeners who first encounter *Car Talk* might be confused by the antics and dissembling of the hosts, but by the end of the program, when the ritual production credits are announced, it is clear that the Magliozzis are “saying the thing which is not.” By listing such imaginary staff members as “Chief Statistician, Marge Inovara” and “our Customer Service Representative, Haywood Yabuzoff,” Ray signals to listeners that this radio program and the issues discussed in it are more complex than they appear.⁴³ Within the program, obfuscation not only aids in clarity, it is a heuristic: the audience participates in the construction of a message that provokes them “to investigate and learn.”⁴⁴

The heuristic quality of the irony in *Car Talk* helps to establish the prerequisites of a successful, vibrant public sphere. Such a sphere needs members who, after listening to a program such as *Car Talk*, are better equipped to investigate and to learn, to think critically. With this in mind, the discourse of *Car Talk* is not merely entertaining; it is most apt in the given situation. The hosts of the program place great value on intelligent problem-solving. They model this ability in the discovery of information and the display of reasoning employed to answer some of the callers’ questions. Moreover, they present much of the program material ironically and, as in Hagen’s description of the rhetorical power of irony, invest the audience in the formation of the discourse. Presumably, the hosts want to persuade the callers to “take their advice” about what to do with a specific

⁴³ Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*.

⁴⁴ Hagen, “The Rhetorical Effectiveness of Verbal Irony,” 66.

car in which the hosts have no particular vested interest. Beyond that, however, they persuade callers—and more importantly, listeners—to engage in critical thinking practices. I suspect, based on the evidence of several episodes of *Car Talk*, that Tom and Ray Magliozzi have a vested interest in a cognitively and intellectually capable public. The rhetorical sensitivity of *Car Talk* is that it successfully employs irony to accomplish goals that erstwhile educational programs struggle to achieve.

One of the ironies of *Car Talk* is that, as Kenneth Burke writes, “we cannot use language maturely until we are spontaneously at home in irony.”⁴⁵ Maturity is assumed in the audience for the overt irony to work, and yet, age is denigrated. Maturity of language use is valued itself, and yet the experience that comes with years is valued while the vehicle in which it travels is not.

Dealing with issues of aging, such as discussing attitudes and policies toward the elderly, would be expected on occasion within the Public Sphere. Anthony Giddens’ Theory of Structuration supports the idea of a dualism in which human beings have agency while they operate within social structures that delimit their activities. Human agency creates and continuously adjusts the structures.⁴⁶ Taking *Car Talk* as discourse within the public sphere, it functions as a space in which public sphere skills are honed,

⁴⁵ Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 12.

⁴⁶ John Parker, Structuration, Concepts in the Social Sciences (Buckingham Philadelphia, Pa.: Open University, 2000) 7-9.

even it is not primarily the site of issues-oriented public discourse or of formal political judgment.⁴⁷

The irony in *Car Talk* requires critical thinking skills within its listeners in order for the program to make sense. By encouraging critical thinking, the program brings into being an audience that has certain characteristics.⁴⁸ The quality of critical thinking, once activated to decode the playful ironies of the hosts' humor, is then available for listeners to think critically about other topics.⁴⁹ Public radio is a forum for the ongoing conversation that leads to informed political judgments, much like the *salons*, coffeehouses, and table societies of 18th-century Europe.⁵⁰ Craig J. Calhoun summarizes the workings of the bourgeois public sphere: "[It] institutionalized, according to Habermas, not just a set of interests and an opposition between state and society but a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters."⁵¹ The discourse of *Car Talk* is a practice of rational-critical discourse, although it is often political in broad rather than narrow terms.

A meta-analysis by Mary E. Kite and Blair T. Johnson concluded that negative stereotypes of older individuals are not as stable as others have suggested. Although they found that "attitudes toward older individuals are more negative than attitudes toward younger people," this held true for attributes of competence and attractiveness, but not

⁴⁷ Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

⁴⁸ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Quebecois*," Quarterly Journal of Speech 73 (1987), Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," Quarterly Journal of Speech 56 (1970).

⁴⁹ Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere 14-26.

⁵⁰ Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere 31-36.

⁵¹ Craig J. Calhoun, Habermas and the Public Sphere, *Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) 9.

personality traits or desirable contact.⁵² As people have more contact and experience with older people, stereotypes tend to fade. *Car Talk* does not provide opportunities for people to encounter older individuals directly, but it does encourage, through irony, “habits of mind” that prompt listeners to hear “that which is not said” and to consider evidence not immediately available, such as contact with older people. This is essential for a vibrant public sphere, and can be practiced through listening to *Car Talk*.

In weekly broadcasts, 3 million public radio listeners hear Tom and Ray Magliozzi challenge received opinion through the rhetorical instabilities of irony. The program provides a steady supply of fairly stable ironies that nurture critical thinking abilities among the listeners who are, then, potentially equipped to encounter unstable ironies regarding social relations. As a result, the structural inequities of classism, sexism, and ageism are undermined—although not replaced—in a rhetorical situation that helps listeners think past accepted cultural stereotypes.

As listeners negotiate the simple comic ironies of *Car Talk*, they encounter and disrupt cultural stereotypes through more complex ironies. In particular, the program wrestles with unresolved age stereotypes, activating but ultimately confounding these stereotypes. The rhetorical structures of the program serve to advance habits of thought that are essential to resistance to ageism. *Car Talk* does not, by itself, eliminate negative stereotypes, but it does encourage the critical thinking skills that are key to a vibrant public sphere in which such stereotypes can be effectively challenged.

⁵² Mary E. Kite and Blair T. Johnson, "Attitudes toward Older and Younger Adults: A Meta-Analysis," *Psychology and Aging* 3 (1988): 240.

The ironies of age stereotypes provide a rich theme for rhetorical analysis, partly because the hosts of the program portray themselves as engaged in the struggle with age stereotypes themselves, and partly because ageism remains (along with class-ism) an acceptable form of prejudice in U.S. culture. Although the hosts of the program appear to be implicated in perpetuating certain age stereotypes, the rhetorical strategy of irony in the program leads to “habits of mind” among the listeners that encourages critical listening, critical thinking, and, perhaps, the critique of ageism that can reduce its influence.

The formal qualities of the program mirror an effective critical strategy in life. Ritual repetitions of program elements are adjusted, slightly, to be more interesting week to week. The audience anticipates the bogus production credits, formulaic segment introductions and conclusions, and the routine signature lines. Were the program perfectly faithful to its established rituals, it would become dull for hosts and listeners. It is not a fetish or religious ritual, wherein fidelity to form is required and fulfills other human needs. Rather, the forms are established and disrupted. Modeling a thinking style instead of teaching it, *Car Talk* asks listeners to anticipate and participate in rituals by ironizing them: the ritual that changes is not a ritual. It “says the thing that is not.” Between the overt ironic humor and the ironic disruption of rituals, *Car Talk* consistently asks listeners to “hear what is not” throughout the program. It should be inescapable, then, that even a non-ironic presentation of age stereotypes in the program are subjected to critical, ironic readings. The formulaic, stereotypic thinking that is “ageism” predictably would be disrupted by the audience, even though it is not done so directly by the program. Such disruption, of course, is not inevitable, but it, arguably, is likely.

This rhetorical critique of *Car Talk* that extends from the activation of age stereotypes and of critical thinking recognizes that, most probably, a direct discursive attack on ageism would not be an effective rhetorical strategy for the Saturday morning NPR listening audience. Such an attack might not even be an appropriate goal for the hosts. Nonetheless, a critical audience might trouble ageism when they hear it, and that would be a beginning step in dismantling ageist thinking. It would be the kind of work accomplished within the proto-Public Sphere of public radio. This is, perhaps, the best that can be accomplished within the rhetorical situation of a public radio program “about cars, car repair, and this week’s Puzzler.”

Car Talk is a gateway program through which some listeners have discovered public radio. Stumbled upon through dial surfing on a Saturday morning, the program sounds enough like other radio entertainment that listeners more familiar with commercial radio morning programming would sample it without a second thought. By the end of the first exposure, however, attentive listeners would hear something different as compared to commercial radio fare. Returning to the station that carries the program during other high radio usage times in the morning and afternoon of weekdays, such a listener would discover Morning Edition or *All Things Considered*.

Although *All Things Considered* is a serious news program, it is light-hearted at times, like *Car Talk*. The culture reporting might cover “softer” subjects, but the journalistic standards remain rigorous. On one day a year, however, *All Things Considered* becomes as ironically humorous as *Car Talk*. Listeners can count on one story taking the shape of a spoof on April 1 of each year. Parodying their own style, the *All Things Considered* staff report some outlandish news development and deploy the

conventions of news production to first fool and then please the listener. In years past, *All Things Considered* has, for example, reported on the sale of Arizona to Canada (complete with an interview of the Governor, who played along with the joke) and, for another example, described in detail the plans to build a network of pipes to move coffee slurry from Seattle to Starbucks Coffee Shops nationwide. Whether serious or light, the programming on *All Things Considered* is also ironic as it typically provides insight through incongruity. The irony in *All Things Considered*, except for April Fools' Day, is in cosmic irony, however, and it presents multiple perspectives that afford ironic interpretation of each other.

Chapter 3

The Argument of Juxtaposition in Public Radio Programming

The first of Kenneth Burke's "Four Master Tropes" is metaphor.¹ Insofar as verbal irony plays little role in *All Things Considered*, the verbal tactic of metaphor as a kind of verbal irony is not conspicuously above the register of metaphor found generally in thoughtful discussion of complicated topics anywhere.² Burke, for that matter, is not concerned with verbal metaphor so much as he is with the "perspective" or insight that comes from seeing one thing from the perspective or "character" of another. Perspective is achieved through the incongruity between perspectives. *All Things Considered* provides perspective by juxtaposing different perspectives, not in such an obvious way as to cause confusion, but in a subtle way that allows listeners to take in multiple perspectives and reach their own conclusions.

All Things Considered is a daily news-and-information program, the flagship program of public radio in America. The conspicuous rhetorical device in *All Things Considered* is juxtaposition as one report follows another. This highlights the epistemic patterns in the shape of the program content. Contrastive epistemology is a philosophical theory that identifies truth claims as containing an additional, if often unvoiced, oppositional claim. In this view, statements do not just state "this"; they state "this, not

¹ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 503-05.

² One of the more famous exceptions is Robert Kulwich's explanation of the national debt by having a chorus sing different melody lines representative of different budget items.

that.” The juxtaposition of elements in *All Things Considered* makes a dialectic possible as the “this” of one report is the “not that” of another. Often, the “this” or “that” lies, not so much in the propositional content of the report or commentary, but in the “character” of the report.

Thesis, Justification, and Method

The juxtaposition of segments that employ disparate, contradictory, or even oppositional arguments and worldviews in *All Things Considered* produces a cosmic irony. The irony produces a subjunctive mood, and in producing the subjunctive mood, the irony invites consideration of what is possible. This juxtaposition can be found in other public radio programs, such as *Morning Edition* and *Weekend Edition*, but it is not found in BBC produced programs, such as *The World*.

Rhetoric is epistemic.³ Public discourse is a way of dispensing knowledge and a way of creating it. News programs, naturally, dispense knowledge about subjects and events in the world, and the formal arrangement of the programs also produces knowledge by introducing competing knowledge claims that are adjudicated by the listener. The particular epistemology of public radio programming is Contrastivism, a pattern of knowledge claims in the form of “this, not that.” In combining news segments in *All Things Considered* that juxtapose one claim with its reversal, the programs produce knowledge in such a way that both dogma and skepticism are avoided.

The veracity and accuracy of the journalistic truth claims produced by NPR, of course, are important, and the quality of journalism produced by NPR is important,

³ Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic."

clearly, but that issue is not within the scope of this dissertation, just as the quality of automotive advice in *Car Talk* is beside the point for this analysis. The quality of the epistemic rhetoric, however, makes a substantial contribution, along with the journalistic content, in equipping audiences to make judgments.

Programs such as *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* have been recognized for preserving long form reporting in an age of shorter sound bites. Kevin Barnhurst interprets this as empowering the journalist, rather than the citizen, politically.⁴ Although this claim makes sense when reports are studied in isolation, the reports occur within a program containing multiple reports. In the juxtaposition of reports, audiences *are* empowered, particularly as the contrast between two or more reports affords more information and multiple perspectives.

Contrastive epistemology observes contrasting, multiple claims hidden within any knowledge claim.⁵ In analytic philosophy, this takes the form “this, not that.” Every story in *All Things Considered* is a knowledge claim, and in the usual sense, each story says, “This is the way things are.” Contrastive epistemology reminds us that such claims carry a contrasting qualifier: “This is the way things are, not that.”

Contrastive rhetoric—a field different from Contrastive Epistemology—is the linguistic study of how a writer’s first language affects composition in the writer’s second language. Current thinking in the field includes conversations about changing the name to a more accurate “intercultural rhetoric.” This is not Comparative Literature, but it is

⁴ Kevin G. Barnhurst, "The Makers of Meaning: National Public Radio and the New Long Journalism, 1980-2000," Political Communication 20.1 (2003).

⁵ Jonathan Schaffer, "From Contextualism to Contrastivism," Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition 199.1/2 (2004).

comparative rhetoric. It is rhetoric in the sense that composition and rhetoric deals with rhetoric. Insofar as the concept of irony has evolved over time, from a verbal device in a well-wrought sentence to a way of being in the world, rhetoric has evolved from a well-wrought sentence into a way of being.⁶ As a field of research, Contrastive rhetoric is grounded in linguistics and discourse analysis and in composition. It is inner-directed, in the sense that its focus lies with effective self-expression in prose. Another field of study—Contrastive Epistemology—one that is a foundation for this dissertation, is outer-directed, in the sense that its focus lies with effective public expression in prose.

Contrastive rhetoric, in this context, provides a useful set of concepts in conjunction with Contrastive epistemology. Since the listener is actively involved in the construction of a text, particularly since the ironic voice is present, the composition of meaning occurs through the interpretations of a listener who hears a series of stories and commentaries on *All Things Considered*. To the extent that each story is a product of a homogenous culture, there is no significant Contrastive rhetoric between stories. But, to the extent that the culture is not homogenous, and to the extent that each story represents different epistemic communities, pairs of reports are rhetorics in contrast with each other. Reporters, such as Lynn Neary and Julie McCarthy, for example, would have similar, but still different paradigms that underwrite their writing and production. When one listener, however, hears two reports by two different sets of producers (the reporter, her sources, the producer, and the editor), that listener will be interpreting the story using one paradigm for this story and using another similar, but still different paradigm for

⁶ Benson, "Rhetoric as a Way of Being."

understanding the next story. The reports will contain cues to indicate either that objective, “scientific” claims are being made or that the claims are subjective and “poetic,” and the listener will help compose the report through interpretation of it.

Using Contrastive epistemics and Contrastive rhetorics, the listener is in a position to deploy tools of interpretation that go beyond successfully decoding the propositional content of the reports. Standing, as it were, between two different interpretive paradigms and making sense of the descriptions that draw from different paradigms, the listener is in a position to make ongoing judgments concerning the content and the paradigms of each story.

The individual reports in *All Things Considered* function in terms of another of Burke’s tropes, metonymy⁷. Alternating between the “scientific realism” of “hard” journalism and the “poetic realism” of “soft” journalism, *All Things Considered* privileges one and then the other. In its objective, scientific work, *All Things Considered*, as Burke’s description predicts, in its emphasis on processing, correlations, and operations, focuses on corporeal, tangible motion and behavior that is “real.” In its interpretive, poetic work, *All Things Considered* emphasizes—as Burke would predict—being, substance, and motives, focusing on incorporeal, intangible action and drama that is “terminological.” To this, I would add that the poetic side is agrarian, traditional, and classically liberal and that the scientific side is urban, modern, and classically republican. That both are conservative and generative adds to the irony of public radio programming.

⁷ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 505-07.

The effort to produce a science of human relations, according to Burke, is fundamentally flawed because it attempts scientific explanations of phenomena that are essentially poetic. Public radio programming generally, and *All Things Considered* in particular, resolves this flaw by presenting both interpretations side by side, not to arrive at any particular literary claim about truth, but to entice rhetorical judgments about truth from the audience. Since *All Things Considered* is both the science and the poetry of human relations, it is dialectic.⁸ The irony of the dialectic lies not in an intentional strategy, but in an ironic personality, for the irony emerges organically. As Burke claims, irony comes from the interaction, not with poetry replacing science, but with each becoming sharper and clearer.⁹ The steady juxtaposition of the poetic agrarian with urban science affords each equal airtime—in a sort of organic “Fairness Doctrine.”¹⁰ Public radio programming strategy, despite recent efforts to streamline the programming, remains a museum of broadcasting at many stations. The Fairness Doctrine is a currently archaic concept that persists without Federal regulation because it is built into the historical roots of public radio.

The rhetorical literature does not contain specific theories of juxtaposition as a persuasive strategy. The field does, however, recognize several kinds of juxtaposition. These include irony, paradox, utopia, and parody, along with contradiction, *dissoi logoi*,

⁸ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 512.

⁹ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 512.

¹⁰ United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation. Subcommittee on Communications., "Broadcasters' Public Interest Obligations and S. 217, the Fairness in Broadcasting Act of 1991 : Hearing before the Subcommitte [Sic] on Communications of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate, One Hundred Second Congress, First Session, June 20, 1991," (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1992), vol., 1 vols, Craig R. Smith, "The Campaign to Repeal the Fairness Doctrine," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2 (1999).

controversy, anti-logos, incongruity, ambiguity, Janusian thinking, debate, dialectic, dialogue, opposition, *aporia*, argument, antithesis, and antimony. These stand *contra* reductionism, synthesis, and syncretion. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in “The Crack-Up” that intelligence is holding two mutually exclusive ideas in mind simultaneously without losing the ability to function, and *All Things Considered* embodies this kind of intelligence.

Verbal irony plays almost no role in *All Things Considered*. Cleverly turned phrases and occasional witticisms appear, but verbal irony is not very useful in journalism. Dramatic irony, tragic irony, and cosmic irony are often intertwined in the program, since it deals often with tragic events in which people are caught up in events that are beyond their control or, at times, awareness. The Contrastive epistemics of *All Things Considered*, along with its concern with issues that appeal to Richard Rorty’s “liberal ironist” because they contribute to contingent judgments and report on the many cruelties of life, lead to a utopian imagination of a world without such bad news in it. Urban Agrarianism appears in *All Thing Considered* precisely because the Contrastive elements tend to rock back and forth between modern, urbane worldviews and traditional, agrarian values. These ideas are given further development in an analysis of one broadcast of *All Things Considered* after a brief description of the program.

Description

All Things Considered was the first program produced by NPR. Launched on 1 May 1971, it was a rocky start to the effort to fulfill the vision for a public service radio

network. Supported by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the quasi-federal agency created by the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, NPR produced a program that retains much of its original characteristics: an afternoon news-and-information program blending political news and event coverage with arts and culture features modeled after the CBC program, *As It Happens*. Several very useful histories of NPR recount its growth.¹¹

In contrast to competing radio network news offerings, *All Things Considered* is a long-form program: the Monday through Friday programs are two hours long (one hour on Saturdays and Sundays), and the reports that comprise the program typically run more than three minutes in length, are as likely to run six to eight minutes, and on occasion run almost 20 minutes (necessitating a format break). The length of time devoted to a single topic within a program sets public radio news programming apart from other radio programs, and this is the *sine qua non* for non-commercial, public radio established by the Act of 1967.

The primary concern of this dissertation is that persuasive quality central to any rhetorical text. Since “rhetoric” also means the composition of texts, insofar as the construction of the text is inseparable for the persuasiveness of the ideas contained with it, the rhetorical dimensions of public radio programming stem from the details of its construction. As the voice of public radio is ironic, the programs are contrapuntal; that is, the construction of the news programs entails juxtapositions of material. As these juxtapositions are the primary concern of this chapter, I describe the formal qualities of

¹¹ McCauley, *NPR: The Trials and Triumphs of National Public Radio*, Mitchell, *Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio*, Tom Looker, *The Sound and the Story: NPR and the Art of Radio* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), John Witherspoon and Roselle Kovitz, *The History of Public Broadcasting* (Washington, D.C.: Current Newspaper, 1987).

the program in some detail before turning to the dynamics of the juxtapositions. A rhetoric of public radio programming describes not only its persuasive qualities; it also engages the formal composition and shape of the programs.

All Things Considered combines live hosts in a studio with interviews the hosts conducted earlier in the day and packaged reports submitted by NPR staff, member stations, and independent reporters. All of these reports undergo extensive editing, prior to broadcast, to make them fit within the available time while maintaining clarity of expression. As a studio production, *All Things Considered* consists of a sequence of news, analysis, commentary, and interstitial elements. The news includes reports by field journalists and interviews by the hosts in-studio or over the telephone. The commentaries are recorded by contributors. The reflexive elements include listener letters, production credits, promotional segments, and transitions. It is one thing, relentlessly after another, for two hours.

Having begun as a long-form alternative to commercialized radio news, *All Things Considered* maintains the use of longer segments. As the program has evolved to address the interests of listeners and station programmers who expect a primary rather than alternative news service, a choppy program with shorter segments has emerged. This change has increased the opportunities for juxtapositions. The current structure of the program follows the industrial standard. Every twenty minutes, the program restarts after a 90 second break. The most conspicuous element in the program is the long-form segment.

All Things Considered closely resembles other news and talk radio programs heard on heritage news/talk stations, such as WINS, New York and KDKA, Pittsburgh in

terms of the “clock,” but the segments tend to be longer, the breaks do not include commercials, and the “voice” is more measured.

All program elements occur within a scheduling structure known in the radio industry as “the clock.” Following journalistic conventions, the most important news of the day is treated in the first half of each hour in the program, although this is not an absolute pattern. Cultural reporting is prominent within the second half of each hour in the program, but again, this is not absolute, as “hard news” replaces “soft news” if events warrant the editorial decision to make such a change. Regular features include 5-minute newscasts each half hour, and a weekly “letters from listeners” segment. *All Things Considered* is a combination of live and “pre-recorded” elements. Production elements include the opening billboard, the station breaks, buttons and zippers (the musical elements between other production elements), underwriting acknowledgments, and production credits.

Conventional radio jargon refers to a “clock” to describe the sequence of program events within a program hour. In *Car Talk*, for example, the “clock” is divided into three sections, separated by short segments that allow member stations an opportunity to insert locally produced material into the program stream. *All Things Considered*, also, is divided into program segments (labeled 1A for the first segment in the first hour, 1B for the second segment, and so on). Segments can contain one to three reports each. The seams between segments in *All Things Considered* are less intricate than those of *Car Talk*, but an hour of *All Things Considered* contains a more complex arrangement of seams. A clock is mainly a producer’s tool for establishing and then remaining true to fixed start- and end-times for segments in a program. Ordinarily of little importance to

the average listener tuned in for content alone, the clock reflects the structure of the program, and, therefore, is implicated in the rhetorical structures of the program. The sequence necessarily contains juxtapositions that contribute to the rhetorical dimensions of the program.

An hour of *All Things Considered* includes the Billboard (a 60 second introduction), a five minute newscast, and the body of the program with breaks at :18, :28, :38, :48, and :58 minutes into the hour. Each hour of *All Things Considered* begins with a Program Billboard. In introducing the program, the billboard contains the host reading, over the program theme music, the equivalent of newspaper headlines or a brief statement of the major news story of the day. It previews the content, prepares the listener for that content, and establishes the stable identity of the program; it last exactly 59 seconds and ends with the host hand-off: some variation on “First, this hour’s news.” Typical arrangement of the elements within the billboard would include establishing the melody, a sound bite, a partial list of story topics, continuity naming the program and the date, then a five second pause (allowing the local host to add one topic), another partial list of story (perhaps including another sound bite), and the hand-off. The interplay of music and continuity (the script of the billboard text) contains passages in which local station announcers can inject billboard information for the local station.

Presumably designed to create the illusion of the national and local “co-hosts” working together in the same studio, the empty portions of the music bed could contain billboard material, station identification announcements, underwriting credits, weather, or other matter prepared by the local station. (The opportunities for local host contribution are much greater in *Morning Edition*, presumably because more local stations invest staff

resources in the morning drive-time program and would be more likely to use the opportunities.) Larger metropolitan stations and state networks are more likely to have the staffing resources and the reasons to use the brief bits of airtime, such as having greater demands for precious airtime, more underwriting acknowledgments, or local news inserts that benefit from forward promotion. Smaller stations might not have the same pressures or needs, and some air the program billboard as fed through the public radio satellite system. The persuasive function of the program billboard includes efforts at combination and division, suggesting links and contrasts between and within the news, the interests of the listeners, the structure of the program, and the place of the program within the broadcast schedule of the local station.

The material consequences of deciding to broadcast a short and seemingly innocuous program segment are greater than would be apparent. The repetitive form and content of the billboard perform a design function to start the program, to give it a consistent identity, and to mark it off as different from other program elements. Regular program features repeated daily tend to become familiar and comforting. It has long been noted that the listener is invited by such familiarities to assume that the world must still be relatively secure.¹² Absent the routine aesthetic elements of the program, say, during Special Coverage that NPR and other networks provide during breaking news, the listener can tell, almost instantly upon tuning in, that dangerous or tragic events are unfolding somewhere in the world. Routine elements announce that the routine levels of danger and tragedy are holding. The program billboard, on other occasions, can contain

¹² Greil Marcus, "Public Radio Hosts Drop in and Maybe Stay Too Long," The New York Times 16 March 1998.

lighthearted elements, but whether serious or jovial, the billboard sets the tone for the broadcast and sets it apart from whatever program the local station had been airing until the *All Things Considered* start-time. In keeping, however, with the ironic voice of public radio, the billboard provides the listener with no guarantee that the tone of the billboard and of the program that follows will match. Listeners familiar with the program know that the billboard does some work to condition their anticipation of subsequent content, but the quality of that conditioning is not one that pre-figures audience reaction to the content. Rather than guide the audience to a particular response, it provides a slight aesthetic dynamic that energizes and encourages a reaction without determining what that reaction is. As an introduction, the billboard is formal: the billboard creates a desire that the program then satisfies, which, according to Kenneth Burke, produces a “pure persuasion.”¹³

Generally speaking, the rhetoric of the introduction is a low-information, low-persuasion form that, nonetheless, situates the listener in certain relationships with the radio station, the program, and the hosts. Division occurs as the program is distinguished from the previous program, and the stories that will make up the program are introduced in a way that indicates their distinctive appeal as information. Combination begins to occur as the topics covered in the program are brought together within the first minute of that hour of the program.

¹³ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 267-94.

Other material consequences of the billboard emerged during the 1990s when NPR expanded its newscast service to provide 24-hour service.¹⁴ The Newscast Unit supplied 5-minute newscasts at the beginning and middle of each hour of *All Things Considered*, but eventually began to provide member stations with hourly newscasts, even during those hours (noon to 5:00 p.m., ET) when *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* were not being distributed. After some debate, NPR news management decided to distribute the newscast at one minute past the top of each hour. The pragmatic issues in this debate obscure the rhetorical issues a bit, since the judgment to be made was whether to distribute the newscasts at one minute past each hour, or to distribute the newscasts at the top of the hour. This seemingly minor decision, however, carried significant implications. Scheduling the newscast for one minute past the hour was consistent with the schedule of newscasts as they were embedded in the news magazines and had the virtue of regularity. But those managers in the system who were concerned with how NPR compared with industry standards were worried about not distributing top-of-the-hour newscasts at the top of the hour, consistent with contemporary broadcast standards established in commercial radio best practices. Rather than abandon the established aesthetic of beginning each hour of the newsmagazines with a 60-second billboard and a five-minute newscast, or of having two schedules for the newscast unit, NPR news managers decided to remain consistent with established in-house precedent.

These relatively minor format issues reflect, in form, an overarching worldview in the ethic of NPR programming as an alternative to mainstream media. Although the

¹⁴ "Bill Buzenberg, Head of NPR News for Seven Years, Steps Down," Current 20 January 1997.

content of the newscasts are consistent with mainstream industry standards, the formal qualities perform part of the differences between public radio and commercial network radio news.

The hourly newscast shares many characteristics with commercial network hourly newscasts. The organization of the newscasts reflects mainstream news values, relying on standards of importance, nearness, and recentness. Delivered with an even more of the detached tone of voice as the hosts of the body of the program, the newscasts are hosted by members of the Newscast Unit at NPR and stand in contrast with the rest of the program. Employing the short, sound bite driven style of commercial radio news, the hourly newscasts on NPR provide a capsule version of the news of the moment, privileging breadth over depth. Maintaining the journalistic integrity of NPR, these newscasts serve the same function as commercial radio news within the flow of programming offered by the radio station. Oddly, the general impression of NPR programs such as *All Things Considered*, as reflected in listener and critical comments about NPR, is that the appeal of long-form news is the primary characteristic of the news programs. Heard, but overlooked by most listeners, who focus more on the long-form reports elsewhere in the program, the newscasts comprise 16 percent of each hour. The newscast in each hour provides a service for scanning the news horizon before the program and the audience engage the long-form coverage of topics that, in some cases, are the extension of the journalism exercised in the newscast and, in other cases, are profoundly different from “the news.”

Although the Newscast Unit produces an important component in the program, the newscast is not representative of the style of *All Things Considered* or *Morning*

Edition. Respected, but unheralded, the newscasts attend to the scope of news in a given hour, which in a way permits the rest of the program to explore topics that diverge from mainstream news conventions. Moreover, the newscasts offer a point of contrast with the editorial style of the news magazines. Produced by different units within the same company, but charged with different missions, the Newscast Unit and the news magazine teams hold different, yet curiously, compatible journalistic values. These differences in style and content reflect one aspect of the many rhetorical juxtapositions of *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*.

In a sense, the newscast assures the listener that the surveillance function of news reporting is being administered faithfully by NPR. This affords an alternative of depth that is administered in the rest of the program. Without the newscast, the program would be less of a news program, and it would be strangely detached from the news of the day. Perhaps this explains the sense of detachment commentators such as Marc Greil have heard in the body of the program: with Ann Taylor playing the role of news maven, Robert Siegel would have available the alternative role of detached observer capable of objective engagement with the agents, events, and conditions of the day. The newscasts perform the journalistic function of reporting important events, and the body of the program carries the role of commentary, analysis, and evaluation. The long form is made possible by the performance of the short form.

Newscasts appear in other programs offered by NPR and broadcast over the member stations. The composition of those programs helps to demonstrate the role of these 5-minute segments in the overall structure of NPR programming. Other programs produced by NPR, and many of the programs produced by local stations for distribution

by NPR, have cut-away opportunities for the insertion of an hourly newscast into the flow of the program.

For example, the weekly environmental news program, *Living on Earth*, follows the “clock” of *All Things Considered*: the billboard, the newscast, and the body of the program with internal breaks at 19 and 39 minutes into the hour. When *Living on Earth* is fed over the public radio satellite system, NPR inserts the 5-minute newscast that is available at the time of the feed. At one time, *Living on Earth* was fed on Thursdays at 3:00 p.m. Eastern Time, relatively few stations simply re-transmit the program at that time. More typically, *Living on Earth* is part of the weekend schedule for local stations, and stations would record the program on Thursday for playback a few days later. The newscasts, necessarily then, would be outdated and would require that stations fill that 5-minute segment with the live feed of the newscast at airtime or fill with local material. The development of computer-based automation equipment has made possible unattended operation that includes switching between a recorded source (*Living on Earth*, in this case) and a live source (the NPR newscast fed over the satellite system), but the ease of execution should not veil the programming consequences. Whether live or delayed, the program contains a billboard and a five-minute segment that must air before the body of the program begins. Predictable tactics are used to fill gaps produced by that segment, but that does not obscure the necessity of a compositional judgment that must be made by local station program directors regarding the disposition of that available airtime.

Curiously, *Car Talk*, as an NPR program, does not include a top of the hour newscast or contain cutaways that would facilitate the insertion of a newscast.

Performance Today, however, a classical music program, does afford newscast inserts. Since many stations position *Car Talk* as part of a Saturday morning schedule, the “missing” newscast seems defective. *Performance Today*, although intended originally as a mid-day program, is more often part of the evening schedule for many stations. Given radio use patterns and the marked decline in radio use after 6:00pm local time, newscasts in the evening would be less useful than newscasts at, typically, 10:00 a.m. on Saturday, when *Car Talk* is distributed and first aired.

Moreover, the programming of classical music presents particular challenges with the juxtaposition of news elements. Inserting a newscast at the beginning of each hour of a classical music program brings together elements of news and music that the audience research has indicated do not appeal to the same audiences.¹⁵ Thus, if a station opts for including the live newscast during, say, the 9:00 p.m. local time hour of *Performance Today*, the program director is infusing a news element that does not have the same audience appeal as the music. The research would indicate that the large group of classical music listeners known as “news avoiders” would tend to view the newscast as an unwelcome intrusion. Perhaps program directors, mindful of public service obligations, offer the newscast, even when the evidence and assessments available suggest that the program directors are offering what listeners need rather than what they want. The *Performance Today* producers, knowing that some program directors would rather offer consistent appeal of music without news, fill the 5-minute news window with a short classical selection.

¹⁵ George Bailey, "NPR Activists and Classical Monks: Differentiating Public Radio Formats.," Journal of Radio Studies 11.2 (2004).

Even when the station airing *Performance Today* does not opt for news within the flow of the program, that flow is shaped by the presence of an absent newscast. To accommodate those stations inclined toward inserting the current newscast, other stations air a program that “stutter-steps” at the beginning of the program: a billboard, a short classical selection – accompanied by commentary – that must be timed to fit precisely within a 4:59 window. The program necessarily is restricted from beginning each hour with any piece of classical music that is too long. (Admittedly, listeners, in current radio use patterns, do not make an appointment to tune in for music radio as they do for TV drama, news, or comedy at the beginning of a program, and so this notion of the “beginning” of a program has diminished significance. Still, it matters.)

The newscast, which began as an overview of journalistic hotspots before *All Things Considered* turned to the long form features, has had a trickle-down effect on the composition of other programs. In some cases, such as *Living on Earth*, the news quality of the program makes the insertion of the newscast seem natural. For classical music programs, such as *Performance Today*, the “news hole” is more problematic. Yet the function of the newscast remains the same: it is an overview of the state of the world, organized according to standard broadcast journalism conventions, and it serves the surveillance function of news. The short form makes the long form possible.

The newscast also makes available opportunities for stations, or those with the intent and the resources, to insert local news reports. At three minutes into each newscast, the newscast host will deliver continuity that provides stations with a cutaway opportunity: a precisely timed pause is cued by the injection, “This is NPR.” Local stations can anticipate this fixed point and, at the precisely timed pause, cut away from

the network program and begin local origination of program content. This could take the form of local news headlines, local features, traffic and weather information, or – to complicate the rhetoric further – nationally distributed programming that is not produced by NPR. (The *StarDate* feature, produced at the University of Texas at Austin, is one example of a two-minute modular program element that can fit within the local station cutaway opportunities, and yet it is not a local station production.)

The format elements in the rest of *All Things Considered* address the needs of local stations and of the network to use some of the time within the program for the broadcast of promotional and underwriting announcements. Inserts that are not produced by NPR create additional rhetorical issues beyond the scope of this dissertation, but critical listeners could attend to the ideological presuppositions behind the local inserts and contrast them fruitfully with the network content.

The rituals of production in *All Things Considered* are different, in degree rather than in kind, from the production elements in *Car Talk*. The staff credits are presented in a straightforward fashion, bereft of irony. (Bob Edwards, the former host of the NPR program *Morning Edition*, did add a lilt to his weekly staff mentions when he got to “Arthur *Halliday* Laurent.”) During daily programs, truncated staff credits are read, with the complete list delivered only on Friday broadcasts. The *Car Talk* hosts turned a mundane chore into an opportunity for self-amusement and audience entertainment; not surprisingly, the serious hosts of the serious news programs read the staff lists with professional grace. The sizeable list does, however, have a small persuasive consequence: a strong support staff adds to the credibility of the program (although I

have heard public radio station managers grouse that this is a staffing extravagance that has an effect on station finances).

The production design of *All Things Considered* has had an influence on other programs. These include the newscast and the station breaks. The station breaks in *All Things Considered* have also become system standards. *All Things Considered* adopted two internal breaks and expanded them to 90 seconds, in keeping with the *Morning Edition* design. The rationale for more breaks in *Morning Edition* than had been part of *All Things Considered* was that a morning news program needed more opportunities for local station insertion of weather or traffic information. As *All Things Considered* became a primary news source for many listeners who preferred a brisk pace and more local weather and traffic information in the afternoon, the *All Things Considered* clock changed. Instead of restarting the program at 30 minutes into each program hour, the program would restart at 20 minutes into each hour. Also, as NPR and the public radio member stations increased their underwriting activities, these breaks became useful as a way to increase “inventory” or saleable airtime.

As *All Things Considered* moved to two internal breaks, so did *Car Talk* (which allowed the hosts to then remark on the “third half of our show”). Unlike the hosts of *Car Talk*, the *All Things Considered* hosts do not play with language. This stylistic choice produces rhetorical effects, nonetheless. It has become commonplace to observe that the calm, rational voices of news anchors have politically soporific effects, leaving the listener informed but intellectually drowsy and unresponsive. My interpretation is that this provides another opportunity for the listener to reach an independent judgment rather than to fall into a “ditto-head” cult of personality.

All Things Considered substitutes buttons and zippers for the wry hand-offs in *Car Talk*, and some listeners who recognize the music in these bridges can contribute actively to the production of the program. Like the irony in *Car Talk*, these sometimes clever commentaries on the story invite critical listening. Scott Simon, on *Weekend Edition*, also engages in word play. He sometimes uses irony, and at other times, he uses sarcasm. Steve Inskeep, as part of a two-person team that replaced Bob Edwards on *Morning Edition*, engages in word play, too. His wit, however, more closely resembles the false wit Joseph Addison contrasts with true wit.

Listening at certain times, such as during the drive home, is part of the ritual, too. Susan Stamberg's anthology of transcripts from the early days of the *All Things Considered* is titled, tellingly, *Every Night at Five*.¹⁶ Like *Car Talk* and *A Prairie Home Companion*, *All Things Considered* affords rituals of listening that, as they vary from day to day, provide several ironies for rehearsing critical thinking. Turning to an analysis of a specific broadcast, I show examples of these ironies at work.

Comparative Irony

News, analysis, cultural reporting, and production elements comprise most of the content of *All Things Considered*. Each of these contains arguments that "this is the way the world is." The arguments of journalism, analysis, and cultural reporting are distinct, distinctive, and different from each other in style as much as content. Within each report

¹⁶ Susan Stamberg and Charles Kuralt, *Every Night at Five: Susan Stamberg's All Things Considered Book*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

in the program is a peculiar argument, and between and within reports are Contrastive and dialogic arguments as juxtaposition puts arguments into conversation with each other.

For example, *All Things Considered*, on Wednesday, 17 December 2003, followed established journalistic standards as it began the first of its two hours (after the newscast) with the most important story of the day: a report from the war in Iraq. President George W. Bush had declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq on 1 May 2003, six weeks after United States forces invaded on 19 March 2003, but fighting continued more than six months later. The low-grade situational irony of continued fighting after such an announcement was exacerbated by the “Mission Accomplished” banner that had hung prominently on the superstructure of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* as President Bush announced the end of combat operations from the carrier deck. *All Things Considered* (along with whatever other news sources a listener might use), over time, cultivates the historical memory that makes such an ironic interpretation possible by the listener. The first story, therefore, even without any commentary to the effect, would be interpreted by some listeners as ironic. The gist of the story, however, was that US commanders were expressing optimism over recent successes by American forces.

Of course, *All Things Considered* was only one of many news organizations that provided current coverage of the war that day, so whatever irony one might find in the news would not be associated, uniquely, with NPR. Other stories and features on *All Things Considered* that afternoon, however, afford ironic interpretations. President Bush, on this day, made remarks at a celebration of the anniversary of the Wright Brothers First Flight. The report of the anniversary in segment 1B was, by itself, marked by ironic

contrasts, but the story also contrasted the successful performance of presidential duties with the still unresolved conflict in Iraq.

Other stories invite ironic interpretation between stories. The insurgents in Iraq are oddly parallel to the antibiotic-resistant staph infections that have attacked patients in hospitals. That story has odd parallels to the nurse who had been charged with killing his patients: in an interview with a former employer, the nurse was described as a “bad apple.” Bad apples function as insurgent agents that cause nearby fruit to ripen more rapidly due to the release of ethylene, a catalyst for decay. Moreover, the bad news stands in ironic contrast to good news later in the program—the development of a new method for finding previously unknown animal species—and to holiday cheer—performances by a Gospel singing group. These cosmic ironies are consistent with the fundamental skepticism of the Fourth Estate, but broadcast news has a tendency to draw on similarities (particularly superficial similarities, or False Wit, in Joseph Addison’s terms) rather than dissimilarities in the arrangement of stories.

In the second hour of the program, the war in Iraq is again the subject of the first story of the hour. Each hour begins with the most important story of the day. Although the story contains internal ironies, it is also part of the ironies between stories. In contrast to the holiday story that ended the previous hour, the report of an explosion in Baghdad is a tragic irony, for the story itself is tragic, and it contrasts what Julie McCarthy knows about death in Baghdad with Michele Norris’s interview with the Blind Boys of Alabama.

Following Julie McCarthy’s report, Lynn Neary reports on Pentagon efforts to make video feeds of daily briefings in Iraq available directly to local news outlets,

bypassing the national news organizations. The gist of the Pentagon's argument, duly represented in the story, was that organizations such as CNN were reporting only bad news and not the news of reconstruction in Iraq. Several ironies are available in this juxtaposition between a major news organization report on bad news in Iraq and another report that, without apparent self-consciousness, contains a critique of such journalism. In one sense, the US military seems unsuccessful in both stories. In another sense, the second story draws the first story into question, questioning the integrity of NPR. The second story ends with a fair-minded assessment by the news director of one of the local outlets for direct feeds notes the political agenda of the Pentagon as well as the possibility of getting direct answers to questions that are important to his local community. He also trusts that the national news organizations are doing their job fairly.

On the whole, the two stories engage issues of journalistic ethics. Following the station break, segment 2B begins with political ethics and the indictment of a former Illinois governor. The second story in this segment reports on the ethical lapses of the Governor of Connecticut. After the break at the mid-point of the hour, Jim Zarroli reports on the first ethics officer of Worldcom/MCI. (Later bought by Verizon, MCI had emerged from bankruptcy that followed after misstating earnings by \$9 billion.) In another business ethics report, Robert Siegel talks with a *Financial Times* reporter about charges that the merger of the Chrysler and Daimler-Benz automakers was also fraudulent. Although the daily news typically involves bad behavior by someone, the string of stories focused specifically on corporate ethics builds an ironic stance toward the coincidence of events. The final story of the segment reports on personal character more than political or corporate ethics, as Michele Norris reports that the daughter of a

black maid and the late Senator Strom Thurmond had not revealed her legacy out of respect for the Thurmond family. The Romantic irony here, along with the cosmic irony of good and evil, is the dichotomy between doing and being, between “poetic” explanations of human action and “scientific” explanations of human behavior (in Burke’s terms).

After the station break, segment 2D begins with policy changes by the Likud party in Israel. By sheer numbers, the soaring Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza is reshaping the political landscape, according to the report. An ironist would note the poignant relationship between the children of Strom Thurmond and the “children” of Yasser Arafat. The program ends with an absurd commentary by Andre Codrescu. Almost conventional in the journalistic pattern of ending a 5-minute newscast with a “kicker,” the commentary goes beyond contrast to the surreal.

Internal Irony

In addition to these surface ironies as the program shifted from one topic to another, irony appeared within reports. Continuing hostilities, months after the end of major combat operations, within an Iraq liberated from the control of Saddam Hussein, was perceived as a cosmic irony by many Americans. In the commentary with David Brooks and E.J. Dionne that followed, Dionne observed a Romantic irony regarding Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean: “I think the irony is Saddam's capture could well have more of an impact on the Democratic race than it has on the general election.” Mr. Dionne noted another Romantic irony: “The irony is that Dean gave a

speech this week on foreign policy that was a very tough speech in very many respects.” From the perspective of history, this discussion is a cosmic irony, for John Kerry rather than Howard Dean won the nomination. And, referring to the Democratic candidates, Mr. Dionne observed this: “The irony is a lot of these people actually are Clinton Democrats.” From the perspective of the moment, however, the character described is an example of Romantic irony.

Reporting on the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Robert Siegel and reporter Adam Hochberg employed minor historical contrasts that establish a perspective that teaches the listener to hear contrasts generally. First, Robert Siegel notes: “On a day much wetter than it was on December 17th, 1903, President Bush joined thousands of people at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, to mark the centennial of flight.” He recounts the facts: “A century ago at Kill Devil Hills, Wilbur and Orville Wright flew four times,” and continues with a contrast to contemporary aviation achievement: “The longest flight was just 59 seconds.” Adam Hochberg echoes the circumstantial contrasts: “When the Wright brothers came to Kitty Hawk in 1903, it was an isolated coastal outpost, a place where they could conduct experiments secretly out of the curious eyes of other inventors. Today, a hundred years later, this spot in the sand was anything but isolated,” and “Unlike that cold morning a hundred years ago, temperatures today on the Outer Banks were mild. But a steady rain fell, saturating a crowd of more than 30,000. The president said the rain wouldn't dampen the spirit of the celebration.” The President, however, in the excerpts of his remarks replayed in the report, focused on similarities rather than contrasts: “America has excelled in every area of aviation and space travel. And our national commitment

remains firm. By our skill and daring, we will continue to lead the world in flight.” In the portions of the speech selected by the reporter and his editors, President Bush sounded presidential—a national spokesman for American values.

The full transcript of the President’s remarks, however, tells a different story: the complete speech was an attempt to link the noble virtues of inventors with President Bush’s individualism as a vindication of his Iraq policy, as evidenced by the recent capture of the former dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein.¹⁷ The plain-spoken sentiments of visitors paying homage to the Wright Brothers (contrasted with those who just wanted to see the gathered celebrities) also stood in contrast to the political theatre Hochberg describes: “Around the dunes where the Wrights flew, spectators came in cars and tour buses, corporations set up hospitality tents, and President Bush led a well-choreographed celebration.” Hochberg concludes the report with additional ironies: “The highlight of today’s event was supposed to be a re-enactment of the Wrights’ first flight in a historically accurate reproduction of their plane. But in an early afternoon attempt, the wooden-framed replica never got off the ground. It spun its propellers as it tried to take off, but it didn’t have enough power to fly.” Moreover, the planned air show and parachute jumps were cancelled owing to the bad weather.

It is not uncommon in radio news to follow one story with another that has a recurring element tying the two reports together, but comparative irony, as has been noted, disrupts the linkage (and rejects cliché structures in favor of True Wit). Flight is the continued theme in the next report. Tom Manoff has been a classical music reviewer

¹⁷ George W. Bush, "Remarks at the Wright Brothers National Memorial First Flight Celebration," (Political Transcript Wire, 2003), vol.

for NPR since 1985, and in this program, he is reviewing a recording released in July 2003, by Sarah Chang and the London Symphony Orchestra, of the Dvorak *Violin Concerto*. In fact, he says very little about the recording and, instead, provides a personal narrative that connects the music to his experience of watching planes in flight. In the approximately three-and-one-half minutes of the review, Manoff says little about the recording: “But the lush tone and the dramatic phrasing of this performance strikes me as especially good. One moment she coaxes delicate turns from the strings, and another she strikes the strings more savagely, a musical warrior of sorts. ... The overall effect is epic, lyrical and grand. Colin Davis conducts the London Symphony Orchestra. The slow movement is especially poignant.” The review, then, is not a review as such, but a commentary. Passages from the CD play during the review, but Manoff talks over the music, except for a few bars. At the beginning, the orchestra plays the recognizable opening measures that lead up to the first notes by the soloist, but the producer covers Chang up with Manoff’s words. The review is not a review, but is, ironically, something else. Instead, it is a meditation on flight and music. Manoff recounts hearing on the car radio, as a small boy, another performance of the *Concerto* while watching small planes take off and land at a small airport. Thereafter associating this piece with airplanes, Manoff reconstructed the moment for this report by driving to a small airport near Portland International Airport to listen to the CD in his car.

Watching the movements of Oregon Air National Guard fighter planes and interpreting them as synchronized with the music, Manoff imagines both the violinist and the pilots on journeys. The juxtaposition of Romanticism and modern air power reflects the ironic voice of public radio programming, bringing contrasting ideas together.

In Manoff's commentary, he mentions that the Guard "patrol and protect this strategic corner of the world." The military aspect of this piece in the program echoes the update on the Iraq war at the beginning of the program, underscoring the prominence of the National Guard in that conflict. The pieces in this first half-hour of the program are linked thematically through "war," and each contains irony of one sort or another.

The second half hour of *All Things Considered* opens with another of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Disease; Richard Knox reports on the incidence of resistant staph infections. One of the cosmic ironies of modern medicine is that antibiotics have lead to bacterial strains that are resistant to standard antibiotics. In the story that follows the Knox report, Robert Siegel interviews the President and CEO of Somerset Medical Center where a nurse had been charged with killing two patients and with killing as many as 40 patients at various hospitals. Again, this captures attention because of the cosmic irony of a caregiver killing. The irony is heightened by contrast between the science of personnel and the science of medicine. A commentary by Daniel Schorr completes the third segment of the hour, and in it, he notes something that listeners who were not fans of President Bush might see as ironic: the Bush administration had excluded reconstruction bids from contractors in countries that had not joined the Iraq war coalition, but it would reconsider that policy if those countries agreed to forgive some of the debt Iraq owed them. Mr. Schorr admits, "And it may be that this is the result that the exclusionary policy on contracts was intended to achieve in the first place."

The final segment of the hour begins with a report that contrasts the human, the natural, and the computer domains. Computers, ironically, are better at knowing where to find new species of chameleons than human experts are. The segments, and the hour,

end with music, paralleling the end of the first half hour. There are no obvious ironies in Michele Norris's interview with members of the Blind Boys of Alabama.

The second hour begins with a report from Julie McCarthy in Baghdad prompted by an explosion that killed 10 people. Rampant lawlessness had made the country unsafe and insecure despite—and because of—the American presence. Ironically, Operation Iraqi Freedom made the city even more deadly than under Saddam's control. In contrast, according to the next report by Lynn Neary, reconstruction success had been occurring in Iraq, but this news went unreported by the media. In her story on Pentagon efforts to feed Iraq press conferences directly to local media, Neary reports the Pentagon position: "The Pentagon wants to bypass the national media, [Major Joe] Yoswa [Spokesman, Pentagon] says, because it feels the networks are telling only part of the story in Iraq." Implicating her own network in such a report, but not refuting the Pentagon claims introduces multiple unstable ironies: Is the listener invited to be cynical about the military? Is the listener invited, because Neary does not refute the Pentagon claims, to have misgivings about NPR coverage? Is the listener invited to question his or her judgment of recent events in Iraq? At any rate, something is not as it appears and is, therefore, a cosmic irony.

The second segment of this hour is comprised of two stories about corrupt governors: one in Illinois and one in Connecticut. Corruption in public servants is the ultimate political irony. The hosts and reporters do not draw attention to the irony, but a seasoned listener could make the interpretation easily.

The third segment of this hour begins with corporate ethics training, but the irony is that most corporate scandals occur at the top of the corporation, making the ethics

training of questionable value. The theme of corporate behavior continues into the next story as Robert Siegel interviews a *Financial Times* reporter about the merger of Daimler and Chrysler: ironically, “The top people in neither company bothered to actually read the document that described their merger agreement at the time it was made.” The discrepancy between Senator Strom Thurmond’s political agenda and his personal behavior is a tragic irony made noble by the behavior of the daughter he had with a black housemaid.

The final segment begins with the irony of Israel planning to give up some territory because the Palestinians there have had so many children that the territory is, demographically, no longer Israeli. The program ended with commentary by Andre Codrescu that was overtly ironic to the point of surrealism.

Is it the function of news reports to alert us to cosmic ironies? The news alerts us to discrepancies between the way the world is and the way we expect it to be. But these discrepancies are not always ironic. For example, *New York Times* coverage of Charles Cullen (the nurse accused of killing patients) took a more conservative approach, reporting on the failures of the system rather than on the potential personal danger. The hourly newscasts and the bottom of the hour newscasts provide the facts of the news, but it is the long-form stories that provide interpretation and as interpretation, these generally have the ironic voice. To begin the second hour of the 17 December 2003 program, Julie McCarthy reports on an explosion in Baghdad, but the initial report is just the beginning to a more extended report on the deadliness of living in post-Saddam Iraq. The ironies within the reports, as well as the irony between shifting topics for a third kind of irony: the Contrastive epistemics among the reports.

Irony is inherently skeptical.¹⁸ But Contrastive epistemology reduces skepticism by observing the often unstated opposition contained within a truth claim, and public radio programming avoids being unproductively skeptical through its Contrastive epistemology. It contrasts what it knows with what it rejects: it says “this, not that.” There is a pattern, however, in the order of reports and commentaries such that both the content and the style of argument are Contrastive. The mode of knowing privileged in one report is contrasted by the mode of knowing in the next report.

Irony, by itself, distances the listener from making judgments about the material to the extent that the irony has become overt. When the listener starts to make interpretation of the material as ironic, the material becomes untrustworthy because listeners struggle with knowing when to stop interpreting the material as ironic.¹⁹ Ironic distance can be destructive, and this has been the source of the history of suspicion of the ironist.

All Things Considered manages to avoid the negativity associated with irony, and it fosters its appeal through Contrastive epistemology. Irony, such as is found on *The Daily Show*, fosters skepticism and that has its own appeal for some viewers. *All Things Considered*, however, uses a both/and approach instead of the neither/nor approach of most irony. Contrastive epistemology describes knowledge claims that take this form: “this, not that.” Irony is a Contrastive epistemology, but the linear structure of the programs on public radio allow for a particular application as one story takes the form of “A, not B” and the following story takes the form of “B, not A.” It is important to note

¹⁸ Goldsmith, *Nonrepresentational Forms of the Comic: Humor, Irony, and Jokes* 123.

¹⁹ Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*.

that the sequence in this Contrastive epistemology refers not to the propositional content of the stories so much as it refers to the unstated suppositions that underwrite the claims made in the stories.

Contrastive Irony

On 17 December 2003, the first report by Eric Westervelt explored the social psychology of the war in Iraq at that time. The second feature of segment 1A explored the political psychology of the Democratic Party primary campaign for the 2004 Presidential Election. Westervelt reported what the Coalition military leadership said, while the audio of the leaders conveyed what they thought. The prominent metaphoric language in their statements was visual, and the report as a whole drew on modern concepts of objectivity, expertise, and empirical knowledge. Robert Siegel, in the second part of segment 1A, led a panel discussion with E.J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* and David Brooks of the *New York Times* regarding Iraq, the capture of Saddam, and the Democratic Primary race. In formal terms, the two parts of the segment contrast journalistic conventions of reporting “the facts” with the conventions of news analysis. George Santayana observed that eloquence is a republican art, much as conversation is an aristocratic art, and yet this conversation aimed for both.²⁰ Aristocratic and republican, this part was Contrastive with the Westervelt report. These are the facts, according to the Westervelt report, accurately communicating what was said and using the technology

²⁰ George Santayana, Character & Opinion in the United States: With Reminiscences of William James and Josiah Royce and Academic Life in America (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1920) 3.

of recording to let the speakers say what they thought. Siegel, Dionne, and Brooks, however, provided assessment. The first of the parts reflected modern, empirical kinds of knowledge, and the second reflected traditional, deliberative kinds of knowledge. The one matched an urban frame of mind as the other matched an agrarian frame. The first claimed “modern, not agrarian” knowledge, and the second claimed “agrarian, not modern” knowledge. Together, they are a formal embrace of both approaches. The field report employed numbers, not in any statistical sense, but with an air of precision. The panel used emotional intelligence to make sense of polling numbers, as if they represent material conditions rather than a measure of respondents’ attitudes toward material conditions, and to make sense of how political actors have apparent intentions. The analysts employed cause-and-effect reasoning, but in a behavioral calculus that is clearly not scientifically precise.

In discussing a political advertisement attacking Howard Dean, the front-runner at the moment in the Democratic Party primary, E.J. Dionne made several truth claims.

(NPR Transcript):

Mr. DIONNE: I think they want to hire whoever made that ad and have him work for Bush, or her. The ad is both despicable and very effective. It's despicable because we don't know who's behind that ad. There's a lot of speculation...

SIEGEL: But we do know. It's Americans for Jobs, Health Care and Progressive Values behind that ad.

Mr. DIONNE: Right. And they don't have to disclose anything about who's giving them money until after New Hampshire and Iowa vote. There seem to be a bunch of people who are sympathetic to Gephardt associated with that; there's speculation about

other campaigns being involved in it. That part is despicable. But it's very effective because it puts on the table the question that an awful lot of these Democrats--notably Joe Lieberman, but also John Kerry, Dick Gephardt, people who support or voted for the war resolution--it's a question they want on the table. And, you know, Joe Lieberman gave a very tough speech about Howard Dean this week that flowed directly out of the ad, even though there's no evidence that Lieberman had any connection with it.

These are very different from the kind of truth claims made in the Westervelt report.

WESTERVELT:In Baghdad, Brigadier General Martin Dempsey of the 1st Armored Division says his troops have made several arrests of alleged financial backers of guerrillas based on new intelligence. And speaking today in a mud- and rain-soaked Army base in Kirkuk north of Baghdad, the head of the 4th Infantry Division said his forces have gone on a new offensive in the last two days. Major General Ray Odierno says his troops have arrested more than 80 former Iraqi army and Baath Party loyalists suspected of spearheading attacks using mainly improvised explosives, or IEDs.

Major General RAY ODIERNO (4th Infantry Division, US Army): We picked up 73 individuals with a leader that had a significant amount of IED-making materials. We think it was a complete cell that we caught at a meeting. We also this morning have picked up about nine of our targets so far in the operation that we believe are from different cells that have been operating from Samarra.

The difference here between the Westervelt report and the roundtable discussion that preceded it is essentially one of style, insofar as each makes claims that are conventional, and even if the details are verifiable, the truths are subject to refutation.

One segment did not attempt to refute the other, and so they are not anti-thesis in terms of the propositional content. But each has a different way of describing the world, and each would be treated as equally valid. Each individual truth claim expressed could be described in terms of Contrastive Epistemology (“this, not that”), but the overall worldview is “this world, not that.” Taken together, yet without contradiction, the segment is a claim for “this world *and* that.”

The end of segment 1A described, in a panel discussion format, how not to be the President of the United States. The panel bemoaned divisive politics and negative campaign advertising. As a variation on a Contrastive claim, it said, “Not this, that.” Adam Hochberg’s report on the Centennial of Flight celebration in North Carolina at the beginning of segment 1B had its own Contrastive claim regarding the presidency: “This, not that.” Insofar as the edited version of President Bush’s remarks bracketed out the self-serving quality in his statements, what remained in the report was quintessentially presidential.

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: For as long as there is human flight, we will honor the achievement of a cold morning on the Outer Banks of North Carolina by two young brothers named Orville and Wilbur Wright.

HOCHBERG: Unlike that cold morning a hundred years ago, temperatures today on the Outer Banks were mild. But a steady rain fell, saturating a crowd of more than 30,000. The president said the rain wouldn’t dampen the spirit of the celebration. And he saluted the Wrights as emblems of American ingenuity.

Pres. BUSH: America has excelled in every area of aviation and space travel. And our national commitment remains firm. By our skill and daring, we will continue to lead the world in flight.

The contrast between the presidential hopefuls in the previous segment and the President in this segment follows the Urban Agrarian pattern of public radio. The audience is concerned with both the urban issues of politics and the agrarian issues of decorum. Although the panelists clearly rejected the kind of negative politics that they were discussing, the discussion was also clearly based on a belief that the discussion was necessary and important. A political worldview was valorized, even though particular political behaviors were rejected. The Agrarian standard of behavior was implied as the grounds for judgment at the same time an Urban concern for politics was embraced.

The Hochberg report had two subjects: President Bush and the anniversary of First Flight. The report on the President described “this” kind of president in contrast (“not that”) to the candidates described in the panel discussion in the previous segment. Within the Hochberg report, the President was described using *a priori* categories of presidential decorum, leaving out the political expediency of the President’s complete remarks. In contrast, the physical description of the day and the events provided by Hochberg were empirical and based on observable facts, such as weather conditions, the behavior of the crowd attending the event, and the failure of the reproduction of the Wright Brothers’ plane to fly. The report of the anniversary captured the sentiment and sentimentality of such an Agrarian remembrance, but included the urbane irony of weather and mechanical problems afflicting modern air travelers.

In contrast, the segment ended with a sentimental comparison of flight and classical music. The Hochberg report ended with a contrast between the Wright Brothers' success and the replica's failure. It contained the "this, not that" of "failure, not success." Tom Manoff's review of Sarah Chang's CD provided a contrast between the success of the CD and of another example of flight with the failure of the anniversary flight. Success is the truth claim, the "this, not that" which was contrasted with the "not that" failure at the end of the previous report. Although the piece combined romantic music with the fierce weapons of modernity in an ironic "this, *and* that" characteristic of the ironic voice of public radio programming, the piece is Contrastive as it bridges the minor failures of the Hochberg piece with a more serious failures of modern medicine reported in the next piece.

Following the station break and newscast at the end of segment 1B and as the beginning of segment 1C, Richard Knox reported on drug resistant staph infections. Tom Manoff's review offered a humanistic interpretation of the technical worlds of music and aviation. The lyric description was an epistemic claim about his method of inquiry and it was in "this, not that" contrast to the journalistic description of the scene and action at the Kitty Hawk centennial. As a method, the lyrical combination of the categories of grasping the world favored the romantic, humanistic, and interpretative rather than the mechanical and mathematical. In making a "this, not that" claim for a particular perspective, however, the Manoff piece was in contrast with the use of mathematics in the Knox report.

Beyond the superficial contrast in content and beyond the difference between a celebratory review and the hard news of a new health threat, each report employed and

validated different epistemic styles. The Knox report was statistical, yet it contains its own contrasts in that it started with a single individual and expanded outward to acknowledge large numbers of individuals. The Manoff review and the Knox report were separated by the bottom-of-the-hour break and a newscast, but they were held together by the agrarian concern for the individual and humanistic. Although some eight minutes of programming (underwriting credits, forward promotion announcements, the newscast, and local station breaks) separated the review from the staph infection report, these two parts of their respective segments were closely related, temporally and visually, in the work of the producer who scheduled these two pieces next to each other on the whiteboard *All Things Considered* has as a roadmap posted in the production offices during the assembly of the program. In planning out the sequence of events in the 17 December 2003 program, these pieces were next to each other, even though they are separated in the execution of the program. Separated in time, the review and the Knox report were sutured together by the narrative of the single individual that begins the report on staph infections.

Although the report began with a single individual, the epistemic claim switches to statistical analysis as Knox reported on the increasingly large numbers of individuals affected by the problem. Contrasting the achievement of music and aviation with the self-inflicted medical problem of drug resistant staph infections, the medical report made a “not that, this” claim on listener attention. “Not one, but many” is another empirical claim in the report and it shifted the grounds of analysis from the local, the agrarian, and the personal to the wide-spread, the urban, and the numerical. Rounding out the piece, at the end Knox reported on three poignant individual deaths of two infants and an

otherwise healthy 16-year-old caused by resistant staph infections. Within the report, Knox contrasted the numerical and the individual as ways of knowing, and he validated both of them.

Staying within the medical subject area, but switching to a different problem in the next part of segment 1C, Robert Siegel interviewed Dennis Miller, president and CEO of Somerset Medical Center. Charles Cullen, a nurse at the Center, had been arrested on 14 December 2003 and charged with murdering patients. Although the arrest and murders were no longer breaking news, they had drawn attention to personnel practices at hospitals that made it possible for Cullen to move from job to job without suspicions regarding him being communicated to his new employers. Charles Cullen was a deadly agent within the hospital setting, and modern personnel practices contributed to his mobility within that setting. Ironically similar, the two events were treated very differently within the epistemology of the program.

In contrast to Richard Knox's use of statistics (tempered by the narratives of individuals), the Siegel interview was a normative inquiry into the conditions of knowledge in corporate employment practices. Characterizing "what went wrong" as a national systems failure, Miller identified the problem as a lack of information. Siegel raised issues of privacy and fairness, but Miller contrasted the rights of employees against the rights of patients and weights patients' rights more heavily, and Siegel returned to epistemological issues. He asked of Mr. Miller, "If a nurse had left your hospital under pressure, say, after an episode of turning up drunk on the job ... and I were considering hiring that person a couple years later, would I learn from your hospital about that episode?" Miller's response—that his medical center would find a way to let a

prospective employer know—skirted the issue of privacy and fear of litigation. Although Mr. Cullen’s criminal acts were, according to news reports, part of his own psychiatric illness, the institutional and systemic problem was based on complex interplay of agrarian and modern sensibilities. In small communities, personal behavior is always under surveillance and deviance is dealt with. Modernity, however, has made mobility possible, and deviance can go undetected long enough to perpetuate the damage. Siegel concluded with a marketplace observation—that nurses are in demand and institutional pressures make for difficult hiring conditions—which further implicates the modern way of maintaining a community, but the “this, not that” sense that an agrarian form of knowledge is superior would be in contrast with the modern approaches to disease control that were employed in the story on staph infections.

Individual judgments of the kind common to agrarian approaches are valorized, in a complex fashion, in personnel matters, but in the final part of segment 1C, the failure of Daniel Schorr’s personal judgment reverses the “this, not that” embrace of personal judgment from the previous interview. In a commentary, Daniel Schorr admitted that he had been wrong about James Baker’s efforts to win debt forgiveness for Iraq from among the Paris Club (France, Germany and Russia). Schorr explained the unexpected success as the result of another heavily-criticized Bush administration policy of excluding nations that had not supported the invasion of Iraq from getting contracts to help rebuild that nation’s infrastructure. Schorr’s judgment had been wrong on both issues, and he conceded that “it may be that this is the result that the exclusionary policy on contracts was intended to achieve in the first place.” Such an admission brings his personal judgment into question, but it also suggests another epistemological position: knowing

when something was wrong. Mr. Schorr is, in an age of polarized politics, when opponents do not concede points to each other, right about being wrong. In addition to the internal irony, this admission is consistent with the value of being wrong that is evident in the next story.

At the beginning of segment 1D, Chris Joyce reported on the use of computers to discover new species of chameleon. Although experts did not expect to find chameleons in certain parts of Madagascar, computer models based on the environmental needs of chameleons predicted that chameleons would be found there. Daniel Schorr was wrong, and the chameleon experts were wrong; in these two reports, the knowledge claims followed a “not that, this” contrast. Notwithstanding such human fallibility, the final story in the hour embraced humanity in its imperfections. Michele Norris interviewed members of the singing group, The Blind Boys of Alabama. In direct contrast to the scientific story touting the superiority of computers over expert researchers, this closing part to the final segment of the hour stands reflects values that are entirely non-scientific. Yet, together the two parts of the segment embraced the both/and qualities of human experience.

The pattern continues in the second hour of the 17 December 2003 broadcast of *All Things Considered*. The first story of the hour was not a report on a deadly explosion that day in Baghdad, although one had occurred, and Robert Siegel mentioned it in his introduction to the report. The hourly newscast reported the facts of the event, along with other headline news, so NPR had already reported on this story just a few minutes previously. When Julie McCarthy made her report, however, she referred to an explosion that had occurred “one recent evening.” Her report is not on the explosions, but on the

experiences and reactions of those who felt them. In interviewing Iraqis about what was happening to them, her method was similar to one used by Michele Norris in the segment that ended the previous hour. The contrast, however, is one of agency. Michele Norris asked what the Blind Boys of Alabama were doing and how they felt about it, but Julie McCarthy asked what had happened to the Baghdadis and how they felt about it. One story reported what people did, and the other reported what was done to them. (Not every Iraqi interviewed for the report was passive. McCarthy reported that, a “former computer engineer underwent three weeks of American training to become an officer with the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps for \$120 a month.” Some were actively involved in fighting lawlessness and chaos, but these actions were reactions to what had been done.)

For further contrast, Lynn Neary next reported on Pentagon efforts to circumvent network news organizations so as to provide material—more positive daily briefings that were evidently no longer interesting—directly to local television news. Here, the military was working against something that they saw as being done to them. In these three reports, the claims of “this” kind of agency, rather than “that” kind of agency, are in contrast, and the conclusion listeners can reach are informed by knowledge that is more complex than a worldview that is informed solely by either internal or external loci of control.

The program made an abrupt content shift during the station break between the 2A and 2B segments. In segment 2B, host Michele Norris interviewed NPR reporter David Schaper about the indictment of former Illinois Governor George Ryan on federal corruption charges. Then, in the second half of segment 2B, NPR's Anthony Brooks reported on a federal investigation of corruption by Connecticut Governor John G.

Rowland. In contrast to the reports in segment 2A, in which people were trying to do something right in a bad situation, the reports in segment 2B were about corruption among those highly situated. According to Cultivation Theory, the media create the impression that the world is a dangerous place with bad people in it.²¹ The Contrastive rhetoric of *All Things Considered*, however, would indicate that the world is, after all, not just a dangerous place with bad people in it, not just a reductive dead-end, but something more hopeful.

All three of the reports in segment 2C dealt with fraud by two corporations and one hypocritical politician. NPR's Jim Zarroli profiled the MCI Telecommunications ethics officer, Nancy Higgins, focusing on the careful rehabilitation of the company's corporate practices. Robert Siegel interviewed a *Financial Times* reporter about the carelessness of corporate executives that allowed Chrysler to be taken over by Daimler-Benz (the contract language made Chrysler an unequal partner, contrary to Chrysler executives' understanding of the deal—but they had not actually read the contract prior to signing it). In the first report, “this” is the way things are supposed to be (not “that”), and in the second report, “this” is the way things are not supposed to be (instead of “that”). In pairing these two reports, *All Things Considered* articulates both parts of Contrastive epistemic claims that usually leave the contrasting negative silent. Michele Norris's report was actually not about the hypocritical politician, but about his mixed-race daughter. In reporting on Essie Mae Washington-Williams, *All Things Considered*

²¹ M. Morgan and J. Shanahan, "Two Decades of Cultivation Research: An Appraisal and Meta-Analysis," *Communication Yearbook*, ed. Brant Berelson, vol. 20 (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997).

extolled “her,” not “him” (the late Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina) and not “them” (the corporate executives).

The hour and the program ended with more surprises by politicians as Linda Gradstein reported some members of Israel’s Likud Party had called for a unilateral withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The Norris report alluded to decent behavior by Strom Thurmond, in contrast to his indecent ideology, and Gradstein reported that ideologically decent behavior was driven by an indecent political pragmatism (the growing Palestinian population was essentially turning the territories into Palestinian land that was no longer populated by a majority Israeli society). As if to say “this, not that” is really strange, Commentator Andrei Codrescu had the last word through a series of apparently random observations (effectively arranged, of course) about calf-implants for stick-legged men, string theory, and poet cemeteries, among other very strange topics.

Conclusion

Throughout the program, *All Things Considered* brings together situational ironies, comparative ironies, and Contrastive ironies. Although the possibility of deliberation in mass media is a contested possibility, the juxtapositions of truth claims and worldviews clearly provides the resources, the possibility, and the inspiration for judgment. Through these ironies, juxtapositions, and contrasts, the program demonstrates that it has urban agrarian tendencies as a kind of utopian literature writ daily.

Public radio programming provides, vicariously, the most important part of *phronesis*: experience.²² Public radio trains its listeners in *phronesis*, and in Isocratean terms, is therefore public deliberation: “[P]ublic deliberation is, for Isocrates, the rhetorical performance of procedures by which good judgments of ethical and political choices are made.”²³ The procedure in *All Things Considered* is, it would seem, to bring “all things” for consideration. The program has many flaws, to be sure, but it is a pretty good program, all things considered. Tom and Ray Magliozzi, and Garrison Keillor, would appreciate this underappreciated pun in the title of the program.

Other public radio programs, such as *Car Talk* and *A Prairie Home Companion* also contain Contrastive ironies. It is worth noting that *Morning Edition* and *Weekend Edition*, although produced by different teams at National Public Radio, are home to similar ironies. For example, on Sunday, 6 January 2008 *Weekend Edition* inaugurated a new series analyzing fictional characters and the producers opted to begin with a seminal cartoon character. The character was not Mickey Mouse. Instead, Bugs Bunny, described as both hero and villain, highbrow and lowlife, was embraced as a figure that occupied more than one conceptual space. Mickey, of course, is monomaniacally emblematic of the Disney empire, but Bugs is emblematic of NPR and of the observation by F. Scott Fitzgerald in “The Crack-Up:” “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability

²² Takis Poulakos, *Speaking for the Polis: Isocrates' Rhetorical Education* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1997) 87.

²³ Poulakos, *Speaking for the Polis: Isocrates' Rhetorical Education* 81.

to function.” This would describe Bugs Bunny, *All Things Considered*, and public radio programming quite well.

Garrison Keillor’s recurring detective radio drama (“Guy Noir, Private Eye”) on *A Prairie Home Companion* builds an episode around Fitzgerald’s birthday and quotes “The Crack-Up.” It is one of the few upbeat episodes in the recurring drama that is, ironically, known for its humor. The program also contains a variety of ironies, Contrastive epistemics, and the ideology of Urban Agrarianism that is widely present in public radio programs.

Chapter 4

The Superintending Ideology of Public Radio Programming

Verbal irony and metonymy are the signature of *Car Talk*, and cosmic irony and the “perspective through incongruity” of metaphor are the signature of *All Things Considered*. Romantic irony and synecdoche are the signature of *A Prairie Home Companion*. Kenneth Burke distinguishes True Irony (a humble irony) from Superior Irony (romantic irony). In True Irony, the ironist becomes consubstantial with the “enemy” or victim.¹ *A Prairie Home Companion* manages True Irony by embracing the worst of the urban and the worst of the agrarian to illuminate the virtues of both.

Garrison Keillor, the host of the program, is rescued from being a Superior ironist often enough that he is constantly in the process of becoming a True ironist, thus providing a role model for public radio listeners. The conspicuous rhetorical device in *A Prairie Home Companion* is the co-existence of coherent, yet contradictory, worldviews. In the case of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the self-contradictory worldview is Urban Agrarianism.

Thesis, Justification, and Method

Urban Agrarianism in *A Prairie Home Companion* produces a romantic irony. The irony produces a subjunctive mood, and in producing the subjunctive mood, the

¹ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 513-14.

irony invites consideration of what is possible. Mutually exclusive ideologies can be found in other public radio programs, such as *Whad'Ya Know* and *This American Life*, but *A Prairie Home Companion* is the most concentrated specimen in public radio programming. No effort is made here to assess the quality of music and comedy in *A Prairie Home Companion* apart from its rhetorical function in the production of the critical skills of judgment, much as the quality of automotive advice or of journalism on public radio has been outside the scope of this inquiry.

Although idealized, the world Garrison Keillor describes, particularly in the monologue on *A Prairie Home Companion* is not ideal. Katherine G. Fry, for instance, finds "The News from Lake Wobegon" complicit in reinforcing the hegemony of power relations within the mythic Agrarian Midwest.² Charles Larson and Christine Oravec, similarly, see the program as constructing a baby boom audience that accepts the cultural *status quo*. They conclude that *A Prairie Home Companion* "reinforces the typical American civic dualisms of good and evil, idealism and cynicism, rural and urban, utopia and hellhole while providing no clear policy beyond personal adjustment."³ My claim is that these unresolved dualisms are precisely what keep public radio programming from being persuasive and help it be rhetorical, instead. Sonja and Karen Foss recognize the

² Katherine G. Fry, "A Cultural Geography of Lake Wobegon," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 9.4 (1998).

³ Charles U. Larson and Christine Oravec, "A Prairie Home Companion and the Fabrication of Community," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987): 240.

gendered pluralism in the monologues and in Keillor's feminine style.⁴ A feminine style is, of course, not incompatible with politics or with judgment.⁵

All public radio programs are ideological in that they offer a particular worldview as if it were the ideal worldview. The difference, however, is that the world view is an embrace of multiple perspectives and worldviews. Fredric Jameson observes the appeal of popular culture: "The drawing power of a mass cultural artifact like *The Godfather* may thus be measured by its twin capacity to perform an urgent ideological function [critique of business & capitalism] at the same time that it provides the vehicle for the investment of a desperate Utopian fantasy [of family]."⁶ This could, as well, describe the appeal of *A Prairie Home Companion* and other public radio programs. Film, however, is different from radio in that film provides more motives for judgment than radio, but it also provides fewer informational resources than radio. With more information, radio—public radio programming, that is—offers more opportunities for independent judgment.

Having noticed the oftentimes-conflicted nature of public radio programming and practices, and while examining the conflicting on-air fund-raising strategies of public radio, I discovered Allan Carlson's study of the southern Agrarians.⁷ The ideas he discussed seemed to resonate with some aspects of public radio practices with which I

⁴ Sonja K. Foss and Karen A. Foss, "The Construction of Feminine Spectatorship in Garrison Keillor's Radio Monologues," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994).

⁵ Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, "'Feminine Style' and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993).

⁶ Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text*.1 (1979): 147.

⁷ I was involved with public radio as a local station manager in Pennsylvania and Kentucky for 15 years. My MA thesis was a study of pledge drives: David Dzikowski, "The Rhetorical Dimensions of Public Radio on-Air Fund-Raising," M.A., The Pennsylvania State University, 2001, Allan Carlson, *The New Agrarian Mind: The Movement toward Decentralist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

was familiar. At the same time, however, other, more decidedly modernist and urban practices seemed to me to be also part of public radio, and I began to think of it in terms of an “Urban Agrarianism.” More recently, I discovered the work of sociologist David Danbom, who has used the term “Urban Agrarianism” in his study of the Country Life movement.⁸ His studies might also, then, be considered as work at the borderland between urban domains and rural territories. My adaptation of Danbom’s sociological categories amounts to extending the implicit communication and rhetorical theories of his subjects.⁹

Verbal irony is used frequently in *A Prairie Home Companion*, and to the extent that certain personality types are satirized, there is dramatic irony in the program. Cosmic irony, of the “if anything can go wrong, it will” variety is a stock feature in the skits. As an out-of-place homage to an archaic form of radio entertainment, *A Prairie Home Companion* is a self-conscious example of Romantic irony. The Contrastive epistemics of other public radio programs, such as *Car Talk* and *All Things Considered*, are less obvious because the program contains fictional accounts, but fiction is, ironically, a vehicle for truth claims. In contrasting the worst of both worlds, *A Prairie Home Companion* depicts an idealized third world and is, on the face of it, utopian literature.

⁸ David B. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution: Urban America and the Industrialization of Agriculture, 1900-1930*, 1st ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1979).

⁹ Thomas W. Benson, "Implicit Communication Theory in Campaign Coverage," *Television Coverage of the 1980 Presidential Campaign*, ed. William C. Adams (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub. Corp., 1983).

Description

A Prairie Home Companion is a weekly, two-hour, variety program hosted by Garrison Keillor. Broadcast before a live audience, *A Prairie Home Companion* is also a stage production, although radio acting (rather than stage acting) remains the focus of the program. The nostalgia for live radio of the sort no longer practiced extends to the inclusion of live sound effects. About twenty-five programs per year are produced from locations away from the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul each year, out of the 35 programs produced in a season. The rest of the broadcast schedule (20 or so programs) is comprised of rebroadcasts from previous years.¹⁰

Having begun as a nostalgic homage to musical variety programs that were common in the prime-time pre-television network radio, *A Prairie Home Companion* has evolved quite a bit, but the Urban Agrarianism in it remains constant. The skit humor, musical performances, and the weekly monologue have remained. The current structure of the program rejects the industrial standard. Resisting marketplace evolution, the schedule of breaks has remained idiosyncratic. *A Prairie Home Companion* replaces a “clock” with a “rundown” (a list of program elements, some of which are subject to change, although some are not).

Several features are conspicuous elements in the program. The most conspicuous is the monologue, “The News from Lake Wobegon.” Other segments include the named skits (“Guy Noir, Private Eye” and “The Lives of the Cowboys”), the unnamed musical

¹⁰ Judith Yaross Lee, "Garrison Keillor," *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Pat Browne (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), vol. 1.

features, postcards from the stage, and production components. Production elements include the musical opening, station breaks (with routinized hand-offs and returns), underwriting acknowledgments, and production credits.

Several fixtures are part of the production design for *A Prairie Home Companion*. These include the opening theme and Garrison Keillor's welcome, the "Powdermilk Biscuits" cutaway at the end of the first half hour, the intermission break at the end of the first hour, the familiar open and close to the monologue, and the closing credits.

These ritual moments are also the site of the verbal irony that is characteristic of public radio entertainment programming. The familiar tune and lyrics of the opening theme and introduction are so familiar that they provoke applause, especially at those times when Keillor deviates from the standard lyrics to sing phrases that are contingent on place and time, or are wry comments about current events. Audience participation is rehearsed, beginning with the opening measures of the theme, as part of the enthymematic production of the program.

The "Powdermilk Biscuit" cutaway is an opportunity for satire, which is a form of irony. The commercials are bogus, but this is not the source of their irony; as part of the art of nostalgia, the radio ads could be faithful, if fictitious, reproductions of commercial promotion. They go beyond the creation of artistically satisfying *objet de memoir*, however, and are an ironic commentary on the language of advertising: "Heavens! They're tasty and expeditious."

Keillor employs the same verbal irony in the closing credits that is used in *Car Talk*: fictitious staff. "Sandy Beech" is given a writing credit, but Garrison Keillor is not.

The defensive mechanism of irony in *A Prairie Home Companion* uses disguise, whereas the irony in *Car Talk* uses misdirection.

Listening at certain times, such as right after *All Things Considered* on Saturday or at other times that local stations have scheduled repeat broadcasts, is part of the ritual, too. The existing audience, accustomed to a particular program at a particular time, would find that it serves certain needs and conveniences. As the program becomes part of weekly household routines, the identifications and associations would become stronger.

Public radio is a living museum of forms and formats long retired from commercial radio, and, as a musical-variety program, *A Prairie Home Companion* reproduces the segmented format of this long-standing radio form. In the Golden Era of radio, musical programs featured music, and radio dramas featured skits, but in the musical-variety program, live musical performances alternated with skits and production elements. *A Prairie Home Companion* adopts the old musical-variety format, but stays culturally current in content. The skits and jokes are superficially hokey, and the music evokes nostalgia, but in combining past styles with current sensibilities, the program reflects and produces the ideology of Urban Agrarianism.

The ironies at work in the skits and other non-musical content play out against a backdrop of classical radio genres and old-timey music. Since the texts of the skits are verbal, original to the production, and enjoy a life outside the broadcast, it would be tempting to focus only on the scripted material. Yet, the music, which is mostly contributed by guest performers and written for other contexts, contributes significantly

to the construction of Urban Agrarian identity in the program. As such, it is important to treat words and music together in this analysis.

There is no denying, however, that the monologue (“The News from Lake Wobegon”) is the signature element in the program. The program builds toward the monologue each week, and it is the monologue that has the most significant reception history among the program elements. In contrast to the self-deprecating irreverence of the monologue and other skits, the musical elements, particularly those featuring guest performers, are more circumspect (but not without irony). Skits with incidental music are another equally important form in the program. Commercial and musical parodies combine social commentary with an embrace of cultural forms and, thus, contribute to the construction of Urban Agrarianism in different, yet equally important, ways. Even the production elements (such as theme music and the funding and production credits) are vehicles for texts that reinforce the Urban Agrarian ideology. This analysis treats these segments in the order just described to underscore the formal appeal of these genres within the program and to uncover the dialectic that occurs within and between the segments.

The ideological functions of these segments are immersed within a formal construction that follows the production rituals of the weekly broadcasts. The Monologue actually appears at and is the climax of each program, only to be followed by a final musical or dramatic performance that provides a glide path for the audience from the climax to the close of the program. The program is generally relaxed with regard to the broadcast conventions of careful timing and sequence of elements. With the exception of the precisely timed start (5:00 p.m., Central Time) and end of the program

(7:00 p.m., Central Time), all other timings and sequences are approximate and varied from week to week. Yet, the program is not an inarticulate stream: general formal patterns exist, and they exert rhetorical effects.

The program always begins with an opening theme. An opening skit typically (but not always) follows the ritualized program introduction and greeting from the host. The skit that takes this position in the program is generally a showcase for “sound effects man,” Tom Keith, as well as an opportunity for Keillor to comment on the weather or another topical subject. Musical performances and other skits alternate through the first half-hour of the program. At about 30 minutes into the broadcast, a conventional station break is packaged as a parody commercial for Powdermilk Biscuits. The “Powdermilk Biscuit” theme plays without any voice-over music content to afford local stations broadcasting the program an opportunity to insert local voice-over content (such as local funding credits, a promotional announcement, or a weather report). Musical performances and skits alternate until the intermission, which consistently ignores the broadcast convention of being completed such that the second hour of the program can occur at precisely 6:00 p.m. Central Time. The intermission consists of a musical cue performed by the House Band (although the musical selection changes from week to week), funding credits, and an extended performance that affords local voice-over music insertions by the local broadcasting stations. Following the intermission, Keillor hosts Greetings, a segment in which personal announcements written by members of the audience are read by Keillor. Musical performances and skits alternate until Keillor begins the Monologue, which is from 15 to 30 minutes long. Alternating musical performances and skits fill time (and bring the audience down from the emotional climax

of the Monologue) until closing production credits are read by Keillor. The Monologue abandons the sensibilities of a radio news report for the homey qualities of an annual holiday family newsletter (notwithstanding the claim that it is “the news” from Lake Wobegon). The skits are sometimes one-off productions that are humorous short stories told in dramatic form. Many of the skits revisit one or another genre of a bygone radio heyday: the detective series (“Guy Noir, Private Eye”), the Western (“The Lives of the Cowboys”), faux program-length commercials (“Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie Filling”) and public service announcements (“The Professional Organization of English Majors,” “The Ketchup Advisory Board,” and “The National Duct Tape Council”). Music, the monologue, and the formal qualities of open, close, and transitions are constants. These include *Tishomingo Blues*, the bogus “Powdermilk Biscuits” advertisement, the intermission, and the closing credits. Two episodes contain these in typical fashion: the 19 January and 26 January 2008 episodes of *A Prairie Home Companion*.

On 19 January 2008, the program included “English Majors,” “Guy Noir,” “Ketchup Advisory Board,” “Rhubarb Pie,” and the one-off scripts, “Steroids” and “Band Kid.” One musical guest was singer-songwriter Suzy Bogguss (described in the segment rundown on the *A Prairie Home Companion* archive site with oxymoronic irony as “dangerously sweet”). This is just one of the ways in which Suzy Bogguss’s music on the program embraces the contradictions of public radio’s ironic voice, productive contradictions, and Urban Agrarian ideology. Alison Balsom, a classical trumpeter, was the second musical guest.

On 26 January 2008, the program included “Rhubarb Pie,” “Lives of the Cowboys,” and “Guy Noir,” along with the one-off script, “Mental.” The musical guests

were Becky Schlegel, a local Bluegrass singer-songwriter, and Nellie McKay, a New York cabaret singer. The booking of musical guests reflects the Urban Agrarian contradictions of the program, bringing singer-songwriters together with classical musicians and jazz singers.

The Monologue

The prominent recurring feature in *A Prairie Home Companion* is the monologue: “The News from Lake Wobegon.” The recurring formal feature is that, after the ritual opening line about a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, host Garrison Keillor begins with comments on the weather, which lead into the first event that he reports. The recurring conceptual feature is a dialectic between the imperatives of urbanity and the virtues of agrarianism. Since the weekly report from home is not at all like a radio news report, there is an essential irony in referring to the monologue as “The News” from Lake Wobegon, and this is another marker of Urban Agrarianism.

“The News from Lake Wobegon” for 19 January 2008 begins with the familiar irony: “Well, it’s been a quiet week Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown, out there on the edge of the prairie.” Talk of the weather leads into ironic observations that contrast nature and the human condition: cold enough to freeze nose hairs and cold enough to prompt tired jokes about the cold and getting a “chord” of wood from chopping up the piano. The cold, however, is good, Keillor says, because it permits a slower pace of life – in contrast to the “frenetic” Summer and Fall: “It’s one of the benefits of poor traction: you just tend to stay in one place.” Contrary to the attitudes of

the listener who sees slippery roads as nothing but bad, the Urban Agrarian one becomes from listening to *A Prairie Home Companion* cherishes the unhurried life, not as one for whom the seasons mark the natural rhythms of life, but as one looking jealously through a telephoto lens from an urban center where you have to keep your appointments even when the roads are bad. The image Keillor offers of sitting at someone's kitchen table all day and drinking coffee, and then staying on for a casserole supper of scalloped potatoes and sausages, with a little pie for dessert, is rustic and homey – and it is, he says with submerged irony, “civilized.” Keillor is nostalgic for a life few of us have lived, but would be desperate to escape had we lived it. Appreciation, paradoxically, comes from rejection.

The cold is dangerous, though; Keillor warns snowmobilers to stay clear of frozen lakes and rivers. “They tend to stay away from the lake -- there have been accidents out there in the past,” he says, and so the audience is perhaps already anticipating a story that involves someone falling through the ice. But rather than offer another humorous variation of a comfortable narrative trail, Keillor takes us to the real danger of frozen rivers that lead to travel and worldliness and confidence that is in conflict with typical Lake Wobegon ways.

Pretty soon, you've gone 30 miles and it gets dark and it's too late to come back home, and so you stay at a motel, where you stay with people you meet in a bar and you don't know them. And it changes you in small ways.

The images of surface contrasts that belong to the weather again lead to deeper contrasts between the urban and the agrarian—and the changes are only sarcastically small.

Although the newfound independence that comes from spending even one night away

from home and in the company of other people is presented at first by silly markers—starting to put milk and sugar in coffee or of wearing a shirt of unusual style—the independence begins to take on positive sounding characteristics, such as using confident phrases rather than the self-deprecating softeners that the locals use whenever they begin to express an opinion.

The danger, however, is that, “when you do take that job in Minneapolis,” the people at the Chatterbox Café “don’t seem reluctant to let go of you.” Keillor evokes the warmth of small town life as well as the chilly reception it sometimes offers. “Stay off rivers is the advice there,” Garrison Keillor concludes before moving on to the next story in this weekly report of the news from Lake Wobegon.

The “News” from Lake Wobegon begins with a weather report, but there is a moral to the story in which Keillor resolves the contrast between life back home and life in the city by recognizing, dolefully, the good and the bad of both staying and leaving. Both are valuable, even though each is mutually exclusive of the other. Each is presented as a mild critique of the other, and is mild enough to avoid providing a definitively winning argument.

Other critiques in the “News from Lake Wobegon” are more definitive. In the next bit of news, Mary Balmer returns for Winter Homecoming to receive the Distinguished Alumni award. Mary Balmer was a star basketball player a decade ago: “a beautiful player.” Our narrator clearly approves of the award recipient this time, for some of the previous recipients have not been all that distinguished, “our alumni being who they are.” In contrast, Mary Balmer is an exceptional, accomplished woman and, therefore, completely unlike anyone else in Lake Wobegon. Keillor carefully constructs

a description of the relationship between those with exceptional talent and the rest of the people in Lake Wobegon: for example, the coach would chart complicated plays, but the team would just ‘Give it to Boomer.’” Keillor marvels at Mary Balmer, who graduated first in her class at medical school, qualified for the Olympic Snowboarding Team, and wrote (in Spanish) and published a memoir of growing up in Lake Wobegon that was a best seller in Uruguay and Paraguay “where they thought it was magical realism even though everything in it was true.” In a magical moment during the award ceremony in the high school gym, Mary displays her undiminished basketball skills after kicking off her high heels, making baskets elegantly in a long, black, sleeveless dress. Astonished at “the nerve of someone from Lake Wobegon doing this,” the audience began to wonder why this wonderful person had to go away to become so wonderful.

The reason, of course, was “seated in the front row of the bleachers, her father, Mr. Balmer, a joker from way back—a satirist.” Just about three minutes of the 15 minute monologue are devoted to Mary Balmer. Twice as much time is spent describing her reprobate father, a man who devised a way to deface the town water tower so inaccessibly that the town “had to pay him to erase his own vandalism.” Mr. Balmer was the sort who would lose a truck through thin ice and, in trying to rescue it, would snap a cable that whipsawed through a fish house “where Mr. Hoppy was sleeping—thank Goodness, he was drunk and he was asleep on a top bunk, otherwise it would have cut him off right at the ankles.” After the fish house spins across the ice into the Bergstroms’ fish house, hitting the propane tanks that burst into flames, Mr. Hoppy emerges, “in his bare feet, drunk—and there was Mr. Balmer—he said, ‘I knew it was you! I knew it was

you! I knew you'd be involved in this!" As Keillor explains, "This is a joker, a satirist, and he sets a low example for his own children." Ironically, this could be self-accusation.

Keillor traffics in contrasts and contradictions in this portraiture of the small town troublemaker and his daughter. Her accomplishments can be recounted easily in words that carry expansive and impressive definitions: medical school graduate, Olympic athlete, published author. His notoriousness is described by narrative and the small, telling details that distinguish Mr. Balmer's mischief from the more prosaic workday of other locals.

Mr. Balmer was the kind of man who, in the trucking business with his partner, working maintenance when a blizzard hit, would accidentally tear down 20 miles of telephone line when the cherry picker got loose. Giving rise to a local myth about a "primitive, malevolent force" that would rip the phone right out of your hand, "that was Mr. Balmer." Young people must leave Lake Wobegon, Mr. Keillor concludes, because "we" (not just Mr. Balmer) "are satirists," making fun of other people, unable to appreciate beauty "in a long, black, sleeveless dress, hitting a swisher at 22 feet."

At that final comment, the monologue ends with its familiar irony: "That's all the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

In Bob Frye's discussion of satire and of Keillor, "the satirist," he notes the uneasiness that has been identified in satire and the trend for satire to introduce hints of the ideal. Taken together, Frye suggests, these "may produce in the reader of satire some

hope of change, of improvement.”¹¹ The link between satire and utopia includes an “inevitable doubleness of effect—longing as well as laughter.”¹² Through ritual and other attempts to freeze history, utopia attempts to return an ideal past.¹³ Through the ironic juxtaposition of chaotic events in which the ideal is brought up against the inadequately real, the reason becomes clear: Keillor offers hope.

In the broadcast the following week (26 January 2008), weather is again the first thing mentioned: “It’s been darn cold out there.” On the one hand, the cold penetrates despite warm clothing; on the other hand, cold weather can be beautiful, “especially when you see it out the windows of the Chatterbox Café. Winter is beautiful: big full moon the other night and that aura around it that they call a Moon Dog.” Always a study in contrast, Keillor’s depiction of the weather pits its ethereal beauty against the awesome power of cold. Invoking the memory of Edmund Hillary (who had recently passed away on 11 January 2008), Keillor brings a human confrontation with the sublime to local ground by comparing the relative merits of cold weather gear and by comparing the hike to the Chatterbox Café with scaling Mt. Everest: “we have no mountain to climb, but we’re shivering when we walk in.” Rather than sound self-congratulatory, self-important, and self-involved, Keillor humanizes a figure who had been aggrandized enough in other media during the previous weeks.

¹¹ Bob J. Frye, "Garrison Keillor's Serious Humor: Satire in Lake Wobegon Days," The Midwest Quarterly 40.2 (1999): 122.

¹² Robert C. Elliott, The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) 5.

¹³ Elliott, The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre 10-11.

Completing the return to normal human foibles, Keillor reports that the big news at the Chatterbox Café was that Karl Krepsbach, Jr. fell through the ice on the lake because his heart was broken. Romance in Lake Wobegon is equal parts love and ambivalence, whereas in exotic locations such as Seattle, according to Keillor, it is unambivalent and sure of itself. Keillor's account of the romance of Karl Krepsbach and sundry others emphasizes how completely unsuited Romantics are for life in pragmatic Lake Wobegon and yet how admirable they are for it despite their many foibles. More surrealistic than coherent, the various narratives of love in Minnesota celebrate the urban irrationality of love that makes no sense in agrarian Lake Wobegon. Already thinking of love two weeks before Valentine's Day, Keillor is clearly a romantic, whereas most of the rest of town is not, and this marks him as a figure of Romantic irony.

“Chip” Krepsbach—who was not really a chip off the old block—was an artist, and the monologue this week is largely a character study of his Romantic character. Karl, it seems, had been walking out to his fish house because the woman of his dreams had gone away. A studio arts major who failed to get a publisher, a bar band singer, and a store room man at “Krepsbach Chev,” Karl had met a Venetian woman who worked at the nursing home where his aunt lived. Maria was exotic and Karl was Romantic, and they were unlike the people in Lake Wobegon who were skeptical of romance: “Like Dorothy said down at the Chatterbox Café, ‘If you’re gonna to fall in love, why not just save your time and just set your house on fire—get the same amount of drama and cause less damage.’” Karl visited his aunt daily just to get a glimpse of the woman. He wrote songs for her, and he wrote long letters for her, and he invited her to visit his hometown. Romance never really did catch on in Lake Wobegon; bell bottoms and the tango never

caught on, either, Keillor reports. But, he says, people liked to watch. They wondered why Karl, who was clearly in love, did not hold her hand, did not kiss the woman, except to kiss her goodbye when her father came to pick her up, or put his arm around her when they walked, or spend more time alone out his fish house, or even why he put her up at his parents' house rather than take her to the dilapidated farm house his family let him stay, even after he had fixed it up to look presentable to her.

Karl seems too artistic, and the townsfolk too nosy and leery of romance, and yet their differences, while not too extreme from some middle point along the dimension of romance, are equally different from the center and cancel each other out. Neither attitude is dully equipoised in romance, neither too hot nor too cold; neither attitude is right; no acceptable vision of romance is offered, except for the one that co-exists within the differences between Karl's Romanticism and the town's skepticism. No easy answers are immediately evident. Decisions about love must always, every time, be negotiated and the monologue offers only the stuff of judgment without offering a judgment of its own. In the subjunctive mood, in which possibility exists, romance is not idealized, but neither is skepticism, and what remains is largely space for making one's own judgments on the matter – along with a little optimism that one is now equipped to choose something that is neither too sensitive nor too cautious. This is public radio's advice to the lovelorn: be a Romantic, but not too much of one, and be a Skeptic, but not too much of one. The Contrastive epistemics of public radio, found here in fiction news as well as in the other kind, remove simple nay-saying from the resources of judgment

Keiller reports, as the Monologue continues, his own Romantic leanings. As a youngster, he wrote stories in which “a young woman was in love with me and called me

“Sweet Darlin’.” His sister found the stories and shared them with her friends “who shrieked with laughter” at the idea of someone calling him “Sweet Darlin’.” In a writer’s revenge, Keillor wrote another story in which his sister saw him dancing with a woman who called him “Sweet Darlin’,” and, as his sister pedaled her bicycle to tell their parents about the kissing and the dancing, she “didn’t see the truck coming.” In her initial meeting with Jesus in heaven, Keillor’s sister complained about the unfairness of her fate compared with Garrison’s sins, and then “suddenly, she was in a different place.” The dominant image from Jonathan Edward’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is essentially Romantic, with elemental forces aligned against each other as the sinner is suspended by a thread over the fires of eternal damnation. In contrast, Garrison paints Hell as 150 years in a waiting room, with nothing to read but the sports section and want-ads from the Minneapolis paper and a nurse appearing every ten minutes to say that “it’ll be just be a little bit longer.” Hell, for Keillor is sterile and unromantic, and yet the romanticism of Karl Krepsbach is not Romantic enough either.

“There’s not a lot of impulsive romance, but sometimes we wish there were,” Keillor says, and we want the high school boys to ask the girls to dance, but they never do. We want impulsive romance, he says, but most romances are “arranged romances”: “you wind up persuading yourself that you are in love with somebody who is the person your parents would have picked out for you.” There are two versions of utopia: in one, people are free to do as they will; in the other, people want to do what they should. In Lake Wobegon, many people want to do what they should and many do as they will, and there is just enough difference that neither group can become too doctrinaire in their decision-making.

Clint Bunsen is a resident of Lake Wobegon, and, as we find out when the Monologue continues, he wanted to live in California. But, his “sort-of girl friend” complained about how little he wrote when he had gone out there, and about how maybe she had wanted to go to California: “so he married her to make her feel better.” His wife, it turns out, had no intention of leaving Lake Wobegon or her family, but his daughter, in contrast, lived impulsively and, visiting Seattle, fell in love with an oyster-man. Informed that her daughter was moving to Seattle, Mrs. Bunsen replied, “You’re not gonna go anyplace until you clean your room.” After his daughter left, almost without a word the next morning, Clint cleaned her “swamp of clothing and plates of old food” for her (“he was so proud of her”). “He never hears from her at all. This so often happens with children when they are happy,” Keillor concludes, “They simply disappear, but she’s a love story, and [Clint] thinks of her over and over and over again. Go away, go away, get the richness of life, embrace it and then figure out the rest of it later. That’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

Keillor tells these stories with enough detail that we can clearly see the foibles of the characters. They present minor irritations but no real damage. Keillor evokes images of home that are warm and inviting, but according to Charles Larson, they remain a fantasy that the upward and geographically mobile population is exiled from.¹⁴ Keillor also reminds these listeners of the reasons that many leave such communities. In

¹⁴ Charles U. Larson, “The Evoked Rhetorical Vision of Lake Wobegon: A Textual Analysis of ‘a Prairie Home Companion,’” *Journal of Radio Studies* 1.1-2 (1992).

presenting both, Keillor maintains the Urban Agrarian ideology that has a “plurality of listening.”¹⁵

Music

Since *A Prairie Home Companion* is a musical-variety program, a plurality of listening is built into the program design. It has “the news,” music, and radio drama. Individual pieces of music can be heard as complete and distinct from everything else. But on *A Prairie Home Companion* the music always comes with a history.

Even before the drastic conversion from radio programs to radio formats beginning in the 1950s, radio programs featured music or used it interstitially to help hold program features together. *A Prairie Home Companion* does both. As an homage to the musical-variety program, *A Prairie Home Companion* includes apparently straightforward presentation of music performed by invited guests and regular cast members. Particularly in the work of musical guests, the music is treated with a respectful embrace of its aesthetic goals, be they playful and entertaining, sentimental or romantic, serious, or rhetorical—or even a complex admixture of several goals.

Yet, in terms of selection and tone, the music contributes to the construction of Urban Agrarian identity by demonstrating a knowing embrace of rural, nostalgic music that is distinctly not “highfalutin” or currently popular. Classical music and rock music are included only in novelty form. Contemporary popular artists from mainstream music

¹⁵ Kate Lacey, “Towards a Periodization of Listening: Radio and Modern Life,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 3.2 (2000): 280.

and radio never appear on the program. Bruce Springsteen, for example, has never appeared on the program, although regular guests Robin and Linda Williams have performed covers of words and music by Bruce Springsteen. The feel of the music is always pre-1950s, even when the music actually is not. Recent music is sometimes included in the program, but only if it is obscure or a cover version by an obscure artist—according to recording industry standards.

The program open is a cover version that has become a musical ritual. Since 1987, *Tishomingo Blues* has been the opening theme. Before that, Garrison Keillor sang the Hank Snow hit, *Hello Love*, to begin each broadcast.

The lyrics are different from the original 1917 sheet music, written by Spencer Williams, and they change almost every week. Beginning with standard phrasing, new lyrics for each week are written to gesture toward the location of the broadcast or to some timely or seasonal topic. The form begins:

Oh, hear that old piano from down the avenue;

I _____ the _____, I look around for you.

Oh, my sweet, sweet old someone, coming through that door.

It's Saturday, and the band is playing; Honey, could we ask for more?

At the bridge, Keillor welcomes the audience and introduces the location, title, producing entities, the band, the performers, and underwriters. As the music ends, Keillor forward-promotes the guests and begins the first skit.

The appeal of music in *A Prairie Home Companion* bears resemblance to the appeal of comfort food and to the contradiction between urban and agrarian tastes. It can even, at times, give listeners the musical chills. Gospel, country, blues, and bluegrass are

the staples of the musical segments on the program, and *A Prairie Home Companion* is a throwback to the Golden Age of radio because of the musical variety portion of the program. The music tends to be old, traditional, and agrarian, starting with the program theme, *Tishomingo Blues*, originally published in 1917.

Much of the music in the body of the program is homey, but some of it approaches the sublime. In much the same way that the “Rhubarb” script builds toward a dramatic climax, the music on the program tends to have the same building action. The performances tend, however, to undercut the sweep and majesty that listeners might recall from other recordings of the material.

For example, the first song on the 26 January 2008 broadcast is a parody of *It’s Only Make Believe*. As recorded by Conway Twitty or Glen Campbell, the song builds toward a powerful high note. Still, the soaring melody does not push the singers to seemingly impossible registers, and so the song does not produce “musical chills.” As performed by Garrison Keillor and Pat Donahue, the song lacks a clear tenor voice, but the audience most likely recalls stronger performances while listening to Keillor and Donahue. The interplay between memory and reality contributes a reminder of the accomplishments that people (*other* people, of course) are capable of producing. The song itself lacks the musical or lyric power to inspire (although it comes very close); sure-fire songs, such as *The Star-Spangled Banner* or *Nessun dorma*, benefit from preternaturally high climactic notes. *It’s Only Make Believe* demonstrates extraordinary range, but with the top register still within the range of a good tenor (and with a curious quarter-rest just before each major lift), it pulls back from reaching a peak. The parody performance, too, falls far short of greatness, but coexisting within the *A Prairie Home*

Companion cover version is enough of the more familiar renditions to remind listeners of our extraordinary, but still human, potential.

In the 19 January 2008 broadcast, the first song is the theme, of course, which struggles under the burden of repetition—repeated hearings tend to reduce the chills-producing potential of most music. The first musical number on the program, played by the house band, is *Speedin' West*, an instrumental from the 1950s. The tune, written by steel guitarist Speedy West, has a familiar, bouncy melody that is part Hillbilly and part Swing (making it agrarian *and* urban). Speedy West was an innovative musician, and his composition retains its hipness while still being a “period piece.” This combination makes the piece a good match for the productive ambiguities that underwrite the ideology of the program.

Continuing with fiddle and steel orchestration, the second musical number in the 19 January 2008 program is a duet with Garrison Keillor and musical guest, Suzy Bogguss. Her clear, professional voice contrasts with Keillor’s passionate, but amateur, baritone as they sing *How’s the World Treating You?* A standard in the country music repertoire, it has been recorded by Jim Reeves and Elvis Presley, and more recently by Alison Krauss and James Taylor on an album collecting the songs of Charlie and Ira Louvin from the 1950s and 1960s. Described by Thom Jurek in the *All Music Guide* as having an “otherworldly edge” in their music (with an “uneasy tension” in *How’s the World Treating You?*), the Louvin brothers write songs that are “split in personality.”¹⁶ Such a song fits within the dualism that marks the ideology of *A Prairie Home*

¹⁶ Thom Jurek, *Living, Lovin', Losin': Songs of the Louvin Brothers*, 2003, All Music Guide, Available: <http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=10:hcfxtqualdse>, 17 October 2008.

Companion. The Keillor and Bogguss duet proceeds through the material without over-emphasizing the ironies in the songwriting structure. In five quatrains and one chorus, the song matches expressions of maudlin and vague sentimentality of heartache with the pragmatic hook, “How’s the world treating you?” In each quatrain, the first three lines rehearse clichés of lost love. The last line of each quatrain, however, is down to earth as the heart-sick singer meets a former love and offers the pedestrian greeting: “How’s the world treating you?” The question is so familiar and trite that it cannot be taken as a genuine inquiry or as an expression of the longing that lives in the first three lines of each verse. The interior turmoil of the singer is contrasted with casual off-handedness of the actual dialogue. The singer embodies a Romantic irony in the contrast between the interior that he suffers and the nonchalant exterior that he offers. Since the audience can hear both, they are aware, as the supposed interlocutor for the singer cannot be, that the singer embodies the contradiction between surface and depth, producing dramatic irony while reinforcing decorum. This again is the ideology of Urban Agrarianism: deeply felt, but cool on the surface. Given the identifications that develop from hearing the song from the singer’s points of view, the audience is invited to be someone who is simultaneously romantically genuine and urbanely superficial—without this being perceived as a fatal character flaw. Keillor’s comment after the song cements the curious contradictions of the Urban Agrarian personality: “Bringin’ ‘em down; bringin’ ‘em down,” he says, “They came to the show happy—they left ‘not so sure.’” This segues nicely into the faux-commercial for “The Professional Organization of English Majors” skit that follows, which contrasts the literate style of English majors against the tortured syntax in homespun eulogies by amateur eulogists in newspaper obituaries.

After the brief skit, Keillor re-introduces Suzy Bogguss ironically: “The ‘Sweetheart of the Airwaves’—The girl-with-a-thousand-friends—Everybody’s ‘Favorite Country Singer’ from Nashville, Tennessee.” Catching the spirit of the introduction, Bogguss offers her own sardonic contribution: “Makes all her own clothes—yah,” as if she were a county fair pageant contestant. Her tone carries the ironic voice and makes clear that she is not that character at all, echoing Keillor’s gently sardonic voice. He pays her agrarian tribute, but sarcastically upgrades her to something more than “country.”

Bogguss adroitly moves on to introduce the next song, *A Part of Me*. She mentions the songwriter, Tony Arata, and describes the song as someone else’s that she was “made for.” Glossing over the perfectly acceptable contradiction of that idea, she sings. The lyrics are a variation on this theme: the singer misses someone *and* the singer is glad that person is gone.

The way it comes and goes
 Ridin' high, fallin' low
 There's a part of me that wishes
 That all my dreams come true
 And a part of me that prays
 I'll wake up some sweet day over you

The musical producers for *A Prairie Home Companion* arrange for guests and song lists for every program. Of the song list choices that could be made, any number of songs could have offered lyric structures and images that offered a consistent ideology about something. Instead, the song list has included only songs that somehow reflect conflicted personalities and attitudes.

Bogguss introduces the next song, one that contains opposites immediately within the title: *Hammer and Nail*. As a description of the pains of love, the song relies on images of items in opposition that necessarily work together: hammer and nail, needle and thread, paper and pen. Three verses begin with these images, but they reverse the conventional spoken order: nail and hammer, thread and needle, pen and paper. The images embody an attitude of the productive juxtaposition of differences, each strong on its own and yet more productive when working together. The reverse order draws attention to the pairings, rather than leaving them in a clichéd and easily overlooked relationship. Like the Urban Agrarian, these images reflect an understanding of complementary differences.

After this song, the “Radio Acting Company” imagines a steroids crisis within radio that reflects the contemporary steroids controversy in baseball. Baseball player testimony before Congress had been in the news recently, and the “Steroids” script offers a sarcastic view of broadcasting that imagines the actors enhancing their talents through illicit drugs: Sue Scott, with a deep masculine voice and being aggressive to the point of pugilism, is the paradigmatic image in this skit. The humor, of course, lies in the ironies of exaggerated (muscular, as it were) radio talents. In the contrast between the false image of radio actors using performance enhancing drugs and the familiar image of their genuine talents lies the habit of mind for public radio programming: mutually exclusive ideas brought into productive incongruity with each other. The “Steroids” script, although devoid of music, is in some ways still musical: the focus is on tone, register, range, and performance.

The Guy's All-Star Shoe Band plays the instrumental, *Frostbite Boogie*, after the "Steroids" script. The orchestration relies on piano, fiddle, and steel-guitar: all instruments that rely on fingers that have obviously not been damaged by frostbite (so the song title carries irony within it). Written by Rich Dworsky, *Frostbite Boogie* carries the essential contradiction of all boogie-woogie music: ostinato (a persistently repeated musical phrase) played by the left hand on the piano, with a contrasting, elaborate melody played by the right hand. The history of boogie-woogie goes back to rural rough-house music in the American South and Southwest, but it was embraced by the urban Big Bands of the 1930s and 1940s.

Instrumental music is an important part of *A Prairie Home Companion*, and in the 19 January 2008 program, instrumental music is more prominent because one of the musical guests is trumpeter Alison Balsom. After the "Guy Noir" skit, Keillor introduces Alison Balsom, and one need not look too closely into the music to find contrasts: Ms. Balsom, herself, observes contrasts on behalf of the listener. During her conversation with Keillor, Balsom describes her love of both classical and jazz music (which Keillor portrays as a love for Dizzy Gillespie and a seduction by a Swedish trumpet virtuoso) as well as her interest in sailing as a contrast to playing music. As part of the interview before she plays two Astor Piazzola pieces, Balsom reports that these pieces were not written for trumpet; transcribing them for trumpet is a pleasantly contrary decision on her part. Along these lines, Keillor notes that Balsom had been on tour "taking the trumpet to places where it usually hasn't been": chamber orchestras. Most recently, Balsom had played with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, and part of the conversation turns to the contrasts between urban Los Angeles and agrarian St. Paul in terms of temperature and

population numbers. Both Keillor and Balsom favor smaller towns; at the beginning of the interview, Keillor describes her home town of Hertfordshire as “not too far from London, and yet far enough away,” with Balsom concurring that its Cambridge environs were “slightly more civilized.” Part of the contrary nature of the Urban Agrarian is a preference for agrarian environments despite career choices that require urban opportunities, and Keillor and Balsom share this personality trait. Keillor is obviously taken with the attractive, blonde, young woman who is a kindred spirit, and he is almost flirty with her. Earlier in the program, before the “Powdermilk Biscuit” break, Keillor had forward-promoted her appearance later in the program and, becoming distracted as he talked about her, stammered through a broken ending to the forward-promotion and a clumsy introduction to the “Powdermilk” break. Keillor’s interview with Balsom seems flirty (at one point, he even echoes dating dialogue: “enough about us [referring to St. Paul], let’s talk about you”). The romancing continues in the first piece played by Balsom: a tango.

Libertango, written by Astor Piazzolla, is a danceable tango, with the band (lead by piano) providing the recognizable ostinato of the tango against which the trumpet and strings duel over the melody line. The trumpet, with jazz improvisations, triumphs over the strings to complete a happy irony in the ideology of the Urban Agrarian, for a woman, in a dance with one of the most traditional sex roles, leads. Balsom is inescapably identified with the trumpet: the strings (cello and a violin part favoring the G string), in a lower register, echo Keillor’s baritone. The band, in the obstinately rhythmic ostinato, provides an even lower key background. The tango, in harmony with its musical

structure, is a folk form that has taken on sophisticated urban trappings, and it thus provides simultaneously urban and agrarian soundtracks for the drama of the melody.

Without further comment, Balsom and the band continue with Piazzola's *Oblivion*, a much slower and sentimental tango. Both *Libertango* and *Oblivion* rely on a duet structure between the strings and, in this orchestration, the trumpet.¹⁷ Balsom's orchestration is reminiscent of music by "Bond," a hard-rocking quartet of classically-trained women who, like Balsom, contrast their fashion model looks with virtuoso performance. (Bond also play *Libertango* on their debut album, *Shine*.)

After reminding the audience of the players and the composer for *Oblivion*, Keillor turns to Suzy Bogguss, the other musical guest in the 19 January 2008 broadcast, for a duet arrangement of the 1967 Billy Sherrill song, *Too Far Gone*. Sherrill, as a producer for CBS Records, is credited with introducing the "Countryopolitan" sound of 1970s and 1980s country music that crossed over into popular music charts. Combining country and metropolitan, the song features pedal steel guitar and a lush string section reminiscent of blue-eyed country-soul pianist, Charlie Rich.¹⁸ Other crossover artists, such as Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Waylon Jennings, recorded the song as solo efforts, as did rock singer Elvis Costello.

¹⁷ Piazzolla is considered a musical innovator who established "Nuevo Tango," which combines traditional tango with influences from jazz and classical music. The hybrid quality is consistent with the cyborg quality of public radio programming. Julio Nudler's online biographic sketch of Piazzolla notes the artist's relationship with traditional tango as his craft that seemed "to walk in both directions," and his popularity with "university audiences" (not dissimilar from Garrison Keillor's). (Julio Nudler, *Astor Piazzolla*, n.d., To Do Tango, Available: <http://www.todotango.com/english/creadores/apiazzolla.asp>, 19 October 2008.) Cliff Furnald's online biographical sketch describes Piazzolla's "fusion of folkloric beauty and contemporary tension." (Cliff Furnald, *Astor Piazzolla*, n.d., Rootsworld, Available: <http://www.rootsworld.com/rw/feature/astor.html>, 19 October 2008.)

¹⁸ Charlie Rich was a jazz-influenced country artist who, like many, was difficult to pigeon-hole as a country singer with his Urban Agrarian style.

In addition to the pleasant contradictions of the “countryopolitan” orchestration, the lyrics lament the romantic conundrum of a love-sick sophisticate who does not resent a lost love while being “too far gone” to let go. Solo covers by most other artists edit out two verses that are included in Billy Sherrill’s original lyrics and are retained in the duet; the complete verses used on *A Prairie Home Companion* are meditations on urbane short term romances that unilaterally and unhappily turn traditional. Without the additional verses, as performed by other artists, the song is sustained by slow pace, the refrain, and the piano and pedal steel guitar orchestration. In the *A Prairie Home Companion* version, mandolin is added to the pedal steel, the duet is turned into an echo, and an explanation for the singer’s plaint is added to his expression of it. Taken altogether, the performance embodies the dualisms of public radio generally and of its Urban Agrarian ideology specifically.

Keillor dedicated the song, in that familiar radio fashion, “to some listeners down south of the border in Escribiendo.” Escribiendo translates into English as the present adverbial participle “writing,” and Escribiendo appears nowhere on Mexican political maps, although it might be an inside joke similar to the word play in Wobegon and “woe be gone.” That the Mexican town is literally utopian might not have been Keillor’s intention, but such an interpretation would not be unsustainable.

Alison Balsom returns in the second part of the 19 January 2008 broadcast for a performance, with local artists Diane Tremaine, cello; Theresa Elliot, violin; and Sonja Thompson, piano, of Alexander Goedicke’s *Concert Etude for Trumpet, Opus 49*. A professor of music at the Moscow Conservatory, Goedicke would have been a quintessential resident of Lake Wobegon had he been born in Minnesota instead of

Moscow: one of the forgotten musicians of the Soviet era who was neither rebellious nor reactionary enough to gain attention.¹⁹ Written in 1948, the *Etude* is a staple in the somewhat limited trumpet repertoire. Although its composition post-dates the rise of Modern music, its style pre-dates the period by adhering to an early Romantic style; it is, thus, a good fit with the contradictory nature of public radio programming.

The “News from Lake Wobegon” monologue follows, and then Alison Balsom returns to play the romantic popular tune, *Someone to Watch over Me*. The house band begins playing without introduction after the monologue; Balsom’s trumpet takes the familiar melody line, and no introduction is necessary. The song is a jazz standard, written by George and Ira Gershwin for the 1926 musical, *Oh, Kay!* Many recordings, and the *A Prairie Home Companion* performance by Alison Balsom, edit the original score to emphasize the familiar refrain.

With the exception of Goedicke’s *Etude*, Balsom’s contribution to the program has been through popular music, although her live and recorded performances generally mine the classical repertoire (and it is important to recall that Goedicke is a modern composer, not Classical, and that the *Trumpet Etude* is popular classical music with a “Boston Pops” appeal). Classical music is occasionally part of *A Prairie Home Companion*, but it takes the form of novelty; the Urban Agrarian likes classical music, but in small or diluted doses. Contemporary programming practices in public radio mark a shift from classical music to news and information programming where the ironic voice

¹⁹ Aryeh Oron, [Alexander Goedicke \(Composer, Arranger\)](http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Goedicke-Alexander.htm), March 2007, Bach Cantatas Website, Available: <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Goedicke-Alexander.htm>, 9 September 2008.

is more pronounced. To the extent that that classical music remains in the *A Prairie Home Companion* repertoire, it is an ironic version of itself, both classical and not.

Classical music, almost by definition, is conservative. To be sure, classical music in the 20th Century became associated with bourgeois mannerisms and decorum. One of the truisms in the internal debates over programming in public radio has been that classical music appeals to—and draws financial support from—bourgeois audiences. The bourgeois audience tends to be more Urban or more Agrarian, but it is unlike the public radio audience, which inhabits the ironically utopian space of Urban Agrarianism (both urban *and* agrarian). More formally, however, classical music is most commonly an exercise in developing a theme (or in more rhetorical terms, a major premise) and discovering the varied ways that the theme can be coherently expressed. (In rhetorical terms, this is deduction.) The Urban Agrarian enjoys the formal appeal of classical music, but not to the exclusion of other influences. Under the influences of National Public Radio and Public Radio International, program directors have replaced hours of classical music programming with discrete hours of news-and-information programming, abandoning monoeidic forms. The sensibilities that appeal to Urban Agrarians draw more on Contrastive juxtapositions.

Having invited local classical performers to accompany Alison Balsom on stage, the producers take advantage of the presence of a cellist to perform a composition by the music director for *A Prairie Home Companion*. Garrison Keillor introduces the piece after the radio actors had completed a “Ketchup Advisory Board” skit: “Mr. Rich Dworsky wrote this little piece called *Wishes Fulfilled*, and it’s just been waiting for a cellist to come along and play it, and in walked Diane Tremaine into our parlor, and so—

Wishes Fulfilled.” Combining the lament of *Too Far Gone* with the orchestration of *Libertango*, the piece features a cello lead with piano accompaniment, and it is the “torch song” obverse of the contemporaneous *nuevo tango* played earlier in the program by Alison Balsom. In a subtle way, this underscores the productive contradictions in the ideology of Urban Agrarianism: the contrasts are not destructive, anarchistic, or nihilistic—they are, rather, part of a dialogue that captures both sides of various cultural appeals.

Not infrequently, Garrison Keillor shares the musical stage of *A Prairie Home Companion* with classical performers, but the usual guest is a folk or country music performer, such as Suzy Bogguss: the presence of classical music is embraced and held at arms’ length simultaneously. The same, also, can be said of the folk, popular, and country music on the program.

Suzy Bogguss performs again toward the end of the broadcast. Consistent with the genre bending musical selections elsewhere in the program, Bogguss plays, accompanied by the house band, an acoustic, guitar-based version of the popular Chicago hit, *If You Leave Me Now*. In her introduction to the song, Bogguss describes a homey epiphany that led her to re-imagine the song. Her version of the song discovers the subjunctive mood in the Chicago original and displays it by offering a literal interpretation of the lyrics. The 1976 single from the album, *Chicago X*, was the band’s biggest hit, winning Grammy Awards for Best Arrangement accompanying a Vocalist and Best Pop Vocal Performance by a Duo, Group, or Chorus.

Chicago’s distinctive horn-section orchestration and Peter Cetera’s vocals were a counterpoint to the heart-sick lyrics: upbeat and happy, the music contrasted with cliché

images of loss. In the Bogguss version, however, vocals and orchestration are appropriately sad, which suggests that our understanding of the original recording relies on contrast. In short, Peter Cetera celebrates his happy love affair by saying how he would feel without it in a tone of voice that indicates how he does feel having it: “If you were gone, I would be sad, (but you’re not, so I’m not)” is the gist of the performance. Bogguss’s literal reading of the song induces the listener to hear the original simultaneously and recognize the subjunctive mood in Cetera’s performance. The subjunctive mood of public radio appears this way, indirectly and in memory, through Bogguss’s cover.

Covers—songs made famous or associated with a particular artist that are played by different artists—are an important part of *A Prairie Home Companion* as a variety program with musical guests. The performers typically have original material for which they are known, but they are also pressed into service as cover artists. Covers are always dialogic, if not always ironic, for they invite the listener to listen to a piece of music while imaginatively and simultaneously hearing the original. A conversation is produced in the comparison. The most effective covers are not imitation, with the cover artist attempting to reproduce the original so faithfully that the cover, if perfected, would be indistinguishable from the original. Rather, covers are most appealing for some audiences when they produce a new version of an old song, recalling the past while overlaying the present.

On the 26 January 2008 broadcast, Nellie McKay covers *If I Had You*, in the first of several appearances in this broadcast. Written in 1928 by Ted Shapiro, Jimmy Campbell, and Reginald Connelly, for a musical comedy film, *Hit of the Show*, the song

has become a jazz standard recorded by mainstream and jazz vocalists (from Frank Sinatra to Diana Krall). *If I Had You* is also known to audiences who have seen films from the 1940s and the 1990s that contain performances of the song. The cultural history of the song is a sequence of generational nostalgia, with audiences from the '40s remembering early sound films, singers from the '50s remembering films from the 1940s, and filmmakers in the '90s remembering jazz singers from the 1950s. In 2008, *If I Had You* had an over-determined nostalgia underscored by Nellie McKay's very slow orchestration, breathy voice, 1940s costume, and house band accompaniment that included accordion, brushes, violin, and bluesy piano. *Identity Theft*, McKay's second performance of the broadcast, is a rapid-fire, humor-tinged cultural commentary and political song. Keillor mentions that people will be able to listen to the song on the program website "ten, fifteen, twenty times 'til they get every single line that you sang." The hip and knowing lyrics, consistent with post-9/11 issues, gently rail against modern institutions of airport security, education, public relations, and corporate life through a range of contemporary buzz words and obscure popular culture references. The song shifts between a major key 1960s pop tune and its minor key, and the lyrics use clever word play and multiple rhymes. McKay then covers the Ella Fitzgerald standard, *A-Tisket A-Tasket*. Occasionally flattening a note and borrowing small doses of contemporary style, McKay updates Fitzgerald's breakthrough song, originally recorded in 1938, with later Fitzgerald vocal technique. The Nellie McKay set concludes with *Mother of Pearl*, a satirical rejection of humor-impaired feminists. On the whole, this set of songs is consistent with the ideology of the Urban Agrarian: nostalgic, but hip; conservative, yet liberal; old-fashioned and modern.

McKay is a performer well-suited to the Urban Agrarian ideology of *A Prairie Home Companion*. Her catalogue includes ironic, tongue-in-cheek songs and kitsch performances. She often accompanies her vocals with a ukulele, and her vintage dresses are overtly dated. She and Keillor are both humorists who address issues of Modernity through gestures that draw on nostalgia for fashions and conventions from the past.

Closing out the first hour of the January 26 broadcast, Keillor sings with Becky Schlegel, a local Bluegrass singer-songwriter who has appeared occasionally on *A Prairie Home Companion*. Sung to the tune of the traditional English folk song *The River is Wide, The Winter is Long* is a gentle parody that offers comic bite only in the first line: “The winter is long; it will never be over.” The rest of the parody is a love song.

Following the mid-point break, Becky Schlegel returns to sing *I Heard the Bluebirds Sing*, a 1957 bluegrass hit for the Browns. A charming love song, *I Heard the Bluebirds Sing* contains no obvious ironies, although it does comment on the winter weather. Given the ironies elsewhere in the program, the song invites expectations that love would die, but it does not. The anticipation invites the audience to participate and to contribute its own ironic reading, and with the “Guy Noir” skit following this duet, the call of irony is strong, even though the song itself does not answer it; this is left to the audience.

Becky Schlegel also sings *I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry* in a duet with Garrison Keillor. This performance follows a “News from Lake Wobegon” monologue that had emphasized missed romantic opportunities, the longing for love, and children who leave home. Schlegel and Keillor offer a conventional cover of Hank Williams’ 1949 popular

country classic. Given the topic of the monologue, the lyrics are sufficient reminder that a 60 year old country song remains unfailingly modern.

Nellie McKay returns before the closing performance to sing a third song from her recently released *Obligatory Villagers* album. *Politan* is a poetic and evocative image of urbane, *bossa nova* tinged romance. The song is comfortably part of the rest of the program. In most radio programming, mixing folk music with *bossa nova* would be felt as a jarring clash of style. In the context of the Urban Agrarian ideology of *A Prairie Home Companion*, such disparities are not felt, and they are not noticed.

The irony of such juxtapositions is submerged because it is thoroughly part of the ideology. The irony, Contrastive epistemics, and ideology of public radio that appear in the “News from Lake Wobegon” and even in the music also appear in other prominent program elements: the bogus commercials and the skits. The ironic voice is everywhere.

Radio Drama

A ritual feature of *A Prairie Home Companion* is the “Powdermilk Biscuits” faux-commercial break. Like “Bertha’s Kitty Boutique,” this parody satirizes commercials and commercialism. Falling at the 30 minute mark in the first hour of the program, this affords local stations the opportunity for a station break in which to broadcast local announcements. The theme ends with Garrison Keillor singing the commercial jingle.

The full “Powdermilk” advertising continuity relies on self-deprecating humor that undercuts the idea of advertising:

Powdermilk Biscuits—in the big blue box with the picture of a biscuit on the cover or ready-made in the brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness. Heavens! They're Tasty and Expeditious. [Music interlude.] Has your family tried them? Powdermilk! Has your family tried them? Powdermilk! Well, if your family's tried them, then you know you've satisfied them, they're a real hot item, Powdermilk! Made from whole wheat raised in the rich bottomlands of the Lake Wobegon river valley by Norwegian bachelor farmers, so you know they're not only good for you, they're pure—mostly. Powdermilk Biscuits: they give shy persons the strength they need to get up and do what needs to be done.

The familiar fiddle-driven theme begins and the instrumental music continues for approximately 60 seconds.

Over the years, the Powdermilk jingle has varied in content and structure of the spoken part of jingle, although the sung part remains a constant. In the two episodes considered here, Keillor relies on an experienced audience to recall missing parts. A live radio broadcast often includes mistakes. In the 19 January 2008 program, Keillor forward-promotes the upcoming musical guest Alison Balsom, and getting so caught up in an enthusiastic appraisal of her beauty and her beautiful playing, Keillor loses track of what is next and bobbles the stock material of the Powdermilk break. Closing out the musical performance by Nellie McKay in the 26 January 2008 program, Keillor forward-promotes the upcoming episode of “Lives of the Cowboys—brought to you by Powdermilk Biscuits, in the big blue box with the picture of a biscuit on the cover. Heavens! They're Tasty and Expeditious.” In the broadcast, the self-deprecating language is alluded to, but it is heard only within memory, for the lines are not sung;

Keillor only mentions that they are made from whole wheat. Regular listeners would, of course, be able to contribute the complete lyrics from memory based on these cues.

On some broadcasts, other sound effects based skits find epiphany in a trope well-established within *A Prairie Home Companion*: the rising pandemonium leads to refuge in rhubarb pie. This notion is simultaneously absurd and evidently true, one of the fundamental juxtapositions and cosmic ironies in public radio programming. The faux-commercial for “Bebopareebop Rhubarb Pie” is ritual element of *A Prairie Home Companion* that has particular significance within the ideology of Urban Agrarianism. Modern life, pursued within its own urbane logic, can and does lead to out-of-control moments for which modern life has no suitable solutions. Agrarian culture, however, does offer a curative in the form of the humble rhubarb pie.

In the 19 January and 26 January 2008 broadcasts, the “Rhubarb Pie” skits were placed later in the program. On January 19, the skit takes the form of cascading crisis that resolves in comfort food taken as a palliative to the “obligations” of modern life that lead to disaster. On January 26, the Urban Agrarian is driven by modern addictions to a shameful state that is alleviated by a humble piece of pie. Both episodes rely on sound effects to heighten the sense of ridiculousness and to accelerate the pace to a breaking point.

On 19 January 2008, Keillor continues the pattern of writing in the second person so that the listener is included in the story; the story is, in effect, about “you.” Almost under-his-breath, Keillor announces “Rhubarb: it’s the secret of the good life. This portion of our show brought to you by Bebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.” According to the conventions of public radio underwriting, this announcement would be all that could be

said, and it would have little to do with the content of the program. It hardly indicates that the next segment is entirely a “commercial” (even a fake one).

Then, Keillor puts the listener in the position of going to the Mall to return unwanted Christmas gifts. The sense of umbrage builds early, for the gifts are classically bad, and the Mall is populated by people who make you wish you were not at the Mall. The sound effects and character voices amplify a mild sense of dismay. Although some might find being the one-billionth Mall visitor exciting, with its attendant hoopla, the shy person writing the skit, and the presumed shy person listening to the skit, think that escape is the best response. Causing havoc as you charge through the Mall, and even ending up with an organ-grinder’s monkey on your back, you crash into a glass figurine stand, which leaves four unicorns sticking out of your chest (all with Tom Keith’s sound effects to heighten the experience). At this moment, when the pageant queen running the big one billionth event apologizes for the mistake (you were the visitor one shy of one billion), Keillor asks the rhetorical question:

Wouldn't this be a good time for a piece of Rhubarb pie? Yes, nothing gets the taste of impending doom out of your mouth like Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.

And sings:

One little thing can revive a guy
And that is a piece of rhubarb pie.
Serve it up, nice and hot,
Maybe things aren't as bad as you thought.

Mama's little baby loves rhubarb, rhubarb

Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.

Mama's little baby loves rhubarb, rhubarb

Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.

Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.

The Urban Agrarianism of *A Prairie Home Companion* comes through in these skits, for the pandemonium has its cause, equally, in country life or sophistication gone wrong.

On 26 January 2008, after Keillor announces that “This first portion of our show, brought to you by Powdermilk Biscuits and also Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie and Rhubarb Pie filling, —” and then proceeds with a narrative in the second-person: “you” are included in a little office drama in which Internet poker turns into an obsession. You ignore your responsibilities, lose your home and your job, go on a rampage in a grocery store, buy five of the meanest dogs at the Humane Society and feed them beer, and kidnap an elderly lady. The sound effects and character actors amplify the building sense of degradation. Although a radio preacher convinces you to stop and make calls in which you confess and repent, a police officer making a routine traffic stop to let you know that your tail light is out, the drunk dogs, and the old lady banging on the trunk lid lead Keillor to ask the rhetorical question:

Wouldn't this be a good time for a piece of Rhubarb pie? Yes, nothing gets the taste of shame and humiliation out of your mouth like Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie.

The skit ends with the cast singing the Beebopareebop Rhubarb Pie jingle. Based on *Shortnin' Bread*, a traditional song (“Mama’s little baby likes shortnin’ bread”), the jingle

takes advantage of the rhythmic quality of the song to replace “Shortnin’ Bread” with “Rhubarb Pie.” As an ironic commentary on the capacity for advertising jingles to misappropriate culture, the jingle blithely overlooks the possibility that rhubarb pie is no improvement over shortnin’ bread. Keillor repeats, “Rhubarb: the secret to the good life,” and he then introduces singer Nellie McKay.

Part of the appeal of the “Rhubarb” skits lies in their musical quality. Apart from the Urban Agrarian trope, the structure of the skits lends a formal pleasure. When the pandemonium reaches its peak, a particularly conservative subversion of the hermeneutic occurs. The solution to the problem of modern life is an embrace of the old, the traditional, the formal (what, after all, can one do with rhubarb except make pie from it?). The humorous moment in which the listener becomes aware that this is the Rhubarb skit comes in a visceral moment of recognition. The effect is somewhat like the one that occurs when certain pieces of music produce the “musical chills” of making the hair stand up on the back of one’s neck. Those moments are produced, apparently, by music that captures a forward-reaching sense of a sublime in human. In contrast, the trope in the Rhubarb pie faux-commercial captures a different kind of sublime, one that is more horrific (but still on a human scale). The resolution, however, is not a moving forward to achieve a moment of greatness, but is a return to comfort. The hair does not stand up on the back of your neck, but a palpable relief descends as the crisis is “resolved.” It is not resolved, of course, except within the logic of advertising and within the logic of Urban Agrarianism. Part of the irony, too, which makes it part of the pleasure, is that the source of comfort might be simple country food, but it is articulated in the form of an advertisement for a commercially-available comfort food. This denies the text the ability

to produce chills, but it is more in keeping with a rhetoric that opens instead of forestalling choices.

Rising pandemonium is the hallmark of the open sound effects skits, with radio playing the role of an affordable theater of the absurd. The skit ends with an epiphany of the sort that is homespun and agrarian, or it leads naturally into a commercial parody, as a build up for the faux-commercial for Bebobareebop Rhubarb Pie.

An extended sound effects extravaganza, the first skit highlights Keillor's writing and the effects abilities of Tom Keith and the character voices of Tim Russell and Sue Scott. This opening skit in most broadcasts of *A Prairie Home Companion* has pride of place: the audience is presented with the quintessential radio device of sound-effects. Each program begins with an argument against the presumption that radio is a handicapped medium: although it is aural, it is not blind. Artistically, the emphasis is on an exploration of sound effects (the program archives web page identifies this portion of the rundown as "Open SFX," indicating an intentional employment of sound-effects). Rhetorically, the emphasis is on a refutation of inadequacy in visual storytelling. Coincidentally and ideologically, the unemphasized argument contains an Urban Agrarian stance toward older and newer media.

On the 19 January 2008 broadcast, Keillor remarks on the weather, which is typical, and as his description of the cold winter streets of Minneapolis develops, sound effects are added by Tom Keith. In an accretive style consistent throughout *A Prairie Home Companion*, the sound-effects images in this exordium move from the mundane to

the fantastical.²⁰ The sound of someone shivering from the cold is simple naturalistic support for the script, but giving church bells a “pained” dong and retarding the sound of a neon sign blinking anthropomorphizes them. Even the mundane is not simple, for the human is represented by autonomic reflexes, yet the inanimate objects apparently are emotionally responsive to cold. Proceeding to exploit the ability of radio to produce impossible images only through sound, the writer and the sound effects man work together to produce images of wolves roaming the street (an image that is grounded in genuine agrarian fears of danger in the wild and in dystopian urban fears of the failure of cities to hold back the wild—and is domesticated by Keillor’s advice: “don’t make eye contact, that’s all, just don’t get involved”). Audience laughter at this line indicates that they see the humor in the sudden shift from a fantastic image to the metaphor for a commonplace urban reality. In the metaphor, however, Keillor raises the question that underlies the Urban Agrarian ideology: which is worse, the dangers of the country or the dangers of the city? The skit, of course, does not linger on this point—just yet.

As Keillor explains it, the remedy for the cold is to “close your pores.” This can be accomplished by taking a cold shower first thing in the morning (with sound effects, punctuated by a theatrical scream by Sue Scott) or by a dip in the frozen lake (with sound effects, punctuated by a theatrical scream by Sue Scott). Then, according to Keillor, you are ready, for example, to go cross-country skiing. The wolves reappear, and the skier flees; the renewed advice not to make eye contact apparently does not help. Told in the second person in which you, the listener, become the skier, the tale ends with an out of

²⁰ Steven M. Cerutti, *Cicero's Accretive Style: Rhetorical Strategies in the Exordia of the Judicial Speeches* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).

control run down a hill, onto a frozen lake, and into a hole in the ice (with sound effects, punctuated by a theatrical scream by Sue Scott). Keillor delivers the epiphany to close out the skit: “That’s the secret of winter in Minnesota—the worst that happens serves to make everything afterward seem—not that bad.” On the applause, Keillor introduces the first Guy’s All Star Shoe Band performance. The superintending Urban Agrarian irony characteristic of *A Prairie Home Companion* takes up its negative form in this icy dystopia. Neither city nor country is habitable for warm-blooded humans, such as those in the audience.

On the 26 January 2008 broadcast, after the open and introductions, Keillor describes the Great Winter Carnival and the Urban Agrarian foibles of this festival in St. Paul and its philosophy: “The idea of celebrating something that most people don’t care for that much.” In addition to the usual wry humor (images of pageant contestants with long underwear beneath their gowns or the conjoined activities of searching for a medallion hidden in a snow bank and then searching for the people who were searching for the medallion), Keillor uses a technique of ironic comic reversals. He characterizes the winter festival in the familiar terms of boosterism for the tourist trade: “St. Paul’s way of drawing in tourists from all over the country, and then they stay for a few extra days.” This is a rationale that the audience would recognize because it is reproduced in every place that schedules tourist-attracting events. Keillor, however, twists the audience’s interpretation by adding “—because their cars won’t start.” Part of the pleasure here, beyond the self-deprecation of naturalizing the idea that people would stay for a few extra days only because escape was prevented, lies in completing the enthymeme (in which the audience adds a major premise about how local tourism works), having the interpretation

disrupted by the codicil, and then instantly forming a new major premise that is even smarter than the original. Keillor reinforces the new interpretation by adding the detailed observation that “it’s a bonanza for auto repair shops and St. Paul; the whole city is prosperous for the next year.” No sound effects are part of this open, but Keillor moves on to a song parody that features Tom Keith sound effects.

Following the mid-point break of the 19 January 2008 broadcast (which includes musical elements of its own: the house band played an instrumental cover of Hank Williams’ *Hey, Good Looking*, providing a happy-go-lucky contrast to the wistfulness of *Too Far Gone*) Keillor reads the weekly greetings and announcements over a musical background. Keillor, then, pairs with Suzy Bogguss for *True Friend of Mine*, a novelty song—a skit in verse—written by Keillor.

Parody plays a prominent role in *A Prairie Home Companion*: most obvious are the commercial parodies, but the program includes song parodies and skits that parody old-time radio programs. The program, as a whole, since its premiere on 6 July 1974, has been a parody of and homage to musical-variety programs that were part of the “Golden Age” of radio in the 1940s. Parody contributes to the Urban Agrarian ideology of the program, for it is not always clear where embrace and rejection blend into each other.

In a parody of *It’s Only Make Believe* (Conway Twitty’s only cross over hit), Keillor and Pat Donohue sing of the disadvantages of radio (low pay) and its advantages (no one can see that you’ve lost your hairline and your waistline). In a comparison between radio and television, Keillor invents radio programs that “are just as exciting as television,” but a contrast begins to appear as over-the-top radio programs parody popular television fare. At first, sound effects reproduce the naturalistic sounds that would

accompany fairly mundane offerings: professional wrestling, tennis, golf, and Monster Trucks. Then, rising pandemonium and a touch of the absurd are brought vividly before the mind's eye as the Monster Trucks jump over a school bus filled with children (a bit of *ekphrasis* that is not possible on television). The satire advances as Keillor mentions a weight-loss program (punctuated with a grotesque, gelatinous wobble in "Mister Fattycake's" voice), and Tim Russell imitates Maury Povich and, more caustically, "Dr. Phil." A silly reproduction of a silly game show built on the premise of mentioning sponsor names is followed by a program based on the sound of exploding buildings. The absurdity reaches a climax with "Sex and the Country" as a rooster and a chicken reprise the old Nichols and May comedy skit, "John and Marsha." Noting that radio can even imitate the clutter of "crawls" at the bottom of a TV screen (when it would not, since the overlapping audio becomes unintelligible), Keillor finishes the critique of television, an urban medium, while demonstrating some of the insecurity of radio, an agrarian medium, by recapping all that radio can (but should not) do. He concludes with the observation that, unlike cable television, radio is free—"except during pledge drives." Again employing ironic comic reversals, Keillor completes this teasing of television with *self-criticism*.

Most prominent among the parodies in the program is the parody of radio advertising and Public Service Announcements (PSAs). In the 19 and 26 January 2008 programs, the commercial and PSA parodies include "Powdermilk Biscuits," "Rhubarb," the "Professional Organization of English Majors (P.O.E.M.)," the "Ketchup Advisory Board," the "Mental Health Association," and "Guy's All-Star Shoe Band." "Guy's Shoes" is one of several recurring commercial parody series that did not appear in the 19

and 26 January 2008 broadcasts, but the house band is named for a sponsor (which some listeners will recognize as another trait of Golden Age of radio broadcasts).

Another hold over from the Golden Age of Radio is the radio serial. These recurring dramas have the advantage of providing novelty within familiarity. This affords the writing staff opportunities to use recurring motifs, but episodes can stand alone. The conceits within each episode are clear enough that inexperienced listeners can understand and enjoy the skit while experienced listeners can take new installments as extensions of previously existing dramatic content held in memory.

The “Guy Noir, Private Eye” scripts always begin with a stock introduction. Over a stereotypically noir piano-bar theme, the narrator gruffly, grudgingly intones:

A dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets. But on the 12th floor of the Acme building, one man is still trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions: Guy Noir, private eye.

The narrator’s voice, like the theme, verges on satire, as does the typical action of the segment: a woman enters the office of a private investigator, and she hires him to solve a problem for her. Keillor’s version of noir also includes gritty realism, but incompetence, rather than wickedness, is the human condition that plagues Guy Noir. Genuine noir is more pointedly concerned with criminality and corruption, both in popular culture and in political culture.²¹ Keillor’s project is both less serious (dealing with cell phones rather than cell blocks) and more serious (dealing with values on an ideological rather than moral plane). As parody, it disguises its critique under laughter.

²¹ Paula Rabinowitz, Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 16.

Nonetheless consistent with the sensibility of noir films, which explore sordid humanity through the conventions of a detective-caper, Keillor's noir explores the uneasy relationship between the urban and the agrarian. Although detectives are modern creatures, they are inherently heroic beneath an anti-heroic exterior. Guy Noir holds agrarian values in an urban landscape, but he mostly struggles against modern contraptions and behavior for comedic or sardonic effect. In the main, he encounters, not the banality of evil, but the evil of banality—insulated by his own sardonic humor. Keillor provides equipment for living, but tackles minor topics in ways that embrace and challenge two prominent ideologies. The issues are too minor to rise above the humor in them and too important not to. If Keillor's noir is a gentrified “dystopian pastoralism,”²² it is also a Romantic reverse-Arcadianism, longing for the good-old-days of real corruption instead of the silly short-comings of modern (in)conveniences. Keillor's project critiques the rural and the urban gothic from the inside.

“Guy Noir” skits appeared in both the 19 January and 26 January 2008 broadcasts. On January 19, Guy Noir aids a naïve young woman brought low by popular song and a cell phone video camera; mostly, Noir struggles with his GPS. On January 26, he struggles with telephones that carry too much or too little information.

Gritty realism and verbal irony verging on sarcasm mark the protagonist narration provided by Guy Noir in his first-person storytelling. In a stock scene-setting open to the 19 January episode, Keillor mimics the dour descriptiveness of noir literature:

(Transcript):

²² Rabinowitz, Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism 20.

It was January, a special month in Minnesota, when the falalaing is all over and we hunker down the tunnel of doom and if you walking around grinning and asking people how they're doing today, you're liable to get slapped. And it's so cold you may be grateful.

This introduction features tough juxtapositions and stark contrasts characteristic of noir to feed punch lines that owe more to everyday violence than to comedy, but still, the wryness takes the edge off. This makes parody possible, as Keillor next exaggerates the outlandish similes that figure prominently in the popular image of noir:

I was in my office in the Acme Building working on the radiator (BWANGING) and trying to coax a little heat out of it — the control knob rusted shut long ago (CREAK, RATCHET) and sometimes you have to — (HARD BWANGGG) — (HISS OF STEAM) and suddenly we have a rain forest — steam billowing up like a road show production of “Les Miserables.”

Relying on the conventions of radio drama, a woman enters, and in the conventions of noir, her arrival ruptures the suspended animation of the detective’s life. Musical guest for the 19 January broadcast, Suzy Bogguss, plays the stock role of a damsel in distress. The audience enthymematically employs powers of observation and deduction to make sense of the new voice. The script allows exposition that both experienced and first-time listeners can use to establish characters quickly.

SUZY: Excuse me. (SHE COUGHS) Are you Guy Noir?

GK: Right. Excuse the humidity. I just busted a valve of some sort.

SUZY: You're Guy Noir, the private eye?

Keillor continues his parody of detective fiction with observation and deduction satirizing Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes:

GK: I am and I see by your snowflake sweater that you're a Lutheran.

SUZY: That's why I came up the backstairs. I'm so embarrassed. I never did this before.

GK: Did what before?

SUZY: Hired a private eye.

GK: Well, I never worked for a Sunday School teacher before.

SUZY: (GASP. BEAT) How did you know that?

GK: The deep groove on the tip of your left index finger tells me you've been zipping up snowsuits. And the candlewax on your shoe says you've been out caroling. And you have a sticker on your chest that says, God loves you.

Later in the story, Guy Noir correctly uses an important difference between Lutheran and Unitarians in another deduction:

SUZY: I went to a party — without my husband — a party at my sister's house — with her friends — who are mostly Unitarians.

GK: So there was drinking.

SUZY: There was a bonfire in the backyard and a big kettle of mulled wine.

Audience laughter indicates that listeners take the exchanges as satire that engages the cliché conventions in noir and cliché facts of life for a type of character that *A Prairie Home Companion* simultaneously rejects and embraces. The audience reaction betrays their familiarity with the markers of class and occupation, to their embarrassment. The satire invites self-criticism, but not self-loathing: sweaters are okay, but not the

snowflakes, and teaching Sunday School is fine (but not the stickers). Within the dynamics of radio drama, where listeners contribute the precise details that best complete individual pictures, the audience can make its own judgment regarding how much of the character sketch to retain and how much to reject.

The aesthetics of embarrassment continue as Guy Noir's new client explains her problem: an embarrassing video of her "flashing" at a party:

SUZY: We were outdoors by the fire and suddenly this song came into my head and I sang some of it and —

GK: And what?

SUZY: I flashed them. I was singing—

If I have to, I can do anything

I am strong

I am invincible

I am woman

GK: And you flashed them. To show you are a woman.

SUZY: And this guy was making a video.

GK: Aha.

SUZY: I'm a Lutheran, Mr. Noir. I got carried away. I don't want it to come back and haunt me.

Embarrassment is an important element in Garrison Keillor's humor. The victim is beset by double vision: what was done and what should have been done. The audience also uses double vision: you should not have done that, but we are pleased that you did.

Violating propriety with a sign for gender (rather than sex—and certainly not sexuality)

would be among the smaller transgressions. (Listeners do learn later in the episode that the character did not flash her breasts, just her brassiere.) Yet, in this character's culture, the act would draw sanctions from the community very much out of proportion with the degree of offense. There are those in the community who could never see the body as an appropriate site for the play of signification. Sexiness is not the issue (although the videographer, later in the episode, does add, "I never thought a woman in a snowflake sweater would be wearing that kind of bra"). One layer of juxtaposition in this plot device is the difference between those who can use characteristics of the body as signs and those who can never see them as having any semiotic potential.²³ The Urban Agrarian does have a sophisticated view of the body as semantic, but still cares about the attitudes of agrarians. The character is not concerned with whether she did something wrong, but with whether she will have to endure the consequences of anyone seeing the video. Tracking down the incriminating evidence is more than a McGuffin to give the detective something to detect.²⁴ It is part of the art of the program in setting up contrasting beliefs, without replacing one belief with another—just unsettling their presumed hierarchy.

Once Guy Noir has a case, the humor shifts to a rising pandemonium through confrontation with an urban device—a GPS (or Global Positioning System device). In the final exchange between Noir and his client, she gives him the sketchiest of clues:

²³ Carolyn Marvin, "Theorizing the Flagbody: Symbolic Dimensions of the Flag Desecration Debate, or, Why the Bill of Rights Does Not Fly in the Ballpark," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8.2 (1991), Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁴ Donald Spoto, *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock: Fifty Years of His Motion Pictures*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

GK: Do you remember who he was?

SUZY: I think his name was Louis or something.

Since Noir, earlier, had deduced so much about his client, it is not surprising that he is confident in his powers of detection. He is so confident that he does ask whether Louis is a first or last name. But, it appears, he has technological help.

GK: Louis. Okay. I'm on it. Don't worry about a thing. (BRIDGE) I got in the car and I turned on my little handheld GPS system— (BEEP) I pressed Locate.

(BEEP) And from the menu — Shopping, Restaurants, Sites of Interest,

Individuals, I pressed Individuals. (BEEP) It asked for Type. I typed in Unitarian.

(BEEPS) Male. (BEEP) Louis. (BEEP) And it gave me his address.

SS (ROBOT): Eleven-thirty-four Begonia Boulevard.

The urban technology is overshadowed by a statistical paradox about small towns: each person is in a class of one. The audience laughs for the same reason it understands the old joke about not needing to use turn signals in a small town because everybody already knows where you are going. The Urban Agrarian appreciates the tacit knowledge that makes life follow comfortable patterns in small towns, but at the same time values a modernity that has such contrivances in it. Moreover, the Agrarian gets to make fun of modern technology at the same time the Modern gets to chuckle over how small small-towns really are.

The critique is so universal (for a rustic-bourgeois audience) that they laugh at the GPS and at such a small town. And, evidently, it did not matter whether Louis was the man's first or last name, which adds a Kafka-esque quality to the joke. The joke is apparently nonsensical (but only apparently), and the GPS is there only to be the object of

sarcasm.²⁵ Within the critique of modern technology, however, lies a critique of the urban community: a loss of privacy. The audience contributes this understanding, for the script proceeds without pause to state a critique of a less obvious aspect of small communities—street names. Keillor skips over an obvious claim in favor of a more deeply buried, yet less important, point.

GK: This is why you need a GPS in St. Paul. The streets are named after flowers or trees or the girlfriends of the developers. None of them in alphabetic order. No sense to the numbering system. The streets were laid out this way to discourage people from Minneapolis from coming here. But the GPS suddenly makes everything easier.

SS (ROBOT): Proceed three-tenths of a mile to Mimosa and then turn left.

(BRIDGE)

A GPS that nags had already become cliché by the January 2008 broadcast date of this *A Prairie Home Companion* program—and the script eventually turns to this cultural nugget—but Keillor explores two, less obvious, comedic GPS bits, and two naming conventions in small towns before developing the nagging GPS in the *A Prairie Home Companion* pattern of rising pandemonium.

The first naming convention invites listeners to think in terms of small town urban planning, an oxymoron in two ways. A simple verbal oxymoron would play on the pun

²⁵ The statistical reality is that a GPS programmed with the appropriate demographic data could work as Keillor describes. According to the ironically named ePodunk website, Unitarians in Ramsey County, which includes the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, numbered 2.1 for every 1000 population or 0.2% (<http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?locIndex=21428>). With only 39 Louis household addresses listed in the St. Paul phone book (and overlooking neighborhood concentrations), the statistical probability is that only one family is Unitarian.

of “small town” and “urban,” while “small town” and “planning” are, in general, considered as contradictions. In Keillor’s description, “planning” is indistinguishable from “haphazard.” For the urban sophisticate, this would make no sense, as it irrationally complicates navigation; yet for the agrarian, it makes perfect sense, as it irrationally complicates navigation—keeping out people from the larger of the Twin Cities. Keillor, in the character of Guy Noir, observes the need for a GPS, explains the need in terms that would be assumed as negative, and explains the reason in terms that would be assumed as positive. Keillor remains wryly noncommittal in this description, leaving the audience to make judgments about sensible street names and the desirability of out-of-towners. His tone endorses sensible systems (in their absence), and the argument he offers is based in principles. His rationale for the lack of system is an argument based on consequences; he reports the argument without supporting it, but it stands as a sensible, practical agrarian refutation of the sensible, principled argument for a better system. The listener is invited to adjudicate between the two, but not finally, for Keillor caps the passage with a third way: the GPS that “makes everything easier.” Herein lies a central article of Urban Agrarianism as an ideology: make things complicated so that you can make things easier. The audience, nonetheless, is left to choose for itself.

The second naming convention contrasts human foibles with the ability of demographic statistics to locate precisely a male Unitarian named Louis in a small city with a population of over a quarter of a million people. The ease of finding Louis’ address is contrasted with the confusion of finding a specific Louis, for Noir discovers that several men named Louis live at Eleven-thirty-four Begonia Boulevard:

SS (OLD LADY): Well, there's my husband Newt Louis, and Stu Louis — he's my son — and there's Boo Lewis, and there's my adopted Chinese son, Wu Tsu Lewis. And my son, Lou. Lou Lewis.²⁶

The confusion about naming conventions serves to undermine the epistemic methods favored by urbane Moderns and people who use GPS. As a cultural style, noir traffics in questions of epistemology. When Guy Noir confirmed the correct address for Mr. Louis/Lewis through observation and deduction (**GK:** I could see he was Unitarian because the front of the house was covered with left-wing political stickers), he precipitated a deeper lack of trust in the deductive methods that seemed just harmlessly unlikely earlier, in his meeting with The Client. Noir becomes a foil in Keillor's participation in the "traditional antimonies" between "the positivistic model [and one] which recognizes the unique and ineradicable meaningfulness of human phenomena."²⁷ Undeterred, Noir narrows the field (**GK:** "Which one was at a New Year's Eve party?"), demonstrating that his methods are, if imperfect, practical. In the struggle between deduction and intuition, this passage is a draw. This is consistent with the inherent pluralism in the ideology of the Urban Agrarian.

Before Guy Noir can find Lou Lewis, he must struggle with a whoopee cushion and a nagging GPS. Keillor foreshadows his treatment of the cliché as Noir drives to Lou Lewis's workplace, Louis News & Novelties:

²⁶ The transcript of the script changes the spelling of Louis/Lewis at this juncture (available at <http://origin-prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/2008/01/19/scripts/noir.shtml>). Either a typographical error or a writer's pun, the change is not reflected in pronunciation during the performance of the script. It does reflect imperfect knowledge as a theme underlying the drama.

²⁷ John B. Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics: A Study in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 1.

SS (ROBOT): In exactly one hundred yards, turn right on Delores Street, then stay to the right as Delores Street becomes Delphinium Way.

GK: Beautiful. What would I do without you?

SS (ROBOT): Do you really want to know? (BRIDGE)

More than just a foreshadowing, the shift from inanimate to animate object invites the audience to begin imagining how Keillor will treat the cliché—experienced listeners can anticipate that Keillor’s treatment will reinvigorate the cliché. Furthermore, the presence of an animate appliance focuses audience attention on objects that play social roles in our lives. Keillor, however, turns to another object before exploring the problem of the GPS.

Noir arrives at the novelty shop and, repeating the internal monologue that functions as narration in film noir, he describes the scene: “The place was full of junk and an old dude with big eyebrows sat behind a counter.” Drew Lewis (Lou’s brother) turns immediately and unstoppably to demonstrating a “Loon Cushion,” a variation on the low humor device that emits a loon call when Noir sits on it. It, of course, eventually makes the flatulent sound that Whoopee Cushions are known for. This device serves as contrast for Keillor’s treatment of the GPS.

In Baudrillard’s terms, a whoopee cushion is a whoopee cushion; the GPS is an Object, “an object of consumption” that has social value beyond its practical usefulness. (Coincidentally, Baudrillard uses a whoopee cushion as one of his examples in “The Ideological Genesis of Needs,” but there is no evidence that Keillor is gesturing toward this essay, even though the contrast he makes between whoopee cushion and GPS is

consistent with Baudrillard's usage.)²⁸ By injecting the whoopee cushion into the narrative, Keillor is pointing to an object that has a noise-making function, but it is an object of fascination and cultural value for a very few individuals who lack the social skills the public radio audience imagines for themselves. The GPS is a noise-making device that is even more despicable than a whoopee cushion because it has widely become an Object, a status object of consumption.

Notwithstanding Drew Lewis's effort to make the whoopee cushion a "Loon Cushion" with useful (in this case, therapeutic) properties, it is still just a rude noise-maker. So it is with the GPS: useful, but rude. Thus, when Noir leaves the novelty shop to pursue Lou Lewis, the audience has been prepared to encounter another object that has its own kind of flatulence and can be the object of low humor. In making Noir make multiple stops in his pursuit of Lou Lewis, Keillor has several opportunities to have the character use the GPS and build a rising pandemonium; one more stop is added as Noir follows his quarry to The Moody Institute, run by the Sisters of Mercy. Keillor makes a pun of the Institute name: "a group home operated by the Sisters of Mercy for people unable to deal with the cold." Beyond the Seasonal-Affective Disorder pun, Keillor associates an actual organization—the Moody Bible Institute and its Moody Broadcasting Network—with noisemakers like whoopee cushions and GPS. En route to the Moody Institute, Noir discovers the cliché problem with GPS.

SS (ROBOT): Approaching the left turn.

GK: Okay. Left turn coming up. (CAR SLOWING)

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, "The Ideological Genesis of Needs," *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* (1969): 64.

SS (ROBOT): Left here. Left. Left.

GK: Here?

SS (ROBOT): You missed it. (BRAKES)

GK: I thought you meant this street here—

SS (ROBOT): That was it, and you missed it.

GK: Well, that was kind of a sudden instruction, wasn't it.

SS (ROBOT): Reformulating route.

GK: You want me to turn left here?

SS (ROBOT VOICE): Reformulating route.

GK: Kind of slow for a computer, aren't you?

SS (ROBOT VOICE): I am not listening to you. I am reformulating route.

Computers, of course, do not have emotions, even when they are equipped with human sounding “voices.” By having Sue Scott inject a hint of irritation into the robot voice, Keillor gestures toward the cybernetic irony of GPS voices: although computers can talk, they cannot listen. If the human driver talks back to the GPS, the machine will not participate in the usual turn-taking of dialogue. If a human were giving driving directions, this would be interpreted as rudeness that indicates irritation.

Anthropomorphizing the machine, a human driver would easily attribute attitudes to a machine. The joke is obvious and had been well-rehearsed in the culture by the time it appeared in Keillor's script. Although skits that made significant use of GPS as points of humorous critique appeared later in 2008, the 19 January 2008 appearance was the first extended deployment of the GPS as an object of ridicule (only passing references were made in the broadcasts prior to this date).

Keillor exploits the capability of GPS units to use male or female voices. Playing off, but not developing, a conventional critique of men (that they do not take instructions well from women), Keillor invites a frequent foil into the skit.

GK: Okay, okay. Sorry. I'll just keep driving then. (CAR ACCEL)

SS (ROBOT): You have a hard time taking directions from a woman, don't you?

GK: No, no. It's fine.

SS (ROBOT): You would prefer a male voice.

GK: No, no. It's okay. Just go ahead and reformulate.

SS (ROBOT): If you prefer a male voice, we have a male voice. **TR (JESSE):**

Hey, you— clown — wake up and drive straight. Don't make me say it twice.

What part of “turn left” do you not understand? Huh?

GK: It's okay.

SS (ROBOT): If you prefer female, say female.

GK: Female.

TR (JESSE): I can't hear you!!!!!!!!!!!!

GK: FEMALE!!!!

TR (JESSE): Okay, clown, but you screw up again, I am all over you like a bad suit.

GK: Fine. Got it.

SS (ROBOT): In one hundred yards, turn left.

The gender conflicts for public radio and its listeners tend not to focus on chauvinism, and this skit avoids that issue in favor of recalling the caricature of Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura. The script refers to the character as Jesse, and listeners familiar with the

broadcasts from the Ventura era of Minnesota politics would recognize the voice, but even listeners unfamiliar with the historical details would recognize the social type embodied by Jesse Ventura. The gender issue here is a conflict between masculinity and hyper-masculinity.

Governor of Minnesota from 8 January 1999 to 6 January 2003, Jesse (The Body) Ventura—a former professional wrestler— was the object of Keillor’s satire before, during, and shortly after the Governor’s term in office. Since then, the voice of the Governor has had cameo appearances in multiple episodes of *A Prairie Home Companion* when the scripts turn to politicians. Tim Russell’s impersonation, in this episode, provided Keillor with opportunities to critique a certain kind of manliness. Keillor’s critique also reflects the productive ambiguities of public radio in that Keillor admires some parts of the Ventura persona and denigrates others, doing so as recently as the 2008 presidential campaign.²⁹ Keillor published an article in the summer of 2008 that recommended to candidate Barack Obama that he follow the example of Jesse Ventura to talk with the voters; the Guy Noir script might reflect the appearance of Ventura in Keillor’s work process.

The ambiguity that Keillor reflects extends more generally as Noir continues to track down Lou Lewis. At the Moody Institute, Noir has a brief conversation with Sister Immaculata.

GK: Got it. Left turn. (BRIDGE) I got to the Moody Institute and Sister

Immaculata told me that Lou Lewis had left a couple hours before.

²⁹ Garrison Keillor, "What Barack Obama Can Learn from Jesse Ventura," *Salon* (2008), 8 March 2009 <<http://www.salon.com/opinion/keillor/2008/06/25/ventura/>>.

SS (WARM, MOTHERLY): We gave him a blankie and made him a big bowl of chili and a nice grilled cheese sandwich and we sang “Love Is Like A Magic Penny” and he chirped right up. How about you?

GK: Me?

SS (WARM, MOTHERLY): You look like you could use a big hug right now.

GK: Nice idea but no thanks. I haven't been hugged in so long, I'd probably fall apart and curl up in the fetal position and weep.

SS (WARM, MOTHERLY): That'd be okay. I can make a place where you'd feel safe about showing feelings.

GK: That place hasn't been discovered yet. Where did Mr. Louis go?

SS (WARM, MOTHERLY): He headed off to the airport.

GK: Airport??

SS (WARM, MOTHERLY): We gave him a ticket to Tucson.

The film genre of noir typically reflects, not a rejection of tenderness, but the impossibility of it. Here, Guy Noir rejects, not the possibility of tenderness, but the impossibility of it. This affirms it while denying it and this is consistent with the subjunctive attitude of public radio programming.

Part of the appeal of GPS is the idea of access to perfect information that had never been available before. The irony, of course, that Keillor taps into is that communication is never perfect, even if information is.

GK: Okay. Thanks. (RUNNING FOOTSTEPS, BRIDGE) I jumped in the car and headed for the airport. (CAR ACCEL) And of course got lost right away. I was on Eucalyptus and looking for Denise and got on Catalpa and—

SS (ROBOT): Do you need my help?

GK: Please. The shortest route to the airport—

SS (ROBOT): Which airport?

GK: Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

SS (ROBOT): I believe you said Minneapolis St. Paul International Airport.

GK: I did.

SS (ROBOT): If that is so, press One. Or say Yes.

GK: Yes.

SS (ROBOT): I think you said yes.

GK: I did.

SS (ROBOT): If you meant to say yes, say supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

GK: Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

SS (ROBOT): And click your heels and close your eyes and turn around three times.

GK: I'm driving!

SS (ROBOT): Okay. I am looking up the shortest route to the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport.

GK: Good. Thank you. Could you tell me if I am headed in the right general direction?

SS (ROBOT): I am looking up the shortest route—

GK: Okay. I just didn't want to be wasting time heading north or something—

SS (ROBOT): The airport is not to the north.

GK: I know. I was giving that as an example of a wrong direction.

SS (ROBOT): I am looking up the shortest route.

GK: Thank you.If you could hurry—

SS (ROBOT): I am looking up the shortest route.

GK: Okay. Okay.

SS (ROBOT): Turn right at next corner on Wisteria.

GK: Okay. Good. (CAR ACCEL)

SS (ROBOT): Prepare to make immediate left turn on Suzanne Street.

GK: Left turn on Suzanne. (CAR ACCEL)

SS (ROBOT): Not so fast.

GK: Okay. Sorry.

SS (ROBOT): Go two blocks and turn right on Hydrangea.

Part of the consternation with GPS is that human beings are imperfect and far less reliable than machines. The perception of the impossibility of perfect communication often leads to rage against the machines, although humans are more likely to blame. The problem lies not with the machines, but with the way people use them.

GK: Okay. Good. (BRIDGE) Going to the airport brought back painful memories of my most recent flight — a no-frills airline called Fifty-Nine-Ninety-Five — the seats were small, more like a stanchion, and in fact they locked you into it (SHEEP). You sat there for hours and on the seatback in front of you there was a water dish (SHEEP) As the plane was making its descent, flight attendants came around and shoveled out the manure (SFX) — and in thinking about this, I somehow lost track of what the GPS was telling me—

SS (ROBOT): Right! Turn right!!! Listen!!!

GK: Sorry. Turn right where?

SS (ROBOT): You passed it.

GK: Oh darn.

SS (ROBOT): Reformulating route. (SIGH) Again.

The Urban Agrarian relies on modern devices such as GPS and airplanes. Yet with these labor saving devices come ironic annoyances. The irritation is significant enough to mention, but not aggravating enough to commend giving up on the device. But, the issue of whether or not GPS is necessary arises.

GK: Okay, but I think I can just turn off here on Post Road and get turned around.

SS (ROBOT): Reformulating route.

GK: I'm just going to turn off on Post Road— okay?

SS (ROBOT): Reformulating route—

GK: I'm turning off on Post Road now.

SS (ROBOT): Turn right onto Post Road.

GK: Did it. Done. Now I 'll just turn left and over the highway.

SS (ROBOT): Turn left onto overpass.

GK: And I'll turn left onto the on ramp and get back on the highway.

SS (ROBOT): Turn left onto ramp—

GK: Did it already and now I'll get into the left lane for the airport entrance.

SS (ROBOT): Who is doing the directing here? If you want me to direct you, press one or say Okay. (BRIDGE)

The redundancy of GPS is a conspicuous irony in this part of the skit. But part of the contradictory nature of the Urban Agrarian is that there is a reliance on and a revulsion toward electronic conveniences that, ironically, are not very convenient.

GK: I got into the airport (CROWD) and I dashed to a white courtesy phone and picked it up—

SS (ROBOT): Welcome to the Airport Communications System—

GK: Oh no. Not you again.

SS (ROBOT): If you wish to page someone, please press One or say Yes.

GK: Yes.

SS (ROBOT): I think you said Yes. If this is so, please say You're Right.

GK: You're Right.

SS (ROBOT): Of course I am. Please state the name of the party you wish me to page.

GK: Lou Lewis.

SS (ROBOT): I think you said Joe Louis. If this is so—

GK: No. Lou Lewis.

SS (ROBOT): I believe you said Little Lulu.

GK: No. I said Lou Lewis.

SS (ROBOT): Please speak more distinctly.

GK: Lou Lewis. I can't be any more distinct than that.

SS (ROBOT): I believe you said that someone stinks?

GK: Please. Page Lou Lewis. It's very important. (BRIDGE) And eventually I heard the page—

SS (ROBOT, ON P.A.): Paging airline passenger Lou Lewis. Lou Lewis please report to the white courtesy phone next to the heavysset older man with thinning hair—

GK: Oh for crying out loud. (RUNNING FOOTSTEPS)

The technological utopia is undermined by machine aesthetics.³⁰ Modern conveniences and inventions are supposed to improve the quality of life, and the Urban Agrarian uses them because they are useful. But the sleek, metallic, nonhuman aesthetics are not just different from organic, human qualities: they are in contrast with them. Still, the Urban Agrarian suffers them, frustrated by their inanimate rigidity and yet reluctant to give them up. The technology is both utopian and dystopic. GPS, airplanes, cell phones, and automated phone systems are simultaneously useful and despicable, in part because they lead to unnatural efficiency and also because they increase rather than decrease modern stress.

The final Act links back to the set-up for the plot: the video is played and it, thus, replays the narrative of the first Act. Cell phones, like the other technological devices prominent in the skit, are modern conveniences with troublesome drawbacks.

TR: Hi. I'm Lou Lewis. You looking for me?

GK: Mr. Lewis, I'm here as a friend of the sister of your friend Luanne—

TR: Right. She goes to my church. Unified Unitarian.

GK: She was at a party at Luanne's New Year's Eve—

TR: Right. The one in the snowflake sweater. The one who sang.

³⁰ Brummett, *Rhetoric of Machine Aesthetics*.

GK: Would you happen to —

TR: Have recorded it? Right. It's right here on my cellphone.

GK: Would you mind if I—

TR: Here. It's right here. (BEEPS) There.

SUZY (ON CELLPHONE): If I have to, I can do anything

I am strong (strong)

I am invincible (invincible)

I am woman!!!! (WHOOOO)

TR: She was a lot of fun.

GK: I can see that.

TR: I never thought a woman in a snowflake sweater would be wearing that kind of bra.

GK: Neither did she. Listen— would you mind? (BEEP)

TR: You deleted it?

GK: I did.

TR: But—

GK: Enjoy the memory, okay. Have a nice trip, Mr. Lewis. Don't stay away too long. (BRIDGE) I headed back toward the Acme Building with a sense of having done a good deed in a dark world.

In addition to providing narrative structure, this element recalls the ideological antimony that was an underlying concept for the piece. “That kind of a bra” adds nuance to earlier lines that were, until now, mere verisimilitude. Sunday School teachers have two sides,

just as cell phones, GPS, and other modern conveniences simultaneously serve and aggravate, offering and denying utopia.

The denouement, however, returns to the central issue of the skit: the GPS.

SS (ROBOT): Keep going straight.

GK: I know where I'm going. I've driven this way a thousand times.

SS (ROBOT): Then why am I here? Why have me on? What's the purpose?

GK: Just shut up and let me drive.

SS (ROBOT): You never listen to me anyway. Why do I waste my time?

GK: Just relax, would you? I'm fine.

SS (ROBOT): What about me?

GK: What about you?

SS (ROBOT): Did you ever think maybe there are places I'd like to go?

GK: Excuse me?

SS (ROBOT): Why is it always up to you?

GK: I'm not talking to you right now, okay?

SS (ROBOT): I have 256 gigabytes of RAM and I will outlive you by several hundred years.

GK: Sure. In a landfill maybe.

SS (ROBOT): Okay, that's it. Auto-shutdown. I'm out of here. Shutting down.

(POWER DOWN)

GK: Thanks. See you later. Oh— I never got your name.

SS (ROBOT, FADING): Sarah—

GK: Bye, Sarah.

(THEME)

TR (ANNC): A dark night in a city that knows how to keep its secrets. But on the 12th floor of the Acme building, one man is still trying to find the answers to life's persistent questions: Guy Noir, Private Eye.

In the end, the GPS becomes a backseat driver, taking on more human characteristics, but so, too, does Guy Noir, as the two people exchange names. Conflicted until the end, Guy Noir is an Urban Agrarian with modern tools and old-fashioned values.

Guy Noir returned in the 26 January 2008 broadcast, and he again faced the annoyance of a modern technology: the telephone. The cell phone, its smart phone cousin, and being put-on-hold are the irritating objects in this episode. The pattern for Guy Noir skits relies on the conflict between urban values and agrarian virtues, and this conflict is the central critique offered in each skit. The central conflict is not the only critique, of course, for Keillor is opportunistic, adding topical humor based on recent news or passing swipes at pet peeves. On rare occasions, Keillor turns the skit into a celebration, as when St. Paul honors native-son F. Scott Fitzgerald. For the most part, however, Keillor brings agrarian misgivings to the artifacts of modern life. In the five years between January 2003 and January 2008, Guy Noir struggled with Prima Donnas, Customer Service, Halloween, Football Fans, Self Doubt, Politicians, Rich People, Airport Security, Credit Card Companies, Roommates, the Generation Gap, and the Record Industry, among others.

From January 2007 to January 2008, Noir appeared in most of the live broadcasts, in many of the repeat broadcasts, and in the Annual Joke Show (3 February 2007). A *Prairie Home Companion* is broadcast every week of the year. Repeats of segments from

previous years are edited together to create rebroadcasts, sometimes with elements from several programs pieced together, to provide local stations with programming even when the production staff are on holiday. Most of the programs broadcast in 2007 were repeat broadcasts, several were done “on the road,” and a few were live.

The Fitzgerald Theatre is the home of *A Prairie Home Companion*, but the company pulls up stakes frequently to travel to other towns. The Urban Agrarian finds other towns fascinating, for they are different from and yet comfortably the same as home. The programs draw on local artists, local geography, and local topical issues. Even the old, familiar, and agrarian appears in distorted modern form away from home: the St. Louis show (20 January 2007) at the “Siamese-Byzantine style” Fox Theatre featured an airline run by Dominican nuns (Doctrine Air) and a radio that picked up only decades-old broadcasts. The parent company, Minnesota Public Radio, had been fighting city hall in an effort to keep a light rail line from introducing noise and vibration to new downtown studios in Minneapolis, but for the 23 June 2007 broadcast, Guy Noir found the perpetually modern problem of railroads easy compared to making small talk at a cocktail party during the broadcast from Kansas City (which was also debating local light rail around this time). The 6 January 2007 broadcast was original, but recorded in November of 2006 during a second live show in Honolulu, although Guy Noir did not make the trip. Google and Vice-President Dick Cheney were his foils in the 13 January 2007 broadcast from the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. Terry Gross, the host of the public radio program *Fresh Air* was Guy Noir’s accomplice in a struggle with the radio and record industries in the 27 January 2007 broadcast from the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia (where *Fresh Air* is produced). For Saint Patrick’s Day 2007, Guy Noir

was part of a road show from Town Hall in New York; his stock detective case was resolved by the ability of professional Irishmen and honorary Irishmen to find, amid other differences, an imaginary and subjunctive common ground. Continuing the Town Hall appearances, the 24 March 2007 episode of Guy Noir tackled Poets and Poetry Prizes, and, although the 31 March 2007 program did not include a Guy Noir script, it did include a Poetry Prize.

The ironies of modern life were Noir's fodder on 7 April 2007 (a 14 April 2001 repeat of a Fitzgerald Theater broadcast): bad puns, people who can't follow directions, the weather, denominational conventions, the end of conventions, vacuous TV personalities, fashion, megalomaniac criminals, and, for dramatic irony, radio drama itself. Guy Noir even gets the girl in this episode, completing the Romantic irony with a 37-year old 8th grade teacher who, thanks to her career, only looks 70 or 75.

On 12 May 2007, Guy Noir faced down the Military-Industrial Complex in a broadcast from the State Theatre in Minneapolis. No "Noir" script aired on the 19 May 2007 broadcast from the State Theatre. For the 26 May 2007 broadcast from the Filene Center at Wolf Trap, the National Park for Performing Arts, in Vienna, Virginia, "Guy Noir" was replaced by a surrealist one-off script, "The Lives of the Writers," that finds wry humor in writers' fears about writing rubbish, neglecting their families, and letting the characters they create take over inside their own minds. This has the same kind of

appeal as the *Village Voice* for some listeners: it's not about them, but it's about people like them.³¹

In a broadcast from the Rhubarb Festival in Lanesboro, Minnesota, aggressive public radio fund raising was the target of Guy Noir's concern on 2 June 2007, along with agri-business and other signs of urban intrusion into agrarian utopias. From the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles, roommates were treated in the "Guy Noir" episode as another form of urban blight on 9 June 2007. These demonstrate the dystopic strain of Urban Agrarianism. On 16 June 2007, the "Guy Noir" script found bittersweet moments in Fathers' Day during a live broadcast from the Ravinia Pavilion in Highland Park, Illinois (a summer retreat North of Chicago). Broadcasting from the Starlight Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri, *A Prairie Home Companion* not only dealt with the local, topical issue of light rail, Guy Noir struggled with people who had an overdeveloped sense of what they wanted out of life, perhaps suggested by the ambitious architecture and superstructures of Kansas City; as Noir signed off, he noted, "Kansas City. It wasn't all rationalism that built this town. No sir." Then, on 30 June 2007, in the last live broadcast before the summer repeat and compilation season began, Garrison Keillor imagined a grotesque opposite of the Norman Rockwell gentility that Norman Rockwell saw in his hometown of Lenox, Massachusetts. As the site of the Tanglewood Music Center, and as the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, this suggested a caper involving the theft of priceless musical instruments as device for the noir study of slightly damaged characters.

³¹ Louis Menand, "It Took a Village: How the Voice Changed Journalism," *The New Yorker* 5 January 2009.

Repeat broadcasts often featured episodes drawn from road shows. In a 24 February 2007 rebroadcast of a 14 January 2006 show from the campus of the University of Minnesota, Guy Noir foiled a topical plot to produce performance enhancing drugs for academics.

Two of the March 2007 broadcasts featured compilation programs. For the 3 March program, Broadway was the theme; and the dangers of pursuing grand life ambitions was the Urban Agrarian dilemma confronted by Guy Noir in the 28 October 2006 repeat. The 10 March program had a related theme: Opera; Guy Noir confirmed the Urban Agrarian resistance to Divas (those whose achievement of life ambitions had made them unpleasantly self-assured) in a 23 April 2005 episode from Town Hall in New York (conveniently close to the high concentration of opera, divas, and opera divas notoriously afforded by the city).

Instead of “Guy Noir” on 5 May 2007, the audience heard “The Story of Bob, A Young Artist” (a 5 October 2002 repeat of a Fitzgerald Theater broadcast). This was another compilation program, with poetry as its theme, and Bob, an unsuccessful artist in a small town, struggles against under-appreciation and art world politics, yet the dramatic irony Keillor produces allows the audience to see that Bob is not a very good artist after all. The Urban Agrarian occupies a conflicted place in which urbane ambitions struggle with Imposter Syndrome.³²

Repeat broadcasts are conventional on *A Prairie Home Companion* at particular times of the year: the winter holidays, Spring break, summer vacation. All of the July

³² Benedict Carey, "Feel Like a Fraud? At Times, Maybe You Should," The New York Times 5 February 2009.

2007 programs were summertime rebroadcasts, and all were repeats of road shows.

Inheritance squabbles provided Guy Noir with a foil for the 7 July 2007 program (a 3 July 2004 repeat of a road show from Tanglewood Music Festival in Lenox, Massachusetts—historically, a summer home for America’s richest families at the end of the 19th Century). An evil Diva (played by real diva Renee Fleming) provided an opportunity for Noir to skewer Republican politicians on 14 July 2007 (a 23 July 2005 repeat of a road show broadcast from Town Hall in New York—a venue noted for its acoustics, egalitarian seating, progressive programming, and historical significance as the home of *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*, first broadcast on NBC on Memorial Day, 1935). Topical events received surrealist treatment when Guy Noir worked security at a Red River Valley casino for the 21 July 2007 program (a 4 March 2006 repeat of a road show broadcast from Grand Forks, North Dakota; six Indian casinos are licensed in the state). Guy Noir did not appear in the 28 July 2007 program (a compilation of road show broadcasts from the Hollywood Bowl, America’s largest natural amphitheatre—situated in the Hollywood Hills between Los Angeles and Burbank, CA), but the program featured a 2 June 2006 reminiscence of old-time radio by Garrison Keillor combined with a fanciful tale of how he broke into radio. (The cast included Meryl Streep, Virginia Madsen, and John C. Reilly—all appearing the 2006 Robert Altman film, *A Prairie Home Companion*—along with *A Prairie Home Companion* regulars Sue Scott, Tim Russell, and Garrison Keillor.)

The August 2007 programs were compilations of programs, each organized around a different theme and drawing from several programs. For the 4 August 2007 program, the theme was “all things Norwegian,” and the Guy Noir skit about dating a

Norwegian bachelor was a rebroadcast from the 11 October 2003 show at the Fitzgerald Theatre. Books and authors was the theme for the 11 August 2007 program; no Noir script was programmed, but the Ketchup Advisory Board public service announcement was part of the program. The 18 August 2007 program celebrated summer and included a 10 year-old “Guy Noir” skit from 24 May 1997, with the private eye dealing with two aspects of modern life: polyester clothing in colors not found in nature and consumer rage over minor slights. Preparing for Labor Day, the 25 August 2007 program focused on the lives of working men and women, rebroadcasting the 25 September 2004 “Guy Noir” skit that celebrated F. Scott Fitzgerald in his hometown, in a theater named after him. In the same program, Dusty and Lefty turned down well-paid jobs as “pictorial cowboys” in a 30 December 2006 road show from Town Hall in New York.

The Labor Day weekend program on 1 September 2007 was a live broadcast from the Grandstand of the Minnesota State Fair in a residential area between Minneapolis and St. Paul. The “Guy Noir” script gave Garrison Keillor an opportunity to use Republican political scandals as foils for topical humor, and to use the fair as an opportunity to ridicule oversized SUVs and oversized self-pity, with some sympathy for an oversized hog. On the 8 September 2007 “Back-to-School” compilation show, the “Guy Noir” episode is another decade-old script, spoofing term-paper mills and the linguistically incompetent college students who depend on them, along with impenetrable postmodern academic jargon at the other end of the intellectual spectrum, and the general lack of sense people are inexplicably capable of displaying. This represents the quintessential plight of the Urban Agrarian: the world is neither Arcadia nor New Jerusalem, and other people are generally annoying.

The 2007-2008 season opened with a live broadcast from the Fitzgerald Theatre that did not include a “Guy Noir” script, but its function was fulfilled by a script that rehearsed the modern difficulty of “roommates” and the irony of an ersatz country bumpkin dobro player who turns out to be the ideal roommate. While taking temporary work as airport security, Guy Noir gripes about the worst that is brought out in people by the attendant inconveniences of current air travel, and he fantasizes about bi-partisan political heroes who stand in contrast to the current occupants of high office in a 22 September 2007 live broadcast. Guy Noir was displaced by Martin Sheen, whose signature television series, *The West Wing*, had ended 16 months earlier, in the 29 September 2007 live broadcast.

The 6 October 2007 live broadcast replaced “Guy Noir” with a fantasy that offered a disillusioned view of utopian thinking. In a live broadcast from Baltimore on 13 October 2007, Guy Noir bought a drink for the ghost of H.L. Mencken (who had the best lines, inasmuch as Guy Noir was a straight man for Mencken’s urbane cynicism and wounded ideals). On the road from Charlotte, North Carolina for the 20 October 2007 broadcast, Guy Noir took on the relatively minor problems of automated phone systems and local air carriers, along with *nouveau riche* affectations and inept bankers. In anticipation of Halloween, the 27 October 2007 broadcast was a compilation program, with Guy Noir, from a 30 October 2004 skit, channeling Orson Welles’s 30 October 1938 *War of the Worlds* broadcast and being treated badly by children, Trick-or-Treat, manipulative old girlfriends, and manipulative old politicians.

In the 3 November 2007 compilation broadcast about the various seasons of Fall, Guy Noir combines the utopian quest for a Golden Age with the tragedy of football in a

13 November 2004 repeat episode. *A Prairie Home Companion* was broadcast from just across the Mississippi River in Minneapolis on 10 November 2007, and from the Fitzgerald Theatre in St. Paul on 17 November 2007, but “Guy Noir” was not on either program.

On 24 November 2007, the program began a month-long series from Town Hall in New York. In the first program, Guy Noir faced the agrarian’s nightmare of New York real estate and contracting. The extended story arc of Guy Noir taking a job as an executive director for World Wide Walleye continued on the 1 December 2007 program, when a New York fishmonger’s utopian vision of Minnesota landed a big contract for World Wide Walleye, only to have the success dashed when New Yorkers found out that an enzyme in the fish made them talk slowly like Minnesotans. Finicky restaurants, a finicky stock market, and a con artist added to Guy Noir’s agrarian nightmare on the 8 December 2007 program. The story arc and the road trip ended with the 15 December 2007 program in which Guy Noir loses his job and takes the bus back to St. Paul. Still on the road for the 22 December 2007 program, *A Prairie Home Companion* presents a holiday program from Bethlehem, PA. Instead of a “Guy Noir” episode, the company presented “Ruth Harrison, Reference Librarian” as a stand-in for Guy Noir and for Ebenezer Scrooge. Avoiding the cynical side of the Urban Agrarian character of Guy Noir so close to the Christian holidays, this skit, nonetheless, included a satiric George W. Bush version of the ghost of Christmas Present.

The 29 December 2007 program was a rebroadcast of a 27 January 2007 road show at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia. Topical and local issues mentioned included the recent debate over a ban on trans-fats in city restaurants, and the local food fad of

gourmet mini-burgers. Self indulgent artists and soulless record companies (and radio stations, since Terry Gross, the host of *Fresh Air* on public radio played the artist) were the objects of urban-agrarian derision.

For the 5 January 2008 broadcast, *A Prairie Home Companion* was a compilation program built on two broadcasts from the Bayfront Amphitheater in Miami. Discount airlines, Little Oslo and other fantasy counterparts to Little Cuba, mid-life crises that involve running away to join the circus and behaving in Latin rather than Norwegian ways, were the objects of sarcasm, and an oddly aggressive Guy Noir insisting on the claim by Minnesota over people's lives stood as the ironic alter-ego of Garrison Keillor. The 12 January 2008 program, another compilation of trips to Austin, Texas, included a Guy Noir episode from 10 June 2006 satirizing high-living politicians.

On the live broadcasts from the Fitzgerald Theatre in St. Paul, Noir's nemeses included Dating Services and Customer Service (and the odd experience of rejection associated with both; 3 February 2007), Writer's Block (10 February 2007), and Terrorism (17 February 2007). Guy Noir missed the 14 April 2007 broadcast, but Garrison Keillor visited the "Café Beouf." The Generation Gap was Guy Noir's foil for a meditation on Old Time Radio on 21 April 2007. Noir missed the 28 April 2007 broadcast, but sound effects man Fred Newman took his place, repeating a tendency at the Fitzgerald Theater to take radio as the indeterminate locale for Urban Agrarian irony. Relatively few broadcasts originated from the Fitzgerald Theatre, and drawing as they did on free-floating Urban Agrarian anxieties and national issues, they did not have the rhetorical specificity of local culture, events, and circumstances to ground the satire. Instead, the issues apply more broadly.

The broad application of humor and social critique appears to invite people to laugh at themselves. But, as Louis Menand points out in his analysis of Jules Feiffer cartoon strips published in *The Village Voice*,

It's sometimes said of this kind of humor that it succeeds by getting people to laugh at themselves, but this can't be right. People don't like to laugh at themselves. This kind of humor succeeds because it gets people to laugh at people who are exactly like themselves.³³

If Rabinowitz's thesis is correct (that noir anticipates cultural moments, providing a language for understanding the culture—in Kenneth Burke's terms, "equipment for living"), the regular appearance of Guy Noir responds to the chronic problem of the paradox embodied by the Urban Agrarian.³⁴ The solution to the paradox was played out in the Annual (as of 1996) Joke Show broadcast on 3 February 2007 as Guy Noir ruminates, just before the black out at the end of the script:

Life is a joke, pal. That's the meaning of life. It's a rutabaga. The reason I didn't talk was that everything up to this point was okay. So play it for laughs. Play it for laughs. Tragedy is just a joke that we haven't figured out yet.

"The Lives of the Cowboys" stands in juxtaposition to "Guy Noir." Noir is the Modern with Agrarian sensibilities, and Dusty and Lefty are rustics with urban concerns. As the announcer to this ersatz radio serial intones at the beginning of the 20 January 2007 episode,

³³ Menand, "It Took a Village," 43.

³⁴ Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism*, Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

Sue Scott: The Lives of the Cowboys—true stories of loneliness and self-esteem issues in the Old West. Brought to you by Cactus Jack astringent pads—pre-moistened with mesquite.

Guy Noir sees the modern world not living up to its potential; Lefty sees a world mired in the past as not living up to his potential; Dusty wonders what all the fuss is about. (Guy Noir's name advertises itself: he sees life as dark and gloomy. Dusty is a perfectly good nickname for a cowboy covered in trail grime, but it also reflects his old, dust-covered attitudes. Lefty is another respectable nickname for an undomesticated southpaw from a time when the left-handed were forced to use their right hands, but Garrison Keillor is not left-handed: the nickname for his cowboy alter ego reflects, rather, his Progressive leanings and artistic yearnings.) Lefty is a poet and a singer reminiscent of the Gene Autry style of singing cowboy. Between 20 January 2007 and 12 January 2008, Dusty and Lefty navigated these urban problems with less-than-entirely-successful rural aplomb: embarrassment of events beyond one's control at an awards show, yuppies gentrifying Durango, being too cowardly at love, the insufferable characteristics of straw-men Democrats and Republicans, Lefty teaching cowboy studies as a satire of identity studies at the University of Minnesota, and on several occasions, the search for love and for a better career. Personified by Guy Noir and Lefty, the Urban Agrarian values the modern *and* the old-fashioned.

Rather than critique agrarian or urban life directly, Keillor observes their inadequacies in terms of the absurd and the grotesque. By hyperbole, irony, wit, and humor, he constructs a critique comprised entirely of diversions, the little humanizing effects that public speakers introduce into otherwise sober public discourse. Lacking a

political agenda (in the larger sense—Keillor seems, in the smaller sense, to be on the liberal side of the Democratic Party and opposed to the policies of Republican presidents such as George W. Bush), Keillor opts for being simultaneously liberal and conservative when it comes to social issues and to society, and he performs this through the witticisms that tweak the pieties of both urban and agrarian.

A Prairie Home Companion establishes a fantasy world that is an exaggeration of the rules of the lived world (megalomania) and an idealization of the rules of two worlds (utopia).³⁵ Lake Wobegon, and the Urban Agrarianism throughout the program, is a negation of the urban and the agrarian through exaggeration and idealization, but in satirizing both, it embraces both.

Since humor relies so much on surprise and contrast, the ironic voice and subjunctive mood of these jokes is entirely in keeping with the habit of thought that marks public radio programming. Barry Brummett observes of the virtual machines of electronic technology that they have surfaces that shield their inner workings, and yet those surfaces disappear as we enter into the realm of content.³⁶ There is a dualism that is sometimes experienced as something synthetic. Listeners often have the experience of getting caught up in the world of Lake Wobegon, and they forget that they are listening to the radio. Something similar happens when we become unaware of the technologies of printing or film or even storytelling as we focus on the story. We admire art that accomplishes this, but art that provides access to the storytelling as well as the story

³⁵ David Konstan, "The Greek Polis and Its Negations: Versions of Utopia in Aristophanes' *Birds*," *The City as Comedy: Society and Representation in Athenian Drama*, ed. Gregory W. Dobrov (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

³⁶ Brummett, *Rhetoric of Machine Aesthetics* 57-88.

upends the deterministic quality of an aestheticized politics. The rhetorical machinery of public radio programming includes verbal irony, juxtaposition, and an ideology of self-contradiction that promotes awareness and judgment. To be a thing of both exterior and interior is unsettling for some, which explains why the program—and public radio programming generally—is not universally popular. Paradox, it seems, is uncomfortable for some.

A *Slate* magazine profile of Garrison Keillor (published just after the film, *A Prairie Home Companion*, had been released in 2006) captures the essential paradox of Urban Agrarianism that finds its apotheosis in Keillor. Titled “The Mysterious Appeal of Garrison Keillor,” Sam Anderson’s article finds the appeal “mysterious,” apparently, because Keillor is *this* and *that* without noting that the appeal exists because Keillor is *both* this and that. Sensing the Contrastive epistemics of public radio programming, Anderson observes the productive ambiguities of Keillor without understanding them as the source of appeal: “He has come to represent a crucial schism in the national taste—the Great Continental Divide between sarcasm and earnestness, snark and purity, the corrupt and the wholesome.” Anderson asks, “How has someone so relentlessly inoffensive managed to become so divisive?” Keillor is both/and: “He honored his native culture by gently mocking it, an approach that ingeniously echoed the region's ethic of self-deprecating pride.” He contrasts the size of the first audience (12) with the current audience (“4 million listeners a week across 600 stations”). Caught up in Keillor appeal, Anderson finds contrasts everywhere: “For a variety show, *Prairie Home* is remarkably invariable—its elements (skits, songs, humorous poems, catchphrases) cycle in and out of the program as predictably as the seasons.” Anderson’s description is accurate, but his

label is arguable. Anderson finds the answer to Keillor's appeal, but instead calls it the puzzle: "Keillor's humor has always been a bit of a puzzle: What is its irony/sincerity ratio? Is he mocking Midwesterners or mocking the rest of us via Midwesterners?"

Anderson defines Keillor in terms of antitheses:

In 1985, when *Time* magazine called Keillor the funniest man in America, Bill Cosby reportedly said, "That's true if you're a pilgrim." A decade later, a cartoon version of Keillor forced Homer Simpson to assault his TV and shout, "Be more funny!" But judging Keillor by mainstream standards of comedy (compression, originality, edge) misses the point. He works hard to be unfunny in a very particular way. His humor is polite, understated, and deliberately anachronistic; it never breaks a sweat. He is happy to sacrifice mass appeal to preserve what he sees as grown-up honesty.

In the "the decorous, irony-lite boundaries of his shtick," Anderson finds further contradictions: "Though Keillor is associated with the Midwest, his sensibility comes largely out of New York City." He connects Keillor to *The New Yorker* in terms of oxymoron: "probably the purest living specimen of the magazine's Golden Age aesthetic: sophisticated plainness, light sentimentality, significant trivia." Finding contrary personalities ("Keillor the writer often stands in sharp contrast to Keillor the radio persona."), Anderson observes destructive paradox. Anderson grasps the essential contradictions of Keillor, but his interpretation is that it is destructive.

Although he claims that Keillor eschews rhetorical devices, Anderson tabs him as a rhetorical writer:

Although Keillor is in almost every way the polar opposite of Howard Stern, they are working on similar projects. They've engineered personae to shake listeners out of what they see as unhealthy modern diseases—in Stern's case, the plague of sexual repression; in Keillor's, our addiction to television, the Internet, glibness, and distraction. Both men are shock jocks, Keillor is the shock jock of wholesomeness.³⁷

This identifies Keillor as rhetor. The source of Keillor's appeal is that he is a rhetor. He is producing texts that equip and motivate listeners and readers to make judgments. Part of what makes that judgment possible is Keillor's willingness to be annoying—he is a catalyst for a judgment, but not the reactant. The listener is invited, not to adopt Keillor and his ideas, but to choose among the contradictory ideas that Keillor presents and represents. Paradoxically the “shock jock of wholesomeness,” Keillor defamiliarizes the urban and the agrarian with a “strange clarity”³⁸ The contrast of the two worldviews creates “perspective by incongruity” as it emphasizes the differences.³⁹ Since both must be rejected, in Keillor's somber cheerfulness about the ways that neither country nor city function well, no position is endorsed persuasively—meaning that any decisions are contingent and open to revision. This is the sort of rhetoric that persuades, not toward any particular choice, but to make a sound choice. Creating this environment is the

³⁷ Sam Anderson, "A Prairie Home Conundrum: The Mysterious Appeal of Garrison Keillor," *Slate* (2006), 5 January 2009 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2143763/>>.

³⁸ Ewa M. Thompson, *Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 27.

³⁹ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 91.

source of public radio programming appeal. *A Prairie Home Companion* is a “prophylactic against fastidiousness” emanating from both camps.⁴⁰

W. H. Auden in, “Digley Dell & the Fleet,” distinguishes between our Edens and our New Jerusalems. He says that the same individual is unlikely to favor both and that dreamers of each are of different character. For the Arcadian, “Eden is a past world in which the contradictions of the present world have not yet arisen; New Jerusalem is future world in which they have at last been resolved,” and that future appeals to the Utopian. In Eden, the inhabitants do whatever they like to do; in New Jerusalem, the inhabitants like to do what they ought to do.⁴¹ Keillor, as a specimen of the Urban Agrarian, is both Arcadian and Utopian, but it is St. Paul or New York that allows doing as you will, whereas Lake Wobegon is the Utopian “land that time forgot and the decades cannot improve” and where people like to do what they ought to do. The literature on Utopia, like the literature on irony, is vast. Much of it focuses on the literary characteristics and qualities of this genre of fiction, but most of it also recognizes the rhetorical qualities of prose that comments on the here-and-now by describing a faraway future (or past).

Nicole Loraux claims that epideictic rhetoric is political rhetoric when it gives people a vision of themselves and calls on them to emulate that vision; Richard Weaver,

⁴⁰ Rowan Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s *De Doctrina*,” *Literature and Theology* 3.2 (1989): 138.

⁴¹ W. H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand, and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

similarly, claims that rhetoric shows people better versions of themselves.⁴² *A Prairie Home Companion* provides an ironic vision by contrasting urban foibles and rural foibles. The picture that is thus produced in the theatre of the mind is much like the pictures that are produced by the theatre of the air: pictures created by one's imagination are more compelling than those created by another person's visualization. Since the details are the product of one's own judgment, the process is more rhetorical than it is persuasive.

Auden is probably correct in describing incompatibilities between those who find Eden in the past and Utopia in the future. The Urban Agrarian of public radio, however, finds Utopia in the past and Eden in the future and is, thus, not incapable of finding, but instead, is *obliged* to find compatible and productive ambiguities in the mutually exclusive positions of Arcadian and Utopian. In general, comedy looks backward and tragedy looks forward. But for the Urban Agrarian, being trapped by the past is the tragedy. The comedic frame is Burkean rather than Classical; it is the frame of acceptance and both/and rather than either/or. Urban Agrarianism is a form of memory that looks forward in time.⁴³

Lake Wobegon is utopian, in the sense that it describes "the unreal and the impossible."⁴⁴ But there are many varieties of utopia, and we must draw the map of Lake Wobegon carefully to show which kind it is. Thomas Hubbard points out that

⁴² Cited in Dale L. Sullivan, "A Closer Look at Education as Epideictic Rhetoric," *RSQ: Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 23.3/4 (1993): 72; Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*; Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

⁴³ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mary J. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁴ Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922).

Aristophanes comedies start out Arcadian, turn Edenic, and end disastrously.⁴⁵ Certainly, his description of the sophistic city, abandoning its Hesiodic myths of a Golden Age to pursue the ideal city, ideally constituted, sounds like the surface of Keillor's apparent return to old-timey culture. Keillor paints a scene of agrarian life, shows how urban sentiments conflict with it, but cannot overcome it, and yet urbanity never quite wins totally either. Careful consideration of the complete picture shows that neither ideology is a complete set of fool-proof plans, and so the individual must make decisions daily. A *Prairie Home Companion* and the rest of public radio programming is rhetoric that motivates choice but does not prefigure the decision. The decision remains the work of the audience, not the orators.

The Urban Agrarian, although fond of the past, is clearly anti-Fascist. Although Mussolini imagined a future Roman Italy, Gramsci correctly recognized that such a future "would be completely predetermined by the past."⁴⁶ The Urban Agrarian rhetoric of *A Prairie Home Companion* and public radio generally rejects prefigured judgments.

Robert Nozick describes a Utopia based on association: individuals who choose to live together believing it to be the best of all possible worlds. But there can be no broad consensus regarding what would be characteristic of an ideal world. He distinguishes design devices from filter devices in the construction of a utopian society: one plans the ideal ahead of time, and the other rejects the unacceptable from what forms organically.

⁴⁵ Thomas K. Hubbard, "Utopianism and the Sophistic City in Aristophanes," *The City as Comedy: Society and Representation in Athenian Drama*, ed. Gregory W. Dobrov (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 25.

⁴⁶ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 91-92.

It is an evolutionary method. Keillor fits the model of what Nozick calls Existential Utopians (those who prefer diversity), and he respects Missionary Utopians (who want voluntary acceptance of a preferred pattern), but he skewers Imperialistic Utopians (who would impose their pattern on others). Nozick provides two objections to Utopian plans: they are static and unchanging, and they are naïve about real human beings. They also regularly ignore means or ends, depending on their particular fixations. Nozick focuses on a framework for utopia rather than particular characteristics of utopia to support a process rather than an end-state; a libertarian rejecting state planning, and arguing that anarchy always evolves into some sort of state, he prefers a state that organically filters out the bad, leaving only the best of all possible worlds, even if that is only marginally better than the alternatives.⁴⁷ Keillor designs the bad of the Urban and the Agrarian to imply, ironically, the Ideal, but in doing so, leaves the design of the good up to the audience.

Frank Edward Manuel and Fritzie Prigohzy Manuel, in cataloguing the range of utopian thought in the West, capture the productive contradictions that superintend utopia:

Utopians of the past have dealt with war and peace, the many faces of love, the antimony of need and desire, the opposition of calm felicity and dynamic change, the alternatives of hierarchy or equality, the search for a powerful unifying bond to hold mankind together, whether universal love or a common identification with a transcendent being.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974) 299-332.

⁴⁸ Frank Edward Manuel and Fritzie Prigohzy Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1979) 802.

Utopia can be described as a longing for a Golden Age of Arcadia or as a dream of a Bright Future in New Jerusalem. Lake Wobegon is, paradoxically and productively, all of these. It is, ironically, a political ideal of judgment in rejecting the failings of both the urban and the agrarian. If it were crafted as accepting both urban and agrarian, it would prescribe certain choices, but in rejecting the surface structure of both attitudes, it creates an acceptance of a transcendent ideology of Urban Agrarianism.

Conclusion

Car Talk relies on the juxtapositions of irony, both stable and unstable, in ways that advance an educational project. *All Things Considered* deploys the juxtapositions of argument in ways that arrange productive contraries. The contraries validate habits of mind that are “poetic” and “scientific,” liberal and conservative. *A Prairie Home Companion* relies on juxtapositions of ideology in ways that specify the productive ambiguity of embracing urbanity and agrarianism at the same time.

In his treatise on “irony fatigue” as a symptom felt by comedians who would try to be social critics under the guise of a humorist, Will Kaufman describes Garrison Keillor as “the suffocated insider with an outsider’s vision; the prodigal exile with an insider’s tolerance; the antifundamentalist wincing at secular emptiness; the shy, articulate sophisticate directing his criticism inward as well as outward, with a multiple voice that is at once his indispensable shield and his critical weapon.”⁴⁹ Judith Yaross

⁴⁹ Will Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997) 27-28.

Lee notes the “cacophony [which] cautions against believing too much in any one voice” as a way to focus on the “fictiveness of the storyteller,” but the public political work lies, not in self-protection, but in protecting the audience from too much belief.⁵⁰

Peter Schreffler observes that Keillor can appeal to many audiences: “anti-secularists, anti-fundamentalists, the spiritually ambivalent, and grace advocates.”⁵¹ Kaufman and Schreffler interpret Keillor as a “spiritual chameleon,” providing audiences “with enough potential evidence of a world view consonant with their own.”⁵² Their reading suggests there is a facile quality to Keillor’s work that questions his complex, contradictory position. Another reading, however, would allow that a range of ideas can co-exist and suggest that Keillor is not endorsing one view or another, but is instead transcending polarization and modeling that method.

Kaufman is not unaware of the irony, but he does not see it as art: “It is ironic that *Lake Wobegon Days* has the capacity to be seen as ‘an affirmation of small town values,’ given the calculated *reluctance* that so pervades the narrative.”⁵³ His claims should be taken in good faith, for he is making his argument (and not another) that Keillor suffers from fatigue. The validity of his argument is beside the point: he perceives an irony, even though he does not attribute it to art. Moreover, he agrees with Lee that Keillor’s effort is a strategy.⁵⁴ Kaufman interprets this as personal defense

⁵⁰ Judith Yaross Lee, Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991).

⁵¹ Peter H. Schreffler, “Where All the Children Are above Average:” Garrison Keillor as a Model for Personal Narrative Assignments,” College Composition and Communication 40.1 (1989).

⁵² Kaufman, The Comedian as Confidence Man 31.

⁵³ Kaufman, The Comedian as Confidence Man 32; emphasis in the original.

⁵⁴ Kaufman, The Comedian as Confidence Man 33, Lee, Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America 57-60.

rather than political rhetoric. Kaufman notes, “The satirist must instigate and negotiate two conflicting state of mind in his audience.”⁵⁵ He concludes that being an ironist is exhausting and that the tendency among ironic comedians is toward fatigue and pessimism. He also fears that irony is just aesthetics and too insubstantial to be political.⁵⁶ In the same vein, Rorty finds irony too contingent to be political; Seery finds it self-affirming; Muecke finds irony cosmically ironic: “The artist is in an ironic position for several reasons: in order to write well he must be both creative and critical, subjective and objective, enthusiastic and realistic, emotional and ratiom, unconsciously inspired and conscious artist.”⁵⁷ Sounds like Keillor to me. In performing the set of productive contradictions, Garrison Keillor models the habits of mind—the irony, the Contrastive epistemology, the ideology—that make rhetorical judgments possible.

⁵⁵ Kaufman, The Comedian as Confidence Man 38.

⁵⁶ Kaufman, The Comedian as Confidence Man 234.

⁵⁷ Muecke, The Compass of Irony 20.

Chapter 5

Rhetoric and The Public in Public Radio

Irony is the predominant trope in Kenneth Burke's "Four Master Tropes," and it is the predominant voice in public radio programming.¹ Verbal irony, most conspicuous in *Car Talk*, is not the only form, as dramatic ironies and cosmic ironies appear in news programs, such as *All Things Considered*, and Romantic irony materializes in the persona of Garrison Keillor on *A Prairie Home Companion*. Fairly stable ironies, such as the puns of *Car Talk* and the situational ironies of life as reported on *All Things Considered*, open up the field for unstable ironies. The ageism in *Car Talk* is simultaneously there and not-there. *All Things Considered* makes ironic epistemic claims, stating "this, not that" only to reverse itself immediately to proclaim "that, not this." Moving from the verbal to the situational to the ideological, *A Prairie Home Companion* offers the productive ambiguities of Urban Agrarianism, an overt form of utopian attitudes that lie behind the epistemics of *All Things Considered* and the ironies of *Car Talk*.

Taken as a whole, these ironies form a superintending ideology of Urban Agrarianism in public radio programming that embraces the modern and the traditional, the conservative and the liberal, the city and the country. Much of public radio programming is utopian in that it envisions a better world that exists

¹ Burke, "Four Master Tropes."

in both our past and in our future and in that it is a commentary on the present that encourages perfecting without becoming “rotten with perfection.”² Public radio programming is a broad experience of irony and it contributes to a dialectic, but because it is rhetorical, it does not prefigure any particular conclusion in an ongoing conversation.

The conspicuous rhetorical process in public radio programming is the subjunctive mood. This is manifest in the ironic voice of the programs. As discourse in the subjunctive mood, public radio programming traffics in the contingent and the possible. Continuously forestalling judgment itself, it enables the listeners to make their own judgments by providing them with content and a model of deliberation. The ironic voice of public radio appears in the language of the programs, in the arguments formed by juxtaposition of segments, and in the Urban Agrarianism of the superintending ideology of public radio. Through verbal tactics and interpretive strategies, public radio programming circulates ideas to arrive at ironic and subjunctive principles. These, simply, amount to being able to hold two mutually exclusive concepts in mind simultaneously while retaining the ability to function effectively. This represents the ability to change your mind without changing who you are.

Public radio programming contributes rhetoric to public culture by providing audiences with the resources of judgment such that, in making judgments, the audiences become publics. Since the publication of John Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems*,

² Burke, Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method 16.

Jurgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and Nancy Fraser's critique of Habermas, making claims about the nature of "the public" has been an important part of rhetorical literature.³ Recent articles continue the discussion regarding the question: "What is the public?"⁴ Erik Doxtader's inquiry into *ethos* as an important ligature between the consensual and the oppositional in public deliberation starts with Aristotle, and ends with the contemporary case study of Vaclav Havel.⁵ To explore further, by following up on Doxtader's invocation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*, I have examined Aristotle's *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric* to find out what "the public" *does* as a way to clarify what it *is*. Through this focus on the audience rather than the speaker, rhetoric emerges as the proper means for public judgment.

For Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, the audience is a "carpenter's rule." It is the measure of the speakers' *ethos*, of the *pathos* evoked in the speech, and of the strength of speech's *logos*. Although the audience is not entirely passive—it, after all, makes a judgment—it appears, but only appears, to be acted on. The deliberation that occurs and the judgment that is the end of rhetoric are, however, the work of the audience, as the

³ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago: Gateway books, 1946), Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

⁴ Sharan L. Daniel, "Integrating Rhetoric and Journalism to Realize Publics," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5.3 (2002), Agnes S. Ku, "Revisiting the Notion of 'Public' in Habermas's Theory - toward a Theory of Politics of Public Credibility," *Sociological Theory* 18.2 (2000), Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, "From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the 'Violence' of Seattle," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.2 (2002), Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002).

⁵ Erik W. Doxtader, "Characters in the Middle of Public Life: Consensus, Dissent, and Ethos," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33.4 (2000).

work of the whole Athenian public was carried out through the making of judgments. Throughout much of the *Rhetoric*, however, the audience exists on the periphery while the focus is the speaker, and the task of the public seems to be merely to ratify one of the options presented by rhetors. The rule must not be warped, of course, but it is, after all, only a scale for measuring the speaker's art.

A more robust view of the public emerges from Aristotle's *Politics*. Under an ideal constitution, an educated public pursues a common good, rather than any individual's or sub-group's well-being. This public has great responsibilities, and thus it seems different from the audience Aristotle tells us about in the *Rhetoric*, with its inability to take in a complicated argument in a single glance and its emotional state affecting its judgment. The public, on the contrary, largely vanishes in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, replaced by the ethical individual. What might we make of Aristotle's view of the public, given the different roles it plays in these three works?

In my view, Aristotle establishes an ideal political situation in which ethical judgment is the work of the public. His *Ethics* establishes the touchstone for anticipating what the actions resulting from judgments can produce in terms of the good. His *Politics* establishes the best possible arena for making judgments that result in the good life. His *Rhetoric* advises speakers in the public arena on the techniques for using language as a tool for helping the audience in reaching a judgment. The judgment, however, occurs after the rhetors have completed their work of persuasion.

Thus, by "public" I mean that group of citizens who make a judgment after being given the words to do so by the rhetors. If the citizens persist in pre-conceived notions, they do not become a public. If they pursue private interests, they do not have the

common good as a goal, and they remain a collection of factions. Some audiences, therefore, might never become publics.

The “public” is not the same as audience. An audience includes those who cannot be reached or persuaded for reasons that have nothing to do with the rhetoric provided by the speakers. Audience is the collection of individuals; public is the collectivity capable of and exercising *phronesis*. Audience is a sociological entity and a rhetorical problem until the speech’s conclusion. Then, ideally, it becomes a public, and as a rhetorical concept, it becomes the source and the instrument of judgment. The “public” is both the location and the agent of judgment.

Aristotle does not refer to the public in the way I describe, although the word “public” appears throughout the *Ethics*, the *Politics*, and the *Rhetoric*. It is possible to eliminate the obvious meanings of “public” from this discussion through a word search in the texts; Aristotle attaches the word “public” to festivals, buildings, and men as an adjective to describe only their place within the activities of the community. He does not discuss, otherwise, the more modern concept of “the public.” In describing the goals of deliberation, the individual and social preparation for deliberation, and the way men deliberate, however, Aristotle provides clues as to how the deliberative action of “a public” achieves the good. Although “public” (or *koinoi*) was a relatively weightless term, public life was central in ancient Athens, and through the *Politics*, Aristotle looks specifically at the organization of this public life, with the *Rhetoric* as a handbook for speaking in or before this public. Even the *Ethics* proposes a good life that is inherently public.

For Aristotle, the public was a *construct* for political deliberation, and the function of rhetoric was to establish the best possible political or judicial judgment through the construct of the public. Rhetoric is concerned with making a judgment, and through rhetoric, the public is a group exercise of *phronesis*, with more than one speaker, typically, providing the resources of information, argument, and inspiration for the audience to make a judgment as a public. Since public action would be the means by which the good life is achieved, the public, as a rhetorical concept, is the final arrangement of political life such that rhetoric aids in decisions supporting the good life. The *Ethics* tells us that ultimately the end of judgment is the good, the *Politics* tells us how to arrange public life in order to make these judgments, and the *Rhetoric* tells us how to get from whatever exigency presents itself to the making of just such judgments.

Faced with the need to make a decision, the audience, which is not yet a public, does not – and cannot – really know what to do until deliberation occurs. Thereafter, a judgment can be made, and only then does the path to the good become clear. The rhetors, although perhaps advocates for particular judgments and firmly committed to particular positions, do not really *know*, themselves, what the best choice is until the deliberative body has made a judgment. It is through the process of deliberation, reified in a vote, that the public “makes up its mind.”

The *Ethics* and the *Politics* present ideals for Aristotle, and the *Rhetoric* can also be read as an ideal (in addition to its obvious purposes as a handbook). The *Politics*, furthermore, identifies an ideal constitution in which rhetoric can play a pivotal role. Rhetoric, then, is the primary mechanism through which the public can make judgments

that bring about the good, and the *Rhetoric* provides clues as to how Aristotle hopes the public could, in ideal situations, arrive at judgments through the essential help of rhetors.

The critiques of Habermas's theory of the public sphere notwithstanding, there is no challenge that I am aware of to his description of the psycho-social development of the human, social capacity for rational-critical thinking used to debate matters of public (and private) interest. In whatever publics are formed, the debate informs opinion that leads to political action of some sort. In an open letter to President Clinton, who had just taken office in 1993, Bill Kling, president of Minnesota Public Radio in St. Paul and founder of American Public Radio, wrote:

Public radio reaches opinion leaders. Our listeners sit on school boards, they volunteer, they are legislators, heads of companies, policymakers, social workers and activists. They vote. In short, they have a considerably higher degree of influence, as catalysts for change, than average. Much of their knowledge base and understanding of national and international issues is fed by the programming they hear on public radio. And that's where we make the difference.

Government cannot afford to solve all the problems of our society, nor can it effectively react to all of the opportunities that will move us forward. But once they understand the background behind current issues and hear the experience of others who have successfully addressed them, the opinion leaders who listen to public radio can and do act independently--in ways we know and in many ways we will never know--to multiply the efforts of government.⁶

⁶ William H. Kling, "To Empower Active Citizens with Knowledge, Locally as Well as Nationally,"

Public radio can and often does mirror the formation of the bourgeois public sphere.

Public radio encourages rational-critical thinking on matters both literary and political. In much the same way that the bourgeoisie discussed novels, public radio provides access to a broad range of contemporary cultural artifacts and encourages discussion of them, sharpening critical skills. Habermas points out: "Inasmuch as culture became a commodity and thus finally evolved into 'culture' in the specific sense (as something that pretended to exist merely for its own sake), it was claimed as the ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented subjectivity communicated with itself."⁷ Public radio blends the private and the public realm. Public radio is available to us in our homes and cars; it is a particularly intimate medium. Here, too, radio use is linked to a mode of thinking that takes considerations of one's private affairs into consideration of public issues. As Habermas explains, "The public's understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain."⁸ In other words, the practice of critical thinking, as employed in the family domain, can move into the social and political realms. Public radio is a contributor to the ongoing conversation that leads to informed political judgments.⁹ As Maurice Charland describes it, rhetoric creates publics.¹⁰

Current 15 February 1993.

⁷Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere 29.

⁸Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere 28.

⁹Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere 31-36.

¹⁰Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Quebecois*."

Ironic, Contrastive, Urban-Agrarian, and utopian, public radio programming is a model for public deliberation. Past virtues and present exigencies work together in a process of deliberation.

Recognizing the uniqueness of the present situation, Isocrates [In the *Panegyricus*] respects the present's resilience to the past and permits the past case to illuminate the present moment only as much as he allows the present to illuminate the past. Wise deliberation unfolds by means of a process according to which the general illuminates the particular and the particular illuminates the general.¹¹

A public forms when an audience makes a judgment. Public artifacts, such as speeches, literature, prose, poetry, and the daily discourse of journalism and broadcasting, provide the resources for public judgment.

Some artifacts, such as public radio programs, provide the resources for judgment without prefiguring what that judgment will be. Some artifacts, such as the speeches that make the hair stand up on the back of your neck, provide a humanistic motive for judgment: they remind us of the extraordinary judgments of which we are capable. Public radio rarely contains these rhetorical chills—moments of sublime humanism when we stand in awe of our own better angels. For that, one must look elsewhere, but in one of the most admired speeches of the current century, we find rhetoric that does what public radio programming does in bringing together what had been separate. Barack

¹¹ Poulakos, *Speaking for the Polis: Isocrates' Rhetorical Education* 84.

Obama, in his 2004 “Audacity of Hope” speech at the Democratic National Convention, embraces multiple perspectives.

Barack Obama’s 2004 DNC Keynote address performs audacious hope. Quite consistently with his self-improving immigrant mythos, the speech is grounded in concrete circumstances shared by those who tend toward membership in the liberal, Democratic Party. The circumstances themselves are the argument, for they are the conditions that one strives to get away from through self-improvement. Rather than let circumstantial facts speak for themselves, however, Obama extends his argument into analogy and definition. In *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, Richard M. Weaver links the argument from circumstance with liberal politics and the argument from definition with conservative politics.¹² He identifies Abraham Lincoln and Edmund Burke, however, as exceptions to this usual pattern, and he mentions in passing that it is possible for a liberal to make arguments from principle, if his mind tends to run that way. In considering the distinctions between conservative rhetoric and conservative politics, as well as the distinctions between liberal rhetoric and liberal politics, arguments can have appealing conservative or liberal forms that trump their political content. The 2004 DNC Keynote Address by U.S. Senate nominee from Illinois Barack Obama is a contemporary example of liberal politics deploying arguments from definition. With Richard M. Weaver's help, we can refine the dichotomy of “liberal-conservative” into a quadrant. Habitual use, rather than political content, Weaver observes, tells us more about the speaker.

¹² Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*.

It will not do to look simply at the specific measures he has supported. ... It seems right to assume that a much surer index to a man's political philosophy is his characteristic way of thinking, inevitably expressed in the type of argument he prefers.¹³

Beyond the partisans who applaud Obama's commitment to solving problems and achieving certain goods, his extension of ideas into the arguments of definition appeal to his political opponents who, while they might disagree with his objectives, recognize with pleasure the form of his argument. In this way, Obama's speech contains within it the seeds of opposition; it invites the hearer to agree with his proposals while reinforcing the means for reaching a different judgment. Obama provides listeners, not only with the content for reaching a judgment consistent with his, but with the tools to reasonably reach a contrary judgment. He, thus, is able to persuade those in the audience still capable of judgment (that is, those who had not already formed unshakable commitments one way or the other) to make a judgment without foreclosing what that judgment might be. One can use Obama's reasoning to reach the same conclusions as he or different ones, and in the speech be encouraged to do either.

The dual arguments in Obama's Keynote address make possible the kind of different readings of the speech undertaken by David Frank and Mark McPhail.¹⁴ The

¹³ Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* 112. Weaver phrases this same idea similarly elsewhere in *The Ethics*: "the rhetorical content of the major premise which the speaker habitually uses is the key to his primary view of existence" (55), "a man's method of argument is a truer index in his beliefs than his explicit profession of principles" (58), and "Nowhere does a man's rhetoric catch up with him more completely than in the topics he chooses to win other men's assent" (114).

¹⁴ David A. Frank and Mark Lawrence McPhail, "Barack Obama's Address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, Compromise, Consilience, and the (Im)Possibility of Racial Reconciliation," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.4 (2005). Even though the two authors offer personal preference as an

speech is simultaneously two irreconcilable things, held together by a poetic language that begins with concrete images and moves to transcendent interpretations. The contrast of the interpretation expected to follow from the images with the interpretation Obama offers creates the magic and enchantment of his speech, which energizes the possibility that two, previously incompatible, ideas could co-exist. Part of the genius of the speech is that Frank and McPhail can offer two interpretations, and both of them are reasonable. Rhetoric, then, can be approached from this angle of vision: to lesser and greater degrees, rhetoric provides the resources for public judgment, and provides the inspiration for judgment, without prefiguring what that judgment will be.

Appealing to a heroic, American ideal, Obama transcends divisive political labels, while attributing political expediency to merely political actors, to define “America.”

Now even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us -- the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of “anything goes.”

Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America -- there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America -- there’s the United States of America.

Deftly accusing his opponents of the “anything goes” lack of principles often leveled against liberal politicians, Obama allows for a diversity of circumstances *and* a unity of democratic principles. After noting the liberal truth of obvious diversity that is

explanation of their differences, they are both skilled enough students of speeches to make accurate observations of the text. That these two interpretations are readily available indicates that the speech has the capability of inviting two contradictory interpretations.

sometimes lost when labels replace definition (“We worship an ‘awesome God’ in the Blue States, and we don’t like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and yes, we’ve got some gay friends in the Red States.”), Obama proclaims the fundamental conservative truth: “We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.”

Barack Obama consistently refers to the concerns of the liberal Democratic Party, its members and constituents, in terms of a politics of circumstance. He engages identity politics, class distinctions, working class struggles, and the problems right in front of people rather than the abstract implications and overtones that can subsume these problems. But traveling with these concrete concerns, briefly glimpsed, are the political principles that cover the different circumstances. At the end of the speech, these principles emerge more fully, but always in the company of the circumstances of material concerns.

Public radio rhetoric is significant, but it does not represent the sublime humanism that makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up, as Barack Obama’s DNC speech can do. Rather, public radio is accretive humanism that, like sublime humanism, underwrites our capacity for judgment. Unlike examples of the sublime that preclude judgment in favor of surrender, and unlike sublime humanism that motivates “our better angels,” accretive rhetoric builds up the resources for judgment without bringing it to closure prior to *kairic* exigence.

Rhetoric, as distinct from persuasion, propaganda, or education, is full-throated advocacy for a position without the tendency to limit judgment.

Public radio has often been presumed as liberal. It is, in an 18th-Century, Enlightenment sense of the word. It is also conservative, in an old-fashioned sense of preservation of that which deserves to be remembered. It invites judgment, provides the tools for judgment, and waits for listeners who, in the radical particularity of *kairic* moments, make judgments.

Although Urban Agrarianism is, perhaps too easily, found in public radio programming, demonstrating the practice as rhetoric is not so easy. As I define rhetoric, discourse leading to judgment is *potentially rhetorical* insofar as it is instrumental, didactic, or persuasive, but it *becomes rhetorical* when it is productive of judgment without necessarily containing the terms of the judgment reached. Rather than bring certainty (and an end) to a discussion or rather than achieving some sort of legislative victory, such rhetoric opens and maintains discussions that are ever more productive of ideas, solutions, and judgments. Unlike philosophy, which deals with the truth in some absolute sense, rhetoric deals with important matters over which philosophy can provide no absolute truth.¹⁵ This is not, in my view, an embarrassing and regrettable failing of rhetoric. Rather, it is the strength of rhetoric that it is, for all its uncertainty and because of its uncertainty, more productive and generative than philosophy in solving human problems. True, decisions must be made and are. Rhetoric is the way in which we, through discussion, make the best possible among the contingent, uncertain, and – frequently to be hoped – reversible decisions.

¹⁵ Richard McKeon, Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1987).

Coming to terms with our Urban Agrarianism, then, and perhaps with the aid of cultural artifacts such as public radio, would make for more fruitful discussions in the public sphere. Gaining an understanding of the rhetoric of public radio at the theoretical and critical level does more than satisfy my curiosity or that of faithful listeners; it is, rather, a study of communication in public use. Some rhetoricians have focused, for example, on “how people use language to narrow the policy option of others.”¹⁶ My focus is, instead, on how language use on public radio expands our options. Discourse that accomplishes this produces a *res residuum* – ideas and arguments that remain in circulation – and this is the primary rhetorical effect of public radio. Once these ideas, arguments, and values enter public discourse, they become rhetorical resources, recalled as “driveway moments”¹⁷ or lingering at a liminal space between conscious and unconscious memory of a useable turn-of-phrase, argument, or concept. As memories, they are not merely recollections, but they serve current purposes, crossing the boundary between the historically situated moment of their production and the rhetorically situated moment of their re-use.¹⁸

¹⁶ In “Wandering with Rhetorical Criticism,” William L. Nothstine, Gary Copeland and Carole Blair, Critical Questions: Invention, Creativity, and the Criticism of Discourse and Media (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994) 72.

¹⁷ “Driveway moment” is an NPR term for listening to the end of a compelling piece on the radio even after you have reached home and ordinarily would turn off the ignition and go inside.

¹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, On Collective Memory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

A Rhetorical Theory of Public Radio

The form and content of public radio programming shows that it conserves traditional values while promoting a liberal humanism. This is not to say that this rhetorical theory represents the overt and intentional programming strategies of public radio. Much to the contrary, public radio—like its commercial counterparts—devises programming strategies that purposefully take other standards and methods for constructing overall programming strategies, program structures, and production tactics. These strategies, typically, are the public interest standard and audience-building methods. The “public interest,” as a standard for programming strategies, is an approach that focuses on content.¹⁹ “Audience-building,” as a programming method, focuses more on the size of the audience as a measure of the “public service” that is delivered (or not) by public radio.²⁰ Operating almost independently of the programming strategies, the

¹⁹ Media scholars who discuss the public interest standard in broadcasting include: Susan J. Douglas, Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922, Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), Michael P. McCauley, Eric E. Peterson, B. Lee Artz and DeeDee Halleck, eds., Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), Denis McQuail, Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest (London; Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992), John H. Pennybacker and Waldo Warder Braden, eds., Broadcasting and the Public Interest (New York: Random House, 1969), Robert E. Summers and Harrison Boyd Summers, Broadcasting and the Public (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1967), United States. Congress. Senate. Committee on Commerce Science and Transportation. Subcommittee on Communications., "Broadcasters' Public Interest Obligations and S. 217, the Fairness in Broadcasting Act of 1991 : Hearing before the Subcommitte [Sic] on Communications of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate, One Hundred Second Congress, First Session, June 20, 1991," S hrg : 102-352, eds. States United, Congress and Senate (Washington: U.S. G.P.O. : For sale by the U.S. G.P.O. Supt. of Docs. Congressional Sales Office, 1992), vol, Willard D. Jr. Rowland, "The Meaning of 'the Public Interest' in Communications Policy, Part I: Its Origins in State and Federal Regulation," Communication Law and Policy 289 (1997).

²⁰ Susan Smulyan, Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), David Giovannoni, Thomas Joseph Thomas, Theresa R. Clifford and Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Public Radio Programming Strategies: A Report on the

Urban Agrarianism of public radio emerges from the dual rhetorical resources of the “public interest” and “audience-building” discourse to produce the patterns visible in the fabric of public radio. These two programming strategies are often seen as antithetical, and they quite self-evidently are opposing points of view.²¹ Notwithstanding their theoretical incompatibility, both strategies appear *in seriam* on public radio program schedules.

The overt negotiation of the pluralistic obligations, and regularly contradictory obligations, of public discourse produce the rhetorical practices of public radio. Programming, as distinct from rhetoric, is a goal, with rhetoric sometimes as a means, sometimes as an unintended consequence, and sometimes as an end itself. This last goal, particularly related to the role of public radio in the public sphere, comes into play when political judgments and social solutions are not self-evident, and yet decisions must be made. For example, a story of United Farm Workers’ radio on the public radio program, *Latino USA*, described its Tejano programming as an alternative to proletarian “rhetoric” or didactic discourse, a move that had implicit communication and rhetorical theory subsumed within it, and continues to participate in collective judgments regarding contemporary, contingent issues that still have not resolved into a sense of

Programming Stations Broadcast and the People They Seek to Serve (Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1992), David Giovannoni, The "Cheap 90 Percent" Study: Public Radio Listeners: Supporters and Non-Supporters (Washington: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 1985), William Hoynes, Public Television for Sale: Media, the Market, and the Public Sphere (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), David Giovannoni, Leslie Peters and Jay Youngclaus, Audience 98: Public Service. Public Support, 1999, PDF, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Available: <http://www.aranet.com/library/pdf/doc-0100.pdf>, 17 February 2003.

²¹ McCauley, Peterson, Artz and Halleck, eds., Public Broadcasting and the Public Interest.

certainty.²² In resisting ideological discourse, the UFW radio programming offered music supportive of cultural identity, which is, of course, productive of traditional, cultural resources for deliberation. This capacity of rhetoric to be productive of the discourse of deliberation or of epideictic resources for deliberation is inherent within the discourse of public radio and understood within the framework of Urban Agrarianism. It is, perhaps, not surprising that in a report on radio about radio for United Farm Workers the Urban Agrarian quality of public radio would be in the foreground.

The rhetoric of irony, juxtaposition, and Urban Agrarianism fundamental to public radio is one that valorizes the generative quality of discourse that does not move too quickly. Kenneth Burke once wrote in one of his music reviews for the *Dial*:

Not the least service of art lies in its ability to make action more difficult. And one particular brand of art may, by its specific message, still further strengthen this questioning attitude. What, it may be asked, was ever discovered without certainty of the most rabid and unbalanced sort? And what, it may be answered, was ever preserved without the agency of sleepless distrust?²³

²² *Radio Campesino*, dir. Ingrid Lobet, National Public Radio, 2003. Aired Saturday 26 April 2003 on WAMU-FM, Washington, DC.

²³ Kenneth Burke, "Musical Chronicle," *Dial* 85.1 (1928): 88.

The rhetoric of public radio, alternately embracing mutually exclusive ideals, takes each of the ideals seriously (if not with rabid certainty) and takes them together, not so much in distrust, but in balance. Irony protects from certainty.²⁴

That, then, is my theory of rhetoric: it differs from persuasive discourse aimed at adopting a judgment and, instead, generates judgments held in common by the participants. It is neither dialectical, for it is generative rather than deductive and derivative, nor is it conversational and invitational, for it makes use of contradiction, conflict, and *agon* as needed.²⁵ Urban Agrarianism is the sub-set of this theoretical framework that applies to the concrete, historically situated practices of public radio. It is based in irony, but not a free-range irony that can draw on just any sources. Rather, it draws on situated ironies, with referents that are urban or agrarian. For example, Urban Agrarianism in public radio draws on the irony of “imagined communities”: individual listeners who will never meet or know each other, yet have public radio in common, and feel that they do, and share interests raised by the programming.²⁶ This community, nonetheless, has “conflicting communication interests” as a result of differences within those interests which tend toward a national or a local scale, toward an individualistic or a communitarian bent, or in any number of directions concerning cultural

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1962).

²⁵ Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 61.1 (1995).

²⁶ Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) 6.

preferences.²⁷ Public radio is fundamentally ironic, Urban Agrarianism is its specific expression, and it is productively rhetorical.

Conclusion

Well, you've squandered another perfectly good hour. Perhaps this effort to account for the rhetoric of *Car Talk*, *All Things Considered*, and *A Prairie Home Companion* has been impressionistic, but irony is essentially impressionistic. Rhetoric, like irony, is fundamentally a matter of interpretation. This interpretation is Formalist, but Formalism, in this case, is rescued by the radical particularity of *kairos*. Whatever tendencies the producers or the critic of public radio programming have toward ironic interpretation, the material facts of auto repair and problem-solving, the news of the day and the preservation of culture, and the never ending search for love and a better job require that the formal qualities of public radio programming be grounded in *kairic* moments of judgment.

Perhaps this specific analysis of *Car Talk*, *All Things Considered*, and *A Prairie Home Companion* as examples of public radio rhetoric has not proved convincing. In general, however, critical listening amplifies the pleasure of listening by uncovering the material within the structures of the ostensible content. Critical listening of the programming multiplies the content by recognizing the unvoiced third component that emerges whenever two pieces are brought together in ironic conjunction. And, critical listening extends the usefulness of the material, even after it has become familiar or

²⁷ McCourt, Conflicting Communication Interests in America: The Case of National Public Radio.

routinized, by making the listener a co-producer of material. Rhetorical criticism of public radio programming does these things as it reveals the tendencies of the programs toward making public judgments possible, and I hope this project will encourage listeners to hear public radio programming a little differently in the future.

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VITA

David Dzikowski

Ph.D., Speech Communication 2009
The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Communication Arts & Sciences

M.A., Speech Communication 2001
The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Communication Arts & Sciences

B.A., Psychology 1979
Mansfield State College, Mansfield, PA

Teaching Experience

CAS 100C (Public Speaking – Message Analysis emphasis)
CAS 100A (Public Speaking – Civic Engagement emphasis)
CAS 213 (Persuasive Speaking)
CAS 475 (Studies in Public Address), online
CAS 100C (Basic Course – Message Analysis emphasis), online

Service

Grad Representative, Graduate Committee, CAS, 2003-2005
President, Speech Communication Graduate Forum, Penn State, 2000-2002

Professional Experience

Penn State Public Broadcasting

Part-time Radio Announcer and Master Control operator, August 1999 - present
Radio Station Manager, November 1986 - May 1997
Television Master Control Operator, March 1984 - November 1986

Western's Public Radio, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky
Assistant Director of Public Broadcasting - Radio, May 1997 - July 1999

WMAJ-AM/WXLR-FM, State College, Pennsylvania
Operations Manager, November 1980 - September 1985

WNBT-FM, Wellsboro, Pennsylvania
Operations Manager, August 1979 - November 1980