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## How to Dredge a Lake

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# How to Dredge a Lake

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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But the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels. All we know is that its internal structure is extremely intricate and consists of more than two hundred different bones and cartilages.

—W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*





# I

*It was late summer and every creature that was unlucky enough to live in the lake was left to boil and decay in the humid heat. The lake bottom had to dry out so the contractors could measure how much of the sediment they would need to scrape out when dredging began. Once it was dry, they could be sure the mud wouldn't swallow their machines.*

1. The foothills that extend from the northwestern curve of New Jersey down to the middle of eastern Alabama, passing through six states in between, create a region called the piedmont. It's a plateau of red clay cupped by the Appalachian Mountains to the west and the coastal plain on the east. Greensboro is in this in-between; most of North Carolina is. The state's width seems to stretch out and softens any potentially extreme features of the landscape.
2. North Carolina doesn't have rivers either, it has creeks and streams, diminutive trickling things that dry up more years than not. It has waters like Catawba, Cape Fear, Haw and Yadkin, which it insists are rivers, but we know better. The textile manufacturers traded river access for cheap labor when they made the move down south. We wanted landmarks. We got mills.
3. Before the mills, Greensboro was a point where the railroads crossed. Before it was called Greensboro, it was a small settlement in the middle of Guilford Country inhabited mostly by south-moving Quakers. They called it Cape Fair. During the Revolutionary War, it was a battlefield where General Nathanael Greene's men lost, but killed enough British that someone decided the village should be his, at least in name.
4. The city is large for feeling so small. There are almost 300,000 of us. We only believe this number when we're sitting in traffic. For convenience, we might say we're the middle of our state, but especially geographically, this isn't quite accurate. We came here because we had already gone west. We came down.
5. Greensboro is forty miles south of the Virginia border, so it is not central, but it is the center point in a cluster of cities of comparable size and stature. To essayist Gerald W. Johnson in 1924, this surroundedness was the source of the city's mildness: "Greensboro has practically the same climate as North Carolina, but being thirty miles east of Winston-Salem and ninety

miles north of Charlotte and eighty miles west of Raleigh, and fifty miles south of Danville, she is protected on all sides from blizzards, sand-storms and beating rains.”<sup>1</sup> We enjoy all four seasons, but mildly.

6. Johnson wasn't from Greensboro. He was born in Scotland County in a town that no longer exists in the southeastern pocket of the state. He followed the Cape Fear up to Greensboro and became the Greensboro Daily News' music critic before shipping out to France to serve in World War I. In writing, Johnson was eager to dispel the myths of the south and to argue the legitimacy of the region's literature.
7. So Greensboro is flat; and, sure, green; but it was supposed to be the next Pittsburgh. The plan folded when Carolina Steel, discovered that the land they'd purchased wasn't worth mining. It was poor in the minerals they required. Brothers Moses and Ceasar Cone of Baltimore bought the land on the outskirts of the city at a discounted price and began building a textile mill. They called the mill Proximity for its nearness to the cotton and the railroad. Proximity sounded better than Convenience. Proximity gave features to Greensboro's flatness. The mills gave the city a sense of direction.
8. My mom moved south thirty years ago. On the phone once, she told me that she likes to pretend that she doesn't actually live in Greensboro, that her stay is only temporary. "I have no roots here," she said.
9. The Cone family moved west from Bavaria to Tennessee (where Kahn became Cone) then northeast to Baltimore and finally south to Greensboro. The family's most successful plant, White Oak, became the largest denim mill in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald W. Johnson, *South-Watching: Selected Essays*, ed. Fred Hobson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), [49].

10. In the decade following Proximity's opening, three more Cone mills grew out the land that couldn't sustain Carolina Steel. First was Revolution in 1898, lauded as the south's first flannel mill and eventually the world's largest. They called it Revolution for the revolutionary technologies it brought to the region. The mill was built in partnership with the Sternberger family, who followed the Cones to Greensboro from Tennessee. Just a decade after their first mill, the Cone brothers built White Oak in 1905. A couple years later, they built Proximity Print Works, one of the first color cloth producing factories in the south.
11. When I was fifteen, a driving instructor with nicotine gum spittle crusted at the corners of his mouth took me to drive on Cone Boulevard to get "highway experience." Cone isn't a highway, but it was the closest thing to a highway that he thought I could handle.
12. The road was named after Benjamin Cone, son of Ceasar, who was Greensboro's mayor when construction of the city's highway system began. Cone begins where Benjamin Parkway ends at the intersection with Battleground Road. It has four lanes, but the speed limit never exceeds forty. Cone ends five miles later past Walter Hines Page High School, Revolution Mill, a Walmart Supercenter and White Oak Lake, which is on the map even though it's been dried up for years. Cone ends and the mill streets begin: McKnight Mill Road, Rankin Mill Road, and Huffline Mill Road. The mill roads connect with O'Henry Boulevard to the west and Philips Avenue to the south to create a loop around the Greensboro Landfill on White Street.
13. Herman Cone Jr. built his Greensboro mansion in 1936. A local architect, William C. Holleyman, designed the 10,900-square-foot Norman Revival home on Country Club Road. It's a small castle made of pale brick.

14. The Irving Park mansion has been off the market since 2005, when the—at that point current—U.S. Ambassador to Estonia, Aldona Wos, and her husband, Louis Dejoy purchased the property for \$5.9 million in “the largest residential real estate sale in Greensboro history.”<sup>2</sup> The previous owner had been Kenneth Kornfeld, a disgraced businessman who surrendered the house in a \$400 million fraud settlement, another record for North Carolina. Kornfeld added 24-carat gold leaf paint to the mansion’s staircase and had custom rock formations designed to adorn the pool. When he gave up the house in 2003, Margaret Moffett Banks of the *News & Record*, wrote, “During their ownership, the Cone family kept the lawn open—convenient for gawking Sunday drivers. Kornfeld changed the 3.5-acre estate to suit his personality. An intensely private man, he landscaped the lawns with trees and shrubs that block the house from view.”<sup>3</sup>
15. On October 8th, 2017, the former Ambassador and her husband hosted President Donald Trump at a reelection fundraising dinner at the mansion.
16. My neighborhood was founded on the success of the former Ambassador’s. After establishing Irving Park, lawyer and businessman Alfred Moore Scales started buying up farmland to the west of the city that was owned by Greensboro’s prominent Quaker families. Out of this land, he carved a pocket for development that would become the town of Hamilton Lakes and then later just Hamilton Lakes. Scales imagined a community where residents could live and play in a setting with abundant opportunities for recreation. Parks, lakes, and ponds were scattered throughout the development.
17. In Scales’s vision, Lake Hamilton was the centerpiece.

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Moffett Banks and Jim Schlosser, "Newly Renovated, It's a Deal at \$5.9 Million," *Greensboro News & Record*(Greensboro, NC), August 10, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## II

*Recycling a technique that worked in Irving Park, Hamilton Lakes' planners transformed low-lying lands into parks and dales. They organized houses on the higher ground surrounding these patches of nature, so that, looking out a front facing window, a resident would only see green. The most disturbing part about winter in Hamilton Lakes is that you can see through the trees to the houses on the other side.*

18. It's difficult to recognize Greensboro in Scales's call for an exodus of the congested urban center:

“ Out from the crowded streets of the town, far from the congestion and traffic, a beautiful village is designed to soothe the senses. Parks and lakes replace crowded corners—the songs of birds, the noise of the motors and trolleys—and flowers and shrubs bloom on every side. Thousands of rose bushes grace the roadsides, and dogwood, redbud, and laurel have been planted in the work of beautification.”<sup>4</sup>

19. The designations of city and country are useless in describing Greensboro. It's neither. It isn't exactly a suburb. It's a *regional distribution center*.<sup>5</sup> And North Carolina, despite its claims to northernness, is firmly in the south, where cities are spread-out hazy things. But to define Greensboro as a city unlike other cities on account of its southernness is to imply “that the South is set apart from the rest of humanity so completely that the very laws of nature, not to mention statute law, do not operate in the region in the Potomac as they do elsewhere.”<sup>6</sup> Johnson called this belief a regional defense mechanism.

20. When I tried to explain the not-quite-cityness of Greensboro to a grandmother from New Jersey, she asked: “Like Boston?” When I said no, she asked: “Do you have sidewalks?”

21. My neighborhood was planned as a garden suburb, meant to look the way that nature would design a neighborhood if it could. Curvilinear roads promise scenic views of the park around every bend. It's a destination for birdwatchers and retirees who race remote-controlled miniature boats in the lake, which is really a pond. No one who lives here could walk to

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Briggs, "The Secrets of Hamilton Lakes," *Preservation Greensboro* (blog), entry posted October 25, 2012, accessed April 29, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Howard E. Covington, *Once Upon a City: Greensboro, North Carolina's Second Century* (Greensboro, N.C.: Greensboro Historical Museum, 2008), [196].

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *South-Watching: Selected*, [110].

work, not that they've ever considered it. Downtown is maybe five miles away, but in Greensboro that's close. Here, three hours to the beach is still *close*. No, there aren't sidewalks either.

22. On one of these scenic curves, is a mid-century modern that was bought and renovated a few years ago by a couple from California who wanted to restore it to its original glory. They filled the house with furniture from the era and added a pool. Residents flooded the neighborhood's online forum with complaints when the Californians start to clear some of the undergrowth across the street so their bulldog who guards the front yard could get a better view of the lake.
23. Proximity closed and was hastily demolished in 1979. Revolution closed shortly after, but was saved from demolition by its historic site status. White Oak may have outlived Revolution, but by the time the denim mill closed its doors, Revolution was already in the final stages of revitalization.
24. The new Revolution, with its airy lofts and startup-friendly offices, would like to be revolutionary for Greensboro in the same way that old mill's power looms once were. In a moment of *déjà vu*, one advertisement envisions Revolution as the center of the city's "new economy." Perhaps it's because the mill has already played this role that we believe it has the potential to do so again. One of Revolution's slogans is "Re-imagine Where." The "where" hasn't changed, but the imagining has. The mill was abandoned for nearly thirty years, but now it's a place to take prom photos, or have a rustic wedding if barns aren't your thing.
25. The rebranding of Revolution is not unique. Reborn buildings everywhere live off the charm of their former lives—or at least their architectures. Despite the fact that no goods are



manufactured in the new Revolution, it's somehow still a mill. Millness is something built into a structure; a mill is a way of organizing a space, not a way of using it.

26. In salvaging a prominent piece of America's textile history, Revolution follows the lead of Lowell, a small city in the top right corner of Massachusetts on the Merrimack River. Lowell is another place that textiles transformed from village to city. The river meant there could be canals and, then, mills. The mills made Lowell the center of American textile manufacturing for something like a century before the industry moved south. Cone's Revolution meant progress for one region and spelled out the fall of another.
27. By this point, Lowell has had ruins for as long as it had industry. The city was a pioneer not only in American textile manufacturing, but in the restoring and reimagining its ruins. Lowell was one of the first to undergo the process that's now being replicated throughout Greensboro. The process that starts with petitioning for historic status and ends with lofts.
28. The visitors' center at the Lowell National Historical Park is housed in what was once Market Mills. The complex now includes lofts for rent called the Market Mills Apartments. They have the same soaring ceilings and factory-sized windows of the new Revolution Mills apartments. The site also includes a gallery called "A Brush with History." A gift shop peddles bobbins, spindles and spools.
29. The park weaves together textile sites scattered throughout the city's downtown area. Beyond the registered historic sites, local businesses honor the city's heritage in their own way. There's a bar called Warp and Weft, a florist shop called Flower Mill and a Coffee Mill. Lowell's American Textile Museum mirrored the fate of the industry it documented when, due to a lack of funding, it was shuttered in 2015.

30. According to the literature at the visitors' center, most people come to Lowell to be close to Jack Kerouac. Kerouac was born and raised and buried in Lowell. He wrote about the mills in his novel *Doctor Sax*: "O tall red chimneys of the Cotton Mills of Lowell, tall redbrick goof of Boott, swaying in the terminus clouds of the wild hoorah day and dreambell afternoon."<sup>7</sup> In 1975, Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan came to Lowell to visit Kerouac's grave. In 1991, Kerouac's legacy brought Johnny Depp to the city. A poster in the visitors' center quotes a magazine interview where Depp says: "I wanted to take a trip to Lowell to see Kerouac's town... I was happy not to leave. I was happy to stay there."
31. In January, when I visited, the canals that once fueled the steam-powered mills were frozen. The Boott Cotton Mills Museum is a couple canal crossings away from the visitors' center at Market Mills. Boott is unique in Lowell because it still has a working weave room. "Still" meaning the room is a kind of living diorama with working looms that are similar enough to those once operated at Boott. The material produced in the weave room is cut into washcloths that are sold in the gift shop. Earplugs are included in the cost of admission. Signage in the hallway leading to the weave room alerts visitors when it's time to put the plugs in, but the casual hum of the mill is hardly loud enough to warrant them. The plugs are part of the simulation. The hallway also offers a time card puncher where guests can "clock-in" before entering just as the workers would have.
32. In Greensboro, advertisements for lofts and offices line the curb on the strip of Textile Drive next to the Revolution. The signs heckle drivers with promises of EXPOSED BRICK and list the phone number of the rental office. When I toured Revolution's ballroom online, I found everything exposed, as promised. The room is all red brick and beams and the mammoth

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* (New York: Grove, 1959), [22].

windows. The only thing in the cavernous space is a red bicycle propped up against one of the windows. It jumps around as I arrow through the venue. One moment it's directly in front of me, propped against the brick, but when I click closer it escapes out of view. Without furniture or people, the wandering bicycle is there to tell us just how big the windows are.

33. Revolution's logo is a two-tone design showing a corner of the building where two brick walls stamped with the mill's iconic arched windows meet. Maintaining the original windows was so crucial to the project that a year of construction was spent replacing each of the old panes. Some of the old panes were even recast and recycled to create glass countertops for the kitchens.
34. In the logo, a water tower and three smoke stacks rise up behind the main structure. The design exaggerates the height of the narrow towers to create a kind of industrial cityscape that imagines the new Revolution within an urban context. This context is exaggerated too: the mill is several miles from Greensboro's downtown. This urban fantasy is key to attracting the "creative professional" demographic at which the advertisements are directed. "Creative professional" means that Revolution isn't for artists; it's for those who can afford to pay for a space that allows them to think of themselves as artists. In one testimonial, a Revolution renter claims, "it has that *vibe*, that San Fran kind of feel."
35. In an effort to equitably distribute the *vibe*, Revolution guarantees at least two of the spectacular twelve-foot windows per unit. To make this commitment to natural light possible, architects placed the allotted windows in shared spaces within the apartments. To enjoy the light, most residents will have to leave their bedrooms. Maybe, one spokesperson proposed, the windows could even bring people together.

36. When the textile industry began to decline during the second half of the 20th century, many companies made the decision to brick up the windows at their mills. The logic was that workers wouldn't get tired if they didn't have a sense of time. The giant windows threatened natural light and natural rhythms. The bricks went up.
37. At Lowell, the weave room is a long bright corridor with light from the massive steel-framed windows casting long shadows on the looms. The windows seem larger than Revolution's. Green metal fencing guards the machinery. The barricades create a single path through the room. The iconic Draper looms are green like the fence and so is the accent stripe that runs the length of the lower half of the brick walls. The sunlight bounces off all this green and reflects the pigment back in puddles of emerald on the hardwood floors. The looms are rigged up to the ceiling by some elaborate system of belts and pulleys. Empty red buckets stamped with the words "FIRE ONLY" hang in the wall space between every other window like sconces. At the exit of the weave room, the interactive experience is bookended by a waste bin marked "Please Dispose of Ear Plugs Here."
38. There's a difference between Lowell and Revolution. Preserving the past in the South has always meant something different from what it means in the rest of country. Sometimes Johnson's defense mechanism is true.
39. The Burlington Industries headquarters hadn't been at its location on Friendly Avenue long enough to age and it was built too well to fall with explosives alone. The engineering had to be undermined. After the internal structure was hollowed out, the crew dismantled the building's exoskeleton using torches to melt through the heavy steel trusses in order to induce precarity. Different materials break differently. When they tore down the Burlington headquarters, the leader of the demolition team said: "It won't collapse completely into a flat

pile, but it will lean over into more manageable pieces. ... Steel won't flatten out as much as brick does."<sup>8</sup>

40. While they made the building fragile, the once carefully landscaped lawn became overgrown with tall grass, dandelions, and danger signs. The grass was knee-high on every side except in front of the southwest corner of the building where it was mowed so that onlookers standing behind the orange plastic fence at the intersection of Hobbs and Friendly could get an unobstructed view. Briefly, Burlington became an empty glass box suspended in a cage of Carolina steel. Then it was gone.
41. Burlington Industries started when James Spencer Love moved down from Massachusetts and started buying up bankrupt mills in North Carolina. He united the mills and replaced their outdated machinery with equipment to manufacture rayon. Love settled east of Greensboro in Burlington and gave his company the small town's name. Burlington's mills spun bedspreads, upholstery and drapery out of the synthetic fiber. During the war they made parachute cloth.
42. When the steel and glass headquarters building was built in Greensboro in 1971, Burlington was the world's largest textile manufacturer. It was built to last. Carolina Steel made custom molds to cast its steel trusses, which were sprayed with rust proofing sealant. The glass behind the steel was a one-way mirror with the mirror side facing out. It had marble bathrooms and its own television studio to shoot commercials. It won national and regional architectural awards. The land it was built on used to be a horse pasture. By 2005, the grand headquarters, built to accommodate some 1200 employees, had outlived its usefulness. High school students skipped class to watch it come down.

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<sup>7</sup> Eric J. Townsend, "Burlington Industries Set for Monday Demolition," *Greensboro News & Record* (Greensboro, NC), May 19, 2005.

43. The building was only a mile from my house. I remember looking out the backseat window of our car and thinking that it was ugly, or maybe my mom thought it was ugly. I was trying on opinions.
44. As a rule, confronting the past is a conflict Greensboro tries to avoid altogether. Someone commenting on a video of the Burlington demolition says, “the city never met a bulldozer or stick of dynamite it didn’t like.”
45. The western corner of the intersection of Green Valley and Battleground is flat except for a historical marker explaining that the site was a prison camp for deserters and union soldiers. Across the street is an abandoned IHOP.

### III

*The problem with the contrast in elevation between house and street is that when it rains the water runs straight down the yard, slicing through the ground cover as it races to the gutter. In some areas of the neighborhood the incline isn't as steep, but it seems especially sharp at my house. We gave up on having a yard and ceded the territory to the crows, who don't mind the mud and cover the yard just the same.*

46. Scales's house was the first in Hamilton Lakes. He had the 36-room Georgian mansion built on seventeen acres on the water. A red brick facade and a portico of Corinthian columns face the lake. Scales was forced to give up the mansion to creditors during the Great Depression. His family rode out the collapse in a more humble mansion on the other side of the lake. There are rumors that the loss of the house sparked anti-capitalist ideas in young Irving Scales, who dropped out of school in 1939, joined the Communist Party and became a union organizer in the textile mills.
47. Scales had received financing for the neighborhood from Emanuel and Herman Sternberger, who years earlier had partnered with the Cone brothers to build Revolution. When Scales foreclosed on the property after the market crash, the neighborhood went to Emanuel's daughter Blanche Sternberger Benjamin. A year later, the golf course that Scales had planned was completed. Benjamin decided to name it Starmount, an anglicized version of Sternberger.
48. Before it was annexed by Greensboro in the late fifties, Hamilton Lakes was a village independent of the city. Incorporated in 1925, it had its own police force and governing bodies. When I was in high school, an elderly couple appointed themselves to be the new police force. They sat in an old Buick parked on the side of the main intersection. Now there's a woman named Gail who protects the lake from trespassers.
49. The same year that Hamilton Lakes incorporated, Cone Mills—then going by the name Proximity Manufacturing Co., published a book celebrating *Thirty Years of Progress* and thirty years of profits. The book positions the Cone Mills system as a model for industry in



the New South: “The story of the upbuilding of a textile industry in the South ranks with the romance of the winning of the West. It is a record of pioneering.”<sup>9</sup>

50. The story of Cone on these pages is not the story of Greensboro, the city chosen to be the location of the mills out of convenience: “a city which has the advantage of proximity to the cotton fields, gins, and warehouses, and rail lines radiating in seven directions.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, *Thirty Years* consistently asserts the mills’ separation from the city. The rural location of the mills was no coincidence; they were close enough to the city to take advantage of the railroads, but far enough away for the company to maintain a certain amount of autonomy. This autonomy allowed Cone to operate the mills and their surrounding villages as an insular community just outside of city limits, in other words, a suburb. Maps referred to the of mill villages collectively as “Coneville.”
51. In the suburbs, the idea was that you could craft your own utopia. Before Levittown and the Sears catalog, the suburbs were—or were supposed to be—a place where a certain kind of person could have exactly what they wanted. Families in search of more comfortable lives were romanced in part by the prospect of being able to shape their living spaces. If the cramped quarters of the city could have such a negative impact on the behavior and well-being of its residents, as they believed, then suburban living could be equally beneficial. As homeowners, the power was in their hands to craft homes that would nurture positive values.
52. The fact of building one’s own house was a lesson in self-sufficiency, but *how* the house was built was also injected with moral significance. Families were encouraged to translate their traditions and principles into aesthetic choices. Architectural and decorative decisions

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<sup>9</sup> Carl J. Balliett and Proximity Manufacturing Company, *World Leadership in Denims Through Thirty Years of Progress: Dedicated to the Founders of the Cone Mills at Greensboro, North Carolina* (Greensboro, NC: Proximity Manufacturing Company, 1925), [Forward.]

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, “Men, Ideals, and Accomplishment.”

became responsible for creating harmony within the home and good citizens outside its walls. Through renovating and building, a family was thought to be constructing a kind of material embodiment of its value system.

53. Unlike the suburbs, the mill villages were Cone's utopia. Like the suburbs, the communities are marketed in *Thirty Years of Progress* as pastoral, sanitary, well-kept enclaves where worker could lead better lives than in the city. According to the company literature, the mill villages had amenities beyond their initial proximity: higher quality of schools and "a deeper interest in religious life than is usual in towns of the same population."<sup>11</sup> Cone even brags that the products in its company stores are more wholesome than those available in town: "pure, unadulterated and of first-class quality at prices that are far below city costs for the same class of products."<sup>12</sup> The mill villages also had the best milk, and it didn't even need to be pasteurized "because it is marketed at so fresh a state that its bacterial count is much lower than the standards of purity required to pass inspection—in fact, average well below the count required to grade the product as the certified milk that brings such a high price in our big cities."<sup>13</sup> Cone's bulls won all the big prizes, state and county. The village's water system was directed by a scientist named—believe this—Dr. True.<sup>14</sup>
54. For the most part, only Greensboro's textile past is visible. Instead of war ruins, there are ruined mills. But these two pasts are knit tightly together; the textile mill was as a way out of the now invisible rubble. The textile jobs and the mill houses that came with them rebuilt communities. But the mill system, once "heralded as the salvation of the region,"<sup>15</sup> also left

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<sup>11</sup> Balliett and Proximity Manufacturing Company, *World Leadership*, "Churches and Religious Life."

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, "Scope of Welfare Service."

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, "Pure Milk and Plenty of It."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, "How Modern Magic Works on Water."

<sup>15</sup> Mimi Conway, *Rise Gonna Rise: A Portrait of Southern Textile Workers* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1979), [12].

workers at the mercy of their bosses. The comprehensive nature of the mill town was both vital and invasive.

55. Gerald W. Johnson takes on the mill owner in his 1925 essay “Service in the Cotton Mills.” He portrays the mill owners as men of the “old order”<sup>16</sup> who took it upon themselves to guide their people out of poverty. Johnson saw the industrialists as the natural successors of plantation owners, likening their leadership to “the final gesture of the slave-owning aristocrat before he left the stage.”<sup>17</sup> This gesture encompassed morality as well as economics. Johnson reports on the paternalistic and moral code of another Carolina mill town in *The Making of A Southern Industrialist*. Johnson’s Southern Industrialist pulls tenant farmers out of the hills, gives them jobs, and teaches them to read (the bible.) Workers’ lives were heavily monitored and regimented. They weren’t Workers allowed to drink on company property, “and the company property included the village in which the operatives lived.”<sup>18</sup>
56. The conditions of the Southern Industrialist’s mill village mirror those of Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina as reported by journalist Mimi Conway. Conway chronicles the lives of J.P Stevens mill workers in the town as their newly formed union negotiates a contract in her 1979 book *Rise Gonna Rise: Portrait of Southern Textile Workers*. In the book, one mill worker reflects: “Back then, even if you went in there sweeping the floor, you was supposed to be better yourself, in your spare time, you know.”<sup>19</sup>
57. Above the weave room in Lowell, the second floor of Boott is a maze of wall text, info graphics and delicate things behind glass. Rectangular platforms jut out from each corner of

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *South-Watching: Selected*, [68].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gerald W. Johnson, *Making of a Southern Industrialist: A Study of Simpson Bobo Tanner* (Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North Carolina Press, 2011), [49].

<sup>19</sup> Conway, *Rise Gonna*, [18].

the first room. The platforms are walled-off by gauzy screens printed with images. Each image conveys a different point in Lowell's textile timeline. In one image, slaves pick cotton on a southern plantation. Another screen is printed with a photograph of Lowell's harbor busy with ships. From far away the screens appear opaque, but closer the gaps in the loose knit reveal life-sized dioramas. Behind the plantation scrim there are bales of the soft white fiber and an old cotton gin.

58. An over-eager docent found me staring at the translucent screens and asked if I was a local or visiting from out of state. I told him where I was from and he told me he had a son working for one of those banks in Charlotte. He led me to a replica of the mill in miniature. It was made out of Plexiglas so you could see through the walls and look at the shrunken dolls frozen in work. Each floor of the miniature was devoted to a different stage of production. Throughout the see-through mill, the machinery dwarfs the workers and their long skirts, but there are no skirts on the bottom of floor where the raw cotton is processed. This was where men worked. But mostly, according to the diorama and the docent, it was women—"mill girls" like Lucy Larcom—that ran Boott. Like Roanoke Rapids, weaving was so little of what happened in Lowell. The mill girls were required to live in the company boarding house and attend the company church every Sunday as a condition of employment. In the diorama, cotton doesn't touch a loom until it reaches the top floor.
59. From the fencing downstairs hung swatches of fabric and laminated cards with quotes from former Boott workers. One of the passages was from a book called *A New England Girlhood* written by Lucy Larcom, a poet and former employee of the mill.
60. In the introduction to the 1973 reprint of *A New England Girlhood*, Charles Davis elevates the Lowell textile mills to the rank of the great utopian experiments of the nineteenth century.

According to Davis, industrial Lowell “stands with the other noble efforts of the time— Brook Farm, the Fourier phalanx, the Oneida community, and even Thoreau’s two years at Walden Pond—which sought to reconcile practical and economic solutions and high spiritual aspirations.”<sup>20</sup> In reframing Lowell as equal to these communities, Davis also grounds the utopians’ noble aspirations in capitalist motives. Like the paternalistic mills of the south, the Lowell mills manufactured upright citizens as well as fabrics. A “Notice” to Boott employees dated 1852 is posted at the entrance of the museum: “no one, on any account, shall bring, within the Yard or into, any building any Lucifer or Friction Matches, Pipes or Cigars.” Davis portrays the Lowell mill owners as enlightened benefactors who made provisions to ensure the education of their workers. By establishing classes around the mill workers’ shifts, owners made it possible for the girls to pursue education without missing work. They understood the mill as a transitional space for the mill girls, who would leave in a year or so when their situations were improved. Indeed, the walls of modern Lowell proudly declare that Charles Dickens’s trip to the city was apparently “the happiest day he had passed in America.” In comparison to the factories of Dickens’s native England, Lowell proved to the author “that it was possible for industry to be both successful and humane.”

61. If Lowell was a utopian model for industry, Lucy Larcom was the model for the kind of individual that the utopia produced. After Larcom left Lowell, she went west to Looking-Grass Prairie, Illinois. On the prairie, Larcom finished the schooling she began at Lowell and made a life as a teacher.

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Davis, introduction to *A New England Girlhood*, by Lucy Larcom (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), [viii].

62. Davis is more skeptical of Larcom's literary output than he is towards the intentions of the mill owners. He dismisses the poet as one of many "sweet singers" "in a steady and sedate procession of others life her."<sup>21</sup> "One poetess seems to be indistinguishable from another,"<sup>22</sup> Davis observes. But the one thing that sets Larcom apart, Davis decides, is that her writings "occasionally display a strength which is unusual"<sup>23</sup> in the work of the other *poetesses*. This unusual strength is apparently a product of Larcom's "sensitivity to the physical beauty of her native shore, the Massachusetts coast."<sup>24</sup> So Larcom is pulled back to Lowell and is reduced, in her own book, to a mere reflection of the landscape.
63. Larcom's own writing about her experience on that coast, and specifically in its mills, reflects not the environment, but her rejection of it: "I discovered, too, that I could so accustom myself to the noise that it became like a silence to me. And I defied the machinery to make me its slave. Its incessant discords could not drown the music of my thoughts if I would let them fly high enough."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Davis, Introduction, [v].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), [183].

## IV

*The runoff from the yard doesn't always stop at the gutter. Sometimes it runs all the way across the street down into the park to the streams. And sometimes it gets all the way to the lake. When it does, the runoff takes the yard with it, and all that soil and silt finds a home in the water.*

64. In addition to building houses, it was typical for textile companies like Cone and J.P. Stevens to provide schools, churches, baseball teams and even marching bands for workers. On Christmas morning, Cone would have a ham and toys delivered to each family in the mill village. The company wielded its benevolence at moments and in ways that were the most visible: cheap but tangible displays. At the same time, the company withheld the same goodwill in situations where benevolence would have cost them something. Workers couldn't demand higher wages or better conditions without being reminded that everything they had was given to them by the company and could just as easily be taken away. Next to the White Oak mill village off North Church Street is Ceasar Cone Elementary School. A couple blocks down is Moses Cone Hospital.
65. Six years before Conway's book about the J.P. Stevens mills in Roanoke Rapids was published, a mill worker named Crystal Lee was fired from her job. Crystal Lee was born in Roanoke Rapids, where three generations of her family had worked in the mills before her. She died in Burlington, the textile town that gave Burlington Industries its name. Like Cone, J.P. Stevens built housing for workers in Roanoke Rapids. Instead of the bungalows favored in the Cone mill villages, Stevens built shotgun style houses. The shotgun house is narrow and deep, the inverse of a ranch house. They're usually no more than one room wide and a few rooms deep. They call it a shotgun because you can only go straight through it like a bullet in a barrel. Crystal Lee's family lived in one of these.
66. There were seven mills in Roanoke Rapids owned by J.P. Stevens. Crystal Lee's mill specialized in high-end towels and tablecloths, the kind she would fold in her middle age as a hotel maid. She was fired for copying down an anti-union letter that the company had posted on bulletin boards inside the mill.



67. In 1979, Crystal Lee's story became a movie called *Norma Rae*. The film's opening credits appear over footage from the inside of a textile mill set to a not-quite country ballad. The song is slow and melodramatic: "It ain't no miracle being born, people do it every day." "Norma Rae" emerges in cursive lettering over framed photos of the young protagonist. The letters look like they're made out of soft ropes of cotton that's just on the verge of being yarn. Loose cotton dust makes the mill equipment hairy.
68. Norma Rae's mill looks much more White Oak than Revolution, meaning it looks like a place where people actually work. This is because the film was shot at a working textile mill. In the film, Opelika Cotton Mill in Opelika, Alabama masquerades as Henleyville, North Carolina, a fictionalized version of Roanoke Rapids. The Alabama mill opened in 1900 while the Cones were in the middle of building White Oak. Like Cone, Opelika housed mill workers in a nearby village. When *Norma Rae* was filmed in the late seventies, Opelika was in decline. The mill had just unionized and they thought the film would be good press. They were right, but ultimately it wouldn't matter. Opelika was abandoned in 2004, the same year Cone Mills Corporation was acquired by ITG.
69. Unlike Opelika, the Cone mills never unionized. In his will, Ceasar Cone is said to have instructed his heirs to close the mill sooner than recognize a union.<sup>26</sup> During the Great Strike of 1934, Bernard Cone even bragged that his workers were more interested in baseball than the labor dispute.
70. There used to be a J.P. Stevens mill in Greensboro. Carter Fabrics opened the mill in 1937. Ten years later, Stevens bought it. After acquiring the synthetics mill in Greensboro, Stevens moved its transportation offices to the city. The J.P. Stevens offices on West Market were

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<sup>26</sup> Covington, *Once Upon*, [23].

some of the first in the city to have air conditioning. The mill on South-Elm Eugene Street was demolished in 2002. At the time, the city had planned to build a new firehouse and police station in its place, but they haven't got around to it.

71. In a photograph from a 1980 Screen Actors Guild sponsored boycott benefit the two Norma Raes, Sally Field and Crystal Lee, are side by side. Sally has shiny, side-swept hair and wears a white short-sleeved button-down blouse covered in hot air balloons. Crystal Lee is posing for a different camera. Her hair is parted down the middle and tucked behind her ears. A white button pinned to her black blouse reads: "DON'T SLEEP WITH J.P. STEVENS. BOYCOTT." Fields is wearing the same button, but it doesn't stand out as much against the white of her shirt. They're both smiling big and their arms are raised up, hands interlocking.
72. In the eighties, Crystal Lee went on a speaking tour as "the Real Norma Rae." Since the film was released, women advocates for workers' rights have often been referred to as the Norma Raes of their industries. The character has outlived her inspiration. There are no real-life Crystal Lees.
73. Almost two centuries before Crystal Lee unionized the J.P. Stevens mill in Roanoke Rapids, another mill worker fled home to realize her own vision of reform in upstate New York. Like Crystal Lee, Mother Ann Lee was born into the mill life, sent to work in the Manchester cotton mills before her tenth birthday. Lee couldn't read or write but she received visions from God. Those visions convinced her that while many of her contemporaries were anxiously waiting for Jesus's return, the second coming had, in fact, already happened. In *Utopia Drive*, Erik Reece writes, "Jesus had returned; he had made his "second appearance," only this time it was in the flesh of a Manchester mill worker, Mother Ann Lee."<sup>27</sup> In Lee's

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<sup>27</sup> Erik Reece, *Utopia Drive: A Road Trip through America's Most Radical Idea* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), [25].

visions, God also told her that sex was the root of all suffering, but she already knew; all four of her children had died in infancy.

74. With Jesus already returned, the Shakers' project was to build heaven on earth. We call their project utopian because they created an isolated alternative to mainstream society. The Shakers isolated themselves with literal walls. And perhaps because the Shakers believed that they were building not just any community, but God's kingdom on Earth, they dwelled more than other utopians on architecture. But all utopian communities are experiments of social reorganization and such a process almost necessarily involves the reorganization of space. Like homeowners in the early suburbs, the Shakers literally built their ideology into their lives through architecture. Both had faith in the transformative properties of space.
75. As in suburban and utopian projects, the textile industry also shared a sharp awareness of the power of space—how it was organized and adorned. The bricked-up windows of White Oak taught the workers to ignore the movements of the sun that might limit their hours of productivity. In the Shaker village, separate entrances for men and women at the meeting hall taught members that devotion to their beliefs had to inspire every way they moved through the community.
76. His wife had asked me if we have sidewalks in Greensboro. I could tell he understood something about North Carolina when he said, “[in] North Carolina it depends where you are, South Carolina—that’s a whole other country.” What he understood about North Carolina isn’t necessarily true, but it’s a myth I’m familiar with. It’s something we carry around as reassurance that no matter what, we’re still on top of South Carolina, geographically, morally. We think, “We’ll always have that.”
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77. He was an accountant when he was my age. He used to travel through all the mill towns in North Carolina, doing whatever accountants do. He told me he was in one of *those* mill towns, but he couldn't remember the name. He expected me to start listing every town in state. "It wasn't one of those big guys...it wasn't Burlington." Then he started rhyming, "It wasn't that...Zone, Tone..." "Cone?" I offered. "Yeah!" he says because I've given him something just by knowing it. Then he added, "It wasn't them either." Anyway, one time when he was down there and all the women—a lot of women worked in the mills he told me—went on strike. They went on strike because, according to them, the mill was haunted. They were superstitious. They refused to work with ghosts. The only way to get the women back to work was to fumigate the mill. So that's what they did. Him and all the guys from the company—"us Northerners" he called them—couldn't believe it.

## V

*Every body of water eventually requires dredging. A lake that isn't dredged threatens to become a swamp. Sedimentation is inevitable: places that collect water tend to attract silt as well. But there was more than just silt collecting at the bottom of Hamilton. There were plastic bottles, beer cans and more organic debris; layers of rotten leaves, displaced branches, and waterlogged stumps.*

78. Somewhere in the middle of North and South is Baltimore. While Ceasar and Moses Cone were establishing their empire in Greensboro, their younger sisters, Etta and Claribel, stayed behind in Maryland. Claribel was teaching a course on pathology at Johns Hopkins when she met a young Gertrude Stein, who was studying medicine at the university. The two women became friends riding the streetcar to campus together.
79. The Cone sisters didn't marry. They lived off a fixed income provided by their father's will and shares in their brothers' North Carolina mills. Etta, the younger of the two, first traveled to Paris in 1901. She spent her days in galleries, museums, and at the opera, always with Stein. In 1904, Etta typed the manuscript for Stein's *Three Women*. On another trip to France, Stein introduced the Cones to Picasso and Matisse. The sisters began buying art. The textile money purchased one of the largest collections of modern art in the world.
80. At the Baltimore Museum of Art there's a photograph from 1903 of Claribel, Etta, and Stein sitting at a table in Fiesole, Italy because where else? The women are dressed almost identically except for their hats. Stein's is white or straw and Etta's is black. Claribel isn't wearing one at all. Their skirts are black too, the darkest things in the photo. Fiesole is dusty gray in the background, terracotta shingles, maybe some orange trees, if they have those there. Claribel is the only one looking at the camera. She has small lips and gray hair and wears what appears to be a bowtie. Etta has one on, too. Stein's blouse doesn't have a collar or a tie; she compromises with a broach. Stein and Etta are looking at the same thing to the left of the camera, their right. Stein and Claribel are sitting with their chairs angled towards each other and the table. Etta is off to the side resting her head in her hand, clenching her jaw. No one smiles. It looks hot.

81. Etta and Claribel's siblings never got far from the mills. They were the two that got out. Stein on the sisters: "They were, the two of them, the ones traveling and they were then the ones buying some things and they were the ones living in a way and they were the ones sometimes living in another way."<sup>28</sup>
82. Claribel had always lived differently from the rest of the Cones. At eighteen, against her father's wishes, she began to pursue a career in medicine. Her studies and subsequent work distanced her from her family and the obligations that came with it. This distance prevailed even after Claribel abandoned medicine. During World War I, Claribel stayed in Germany without access to her accounts in the states, despite plenty of opportunities to leave. She felt no urgency to return and she refused to compromise her traveling standards just to appease her siblings' concerns. Even after the war ended, Claribel lingered, finding any excuse not to return to her family for another eight months. She had made a life in Germany and she wasn't eager to pack everything up and leave just because the armistice was signed. When she finally reappeared in Baltimore, Claribel maintained her independence by arriving late to family dinners.<sup>29</sup>
83. Etta was more sensitive to the pull of the family's gravity. Before the trips to France and Fiesole, Etta's movements were limited by the walls of the family's Baltimore home. As the youngest daughter, she was expected to take care of her aging parents. She couldn't leave until they did. Years later, Etta was called back home again by the death of her older brother Moses. This time she returned to Moses' home at Blowing Rock to help his wife deal with

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<sup>28</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Two Women," in *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla E. Dydo (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), [107].

<sup>29</sup> Ellen B. Hirschland and Nancy H. Ramage, *The Cone Sisters of Baltimore: Collecting at Full Tilt* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008), [92].

the estate. The short trip turned into years. She stayed with her sister-in-law and taught at a nearby school.

84. In the beginning, the lots were big, but after Scales lost the development when the stock market crashed, the land was divided and sold off in smaller tracts. My house, a single-story white ranch, wasn't built until 1960. My address doesn't show up in the city directory until 1963. The directory includes an alphabetical listing of all city residents with their addresses, occupations, and phone numbers. Abbreviations are used for common names and occupations. A section at the end of the directory lists property owners by street name. It reads like a driving tour down every street in town. It categorizes empty lots as abandoned, or under construction. The directory lists Anthony Payne, along with wife Elizabeth W. Payne in parentheses, as the owner of my house. Payne's occupation is listed as "agcy supt jeff life" which, based on the legend at the beginning of the directory, translates to agency supervisor at Jefferson Standard Life Insurance.
85. For a brief stretch between 1923 and 1927, Jefferson Standard's downtown Greensboro headquarters was the tallest building between D.C. and Atlanta. It was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1976.
86. Down the street from Payne were schoolteachers, IBM salesmen, small business owners, and managers.
87. The 1963 directory was the last Greensboro directory published. From that year on, the city transitioned to phone books, which didn't list resident occupations or include the street directory.
88. Sometime after the Paynes, the Rivers purchased my house. Maybe it happened around 1981, when Robert Rivers began teaching economics at North Carolina A&T State University.



Robert's roots were in Massachusetts, where he grew up. Robert taught at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst for thirty-three years before he moved south with Amelia. Amelia Louise Rivers was originally from Indiana, but moved to Massachusetts for her master's degree. When Amelia, who I think went by Louise, married Robert, she was a widow. When they lived in my house it still had wood paneling, linoleum floors and a dropped ceiling with acoustical tiles.

89. When I lived in my house, my window was the first to the right of the front door. There are five windows on the front of the house. They're large, but not quite floor to ceiling. They're flanked by dark green shutters that I always thought were black. White brick covers the front facing walls of the house. It wraps around to the back of the house where it meets white vinyl siding and the tall panes of the sunroom.
90. There are several of these dark shuttered ranch houses in the neighborhood. I've only visited one of them. The house was mine but bigger and mirrored. The layout was reversed so that everything facing the street in my house faced the backyard in this one. It was on Falkener instead of Henderson. It had a basement instead of an attic, but its sunroom had the same slate tiling as mine.
91. The houses that Cone built for the mill workers in the 1920s are made of stucco. Most of them are one-story bungalows and the rest are narrow, two-story craftsmans. The two-story houses are set further back from the street, with roomy front porches. The registration form for the National Register of Historic Places counts 164 buildings in the White Oak New Town mill village. This number includes houses as well as car sheds. The form proudly notes

that the original spatial relationship between the houses, streets, and car sheds has been maintained. The unchanged structures stand as “they always have.”<sup>30</sup>

92. A man introduces himself as Dick Whitfield at the beginning of a video titled, “Cone Mills Village 1939.” Dick is one of those ancient Greensboro types whose “o”s collapse into soft “a”s when they show up at the end of a word; Greensboro becomes Greensburr-ah. This accent I refuse to imitate for fear that once I sink into it I’ll never be able to get out—linguistic quicksand.
93. Several minutes into Dick’s preamble, the camera zooms out and he invites a man named Bernard Jarvis to come into the frame. Bernard is an old friend who grew up with Dick in the mill village. Dick just happened to run into Bernard at the grocery store the other day and it was Bernard who told him about the film they’re about to watch. On his way to explaining Bernard’s connection to the film, Dick mentions that since he was born in December of 1926 and Bernard was born in January of the same year, the two would be signing up for social security at about the same time. These coincidences are important to Dick Whitfield in 1990.
94. Dick and Bernard are watching the original footage on a television set in Dick’s living room. An unseen third person, but more likely a tripod, records the footage playing on the screen. The footage sputters and crackles around the edges of the frame. The black and white film has eroded into browns and yellows. In this distortion, the images become generic; Americana stock footage. Several layers removed from the original film, it’s difficult to make out anything, but somehow Dick can still name the faces he recognizes.

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<sup>30</sup> United States Department of Interior. *National Register for Historic Places Registration Form: White Oak Town Historic District*. (United States Department of Interior, 1992).

## VI

*The year that Cone became ITG, the inlets of Hamilton were clogged with runway sediment and the lakes' water levels were at record lows. Though the parks were maintained by the cities, the neighborhood association retained control of the lakes. Members pitched in to save the two major bodies: Hamilton and Euphemia. The rest of the dredging costs were covered by donations from a fundraising cocktail party at the old Scales's mansion on Lakewood.*

95. My neighborhood is heavily wooded, which means that, for at half the year, it's green. Not a perfunctory green, but a true, deciduous green—pure life. The trees leaf out by the beginning of April and are bare again by maybe mid-December. One spring there was a big storm that knocked a tree-sized branch through the roof. The big storm was big enough for someone to carve “The Big Storm, May 2000” into a tree in the park. My mom filmed the damage on a JVC camcorder for the insurance claim. This footage exists on a tape that documents six years of my life. For six years we recorded, and inevitably recorded-over, on just this one tape. The storm damage footage is wedged between my first snowstorm and my fifth Christmas. The recording starts in the attic where the branches punctured the pink insulation and made their own skylights with leaves still in tact. In the kitchen, one branch reaches through a built-in shelving unit like a gnarly finger.
96. In textile mills, cotton dust spit out by the looms created a kind of fibrous smog that choked the air. In the denim mills, the dust was blue. I wonder how thick it was, if you could feel it the way you can humidity.
97. The dust seemed innocuous enough, even kind of dreamy in the case of the denim. But it clung to the workers' skin and hair. People called them lintheads. Left undisturbed, the dust settled on whatever it could find. In C.C. Hudson's Greensboro mill, it found a bell and the Blue Bell Overall Company got its name.
98. What the workers got for churning out overalls, inhaling cotton dust as they worked in the indigo haze went by a different name: Brown Lung. The problem with the name is that it doesn't account for the true damage, that upholstery of the capillaries. Brown is almost too organic a modifier, too ripe. Byssinosis, the medical name for the condition, is an invasion, like being slowly taxidermied alive, not the rotting that “brown” conjures up.

99. Blue Bell didn't stick. In 1943, the company acquired Casey Jones Work-clothes Company and with it the right to the name "Wrangler." Three years later, Blue Bell hired someone called "Rodeo Ben" to design their signature jeans. Rodeo Ben's jeans were for bull riding champs and steer wrestlers; cowboys. Wrangler was the only name that made sense.
100. It was New Year's Eve when I went to the Wrangler Pop-up store. The temporary store occupied the storefront at the bottom of a maybe three-story stone building at 314 South Elm. The store "popped-up" for 59 days between December and January in this property where the name "Miller's Furniture Store"—a weird conflation of Greensboro and neighboring High Point's founding industries—peeled on the facade just above the brand new Wrangler banner.
101. When I visited, the pop-up was staffed by two denim-clad employees and completely empty of customers. While the jingle bells on the doorknob were still ringing to announce my entrance, one of the employees introduced herself as Kaitlin. She explained that the store was organized by collection. The center display was for Wrangler's 27406 collection, named after the Greensboro area code where the denim is cut and sewn, in celebration of company's 70th birthday. In the 27406 section, there were limited edition denim jackets with red handwritten numbers on the inside to prove just how limited they were. The jacket I picked up said it was number 53 of 62.
102. The store was full of artifacts, for sale and for decoration, meant to convey the company's history and, in turn, Greensboro's. The pop-up sold pins, stickers, hats, and socks stamped with vintage Wrangler logos and local highway signs. Highway 220, the one that starts in southern Virginia and reaches past the state line into Greensboro, was immortalized in an iron-on patch. The patches, like expensive menu items, didn't tell their prices. I had to

ask Kaitlin. They were eight dollars each. The artfully placed vintage sewing machines were not for sale. The antique irons and spools of yarn weren't for sale either. There was a roped-off platform in the back right corner of the store with chairs and tables and more sewing machines. Customers could bring their Wrangler purchases here for light tailoring.

103. The Wrangler Jeans headquarters is several blocks up from where the pop-up store was. A few years ago, Wrangler began installing four-foot-tall jean sculptures throughout Greensboro's downtown to celebrate the city's—and the company's—history. The sculptures were jeans without bodies, just cowboy boots. Area artists painted local imagery on the fiberglass jeans: light blue tar heels and the Greensboro skyline.
104. In 2011, Wrangler held a competition to find the “next big thing in denim.” Contestants submitted their designs online and Wrangler promised to manufacture and sell the winning pair. The winner was an apparel design student at UNCG. The jeans of the future were denim trousers in a muted, coppery wash, like a faded penny.
105. At the pop-up, a hand-sewn North Carolina flag, the state seal replaced by the Wrangler “W” (upside-down golden arches), hung above the sock display inside a frame made of splintery two-by-fours. Tucked away in a corner, a miniature Christmas tree made of denim scraps, no doubt once prominently displayed, had overstayed its welcome. Surrounding the mannequins in the window display were succulents planted in pots dressed in denim, I imagined, to keep them warm in the foreign climate. The cacti were not native to Greensboro, but, rather, to the wild west of Wrangler's imagination. In the Wrangler Pop-up, it was essential to parse out these regional influences. *You are here. You could be everywhere.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York, N.Y.: New Press, 1997), [284].

106. The *here* of the Wrangler pop-up store both is and isn't where I'm from. In the Wrangler pop-up, as in the American Imagination, there were only three regions and Greensboro was in the west. And wasn't Greensboro in the western part of the state, settled by people moving down from other western parts of states? Wasn't it the west without the romance?
107. My house and its Hamilton Lakes cousins are mutations of the first ranch houses, mission adjacent dwellings built by Spanish colonizers in southern California. They were one-room structures made of adobe instead of brick. The early ranch house was a composite of the environmental features of its place. One architectural scholar calls the American ranch-style house "a building truly of and from the region."<sup>32</sup> The houses grew up out of the land by necessity, not by aesthetic preference. Later advances in air conditioning and building supply manufacturing divorced the ranch house from its native land.<sup>33</sup> Suburban developers built ranch houses anywhere and everywhere out of mass-produced materials. The connection to place, which was initially essential to the definition of the ranch house, was all but forgotten. Instead, the ranch house became the dominant suburban style not just regardless of place, but in defiance of it.
108. The invasive ranch house, like some kind of architectural kudzu, replaced local housing styles and created the homogenized, placeless face of suburbia we recognize today. One definition for Greensboro is a collection of subdivisions of these anonymous ranch houses. Places without place. The one "placed" aspect of the early ranch house that remains is the ranch part. All of us can be ranchers on our suburban plots. That's why Greensboro can be the West. Anywhere in America can.

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<sup>32</sup> Barbara L. Allen, "The Ranch-Style House in America: A Cultural and Environmental Discourse," *Journal of Architectural Education* 49, no. 3 (February 1996): [157], doi:10.2307/1425325.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

109. But maybe the ranch houses have been in the soil for enough generations to soak in whatever Greensboro is. They've been here longer than I have and even ranch houses are *homes*. In a city that can feel directionless, it's the home that provides a center, a point from which all distances are calculated. Maybe that kind of relationship to place is more important than material. Maybe the kudzu is pretty.
110. What I mean is that the Wrangler pop-up convinced me that the aloe was native to the land and that I was a cowboy because I looked good in their jeans.
111. I wanted to convince myself that all of this was in my blood even though I don't believe in blood. I do believe in *fromness*, I think. I used to say I wasn't from here. I didn't think I was lying. I said my mom is from Colorado, so I'm not from here. But my mom isn't really from *there* either, she's from Chicago. So really I'm from Chicago.
112. I wanted to believe in inheritance. Genes; jeans.



## VII

*There are different kinds of dredging. Canals and harbors, waters that perform practical or industrial roles, are dredged routinely so as not to interrupt the flow of commercial traffic. A body of water may also be dredged if it's the site of a more serious contamination, to prevent the pollutant from leaching into the water table. The kind of dredging that was planned for Hamilton and Euphemia was restorative. Its goal was to re-sculpt the lakes to their original depths.*

113. In 1912, the Cones bought an old carpet plant up the creek from Revolution and turned it into the first textile printery in the south. At Proximity Print Works unfinished fabrics from the Cone mills were cleaned, softened, dyed and printed. The plant employed artists to hand-paint designs for the printed cloth. Their sketches were etched into copper rolls to apply the designs to the cloth.<sup>34</sup> The Print Works closed in 1977 and has been abandoned ever since. In 2014, it was added to the national historic register.
114. Throughout its abandonment, the Print Works has been a destination for ruin tourists. Online, there's no shortage of videos of abandoned subdivisions, call centers, and churches uploaded by people who go by usernames like "KistchyTravels" and "The Carpetbagger." Watching these videos, it's easy to get lost inside the abandoned landscape, to sew together these scenes of ruin into a larger apocalyptic quilt. But this picture isn't entirely false. Historically, we've abandoned most of what we've built.
115. In June 2017, a user named "G H O S T" uploaded "Exploring Abandoned Proximity Mill, Greensboro NC." It's the only "abandoned" video on the channel, the rest are videos for G H O S T's music set to stock footage of clouds and sunsets. One of them is called "Chill inspirational hip hop beat // (WEAR HEADPHONES)." The parenthetical echoes the earplug warnings of Lowell.
116. In the Proximity video, the broken century-old warehouse windows and graffiti provide an edgy backdrop for G H O S T's beats. The video begins with a shot of two white boys, who I expect to recognize but don't, walking on a dirt path through overgrown grass outside the mill. The taller one is wearing khaki shorts, a white shirt, and a white dust mask over his mouth. His mask reminds me of the ones that the mills handed out to workers to prevent

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<sup>34</sup> United States Department of Interior. *National Register for Historic Places Registration Form: Proximity Print Works*. (United States Department of Interior, 2014).

them from inhaling the cotton dust. The masks had to be replaced frequently as the dust built up. The boy with the mask has glasses and a backpack with the chest strap fastened. The shorter one is wearing a baggy red t-shirt and skinny jeans. Their voices give them away; they're from here. But soon I can't hear their voices at all. As the boys near the entrance to the mill—really a human-sized hole in the window—the music makes their conversation unintelligible.

117. KitschyTravels has her own video of the mill. Posted two months after G H O S T's, its subtitle reads: "Trying to get into Proximity Mill, very hard. I will find a way!!! Still a beautiful large abandoned property." The point of most abandoned videos is that the explorer finds a way in. No one wants a video of the outside. KitschyTravels spends the entire nine minutes grumbling, "I must find a way," but eventually accepts defeat. "Sometimes you just gotta enjoy..." she starts before trailing off right when it seems like she might grant us some token of abandoned explorer wisdom. I wanted her to say something like, "Sometimes you just gotta enjoy things from the outside," but she doesn't.

118. Across downtown from Proximity were other mills. On the corner of Spring Garden and Merritt Drive was Pomona Cotton Mill. Like the Cone Mills, Pomona was situated conveniently along one of the major railways that cut through the city. After nearly sixty years of business, Pomona closed in the fifties. The property was then converted into a manufacturing plant for Western Electric. Later, in line with more recent "revitalization" projects, the mill became an outlet mall called Cotton Mill Square. The mill became a place to purchase rather than produce textiles.

119. When Cotton Mill Square, along with many of the city's enclosed malls, closed in the early aughts, Preservation Greensboro launched a campaign to add the property to the

National Register of Historic Places to prevent it from being demolished. The organization argued that the mill could be redeveloped into student housing using historic preservation tax credits. Instead, the owner of the mill neglected the property until demolition was the only viable option. Rather than renovating the structure into apartments, the mill was leveled, and a student housing development called Block 43 was built in its place. Block 43 is a neighborhood of brightly painted condos and duplexes where student tenants get free transportation to campus and discounts on rent if they make the Dean's list. From above, the shipping containers behind the Block 43 apartments look like chalk pastels.

120. Online, people reminisce not about the mill, but the mall it was made into. "Cityboi" remembers "a mini mall...in a historical textile factory with wood floors" that always smelled like kettle corn at Christmastime. The Cotton Mill Square of 2006, cityboi wrote, "sits vacant with weeds growing up through the cracks of the parking lot." In just a few years, the structure would be demolished, but cityboi doesn't know this; he is hopeful. He wonders how the building will be reincarnated next. He suggests maybe a museum or, even, a rail stop.

121. Though cityboi regrets Cotton Mill Square's abandonment, landscape theorist J.B. Jackson would argue that the mall's vacancy was necessary in order for cityboi to conceive a future for it. Jackson believed that structures must be abandoned before we recognize their potential as salvaged things:

"But there has to be that interval of neglect, there has to be discontinuity; it is religiously and artistically essential. That is what I mean when I refer to the necessity for ruins: ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins. There

has to be (in our new concept of history) an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform.”<sup>35</sup>

122. In order for ruins perform this task, we would have to resist demolition for long enough to see their value. Here Revolution has been helpful. Its success has made the value of old mill properties in Greensboro more visible than it was when the Pomona was demolished. In March, Alexander Co., a real estate developer based in Wisconsin, announced that it had purchased the Print Works and had plans to redevelop the property into apartments and retail space. A man who calls himself an “urban pioneer”<sup>36</sup> will lead the project.
123. Another man who eschews the developer label is renovating the old Blue Bell mill downtown. His pick: place maker.<sup>37</sup>
124. In addition to the Print Works, Alexander Co. will also revitalize the old Mock Judson Voehinger Hosiery Mill a couple miles east of Pomona, tucked up against the same train tracks. Mojud, as the mill was called, knit hosiery out of silk and later nylon. The mill stopped producing hosiery in 1972. The building then became a locally owned outlet store until that too went out of business. For twenty years, the mill was allowed to mature into a ruin—to become eligible for reimagining. Finally, in February 2018, the mill was awarded historic landmark status at a Greensboro city council meeting.

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<sup>35</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), [102].

<sup>36</sup> Richard M. Barron, "Wisconsin Group Plans Apartments, Commercial at Old Printworks Mill," *Greensboro News & Record*(Greensboro, NC), March 4, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Richard M. Barron, "100-year-old Greensboro Factory's New Look Holds on to Past," *Greensboro News & Record* (Greensboro, NC), April 21, 2018, accessed April 29, 2018.

## VIII

*The dredging of Hamilton happened in stages. First, before they could get to the muck, they had to drain out all the water. I remember thinking that someone must have swum to the bottom and pulled out the drain stopper like in a giant bathtub. Once that happened, Lake Hamilton was a bowl of rotting mud.*

125. Carolina Circle Mall was demolished around the same time that cityboi was imagining a future for Cotton Mill Square. Greensboro resident Billy Coore has dedicated his life to preserving its history. Located less than two miles from White Oak, the mall was meant to serve the northeastern Greensboro community as well as customers from as far away as southern Virginia. The 800,000 square-foot space had lime green shag carpeting and an ice-skating rink.
126. Coore runs a blog devoted to sharing memories and memorabilia from the mall's peak, which Billy, born in 1990, wasn't actually alive to experience. Local journalists and news anchors that interview Coore refer to him as the city's resident Carolina Circle Mall expert. In a 40-minute webcam video, Coore says that when he was young, his dad brought him to ride the mall's carousel every day. The banner on Billy's YouTube channel borrows the mall's sea foam and salmon logo design. Where the words "Carolina Circle" should be it reads "Nostalgia Mall." In 2016, he hosted a party celebrating the 40th anniversary of the mall's opening.
127. Despite the fact that the Cones had established the White Oak village almost eighty years prior to the mall's opening in 1976, it was still a rural area. Developers lobbied the city to invest in street improvements to provide access to the mall. Because it was close to the White Oak, Carolina Circle was also close to the landfill and sewage treatment plant on White Street. The mall had to install special air filters after customers complained about the smell that wafted in from the plant.
128. Carolina Circle struggled to compete with Four Seasons Mall on the other side of town for actual paying customers. Most of the people who went to Carolina Circle were there to hang out, teens wasting time after school. It didn't help that a skate park opened up next

door. After decades of losing tenants, in 2002 the mall was entirely vacant. I found a video of some college kids exploring the abandoned mall before it was razed. The guy holding the camcorder stops in front of a mirrored wall graffitied with the words “Tomb of Capitalism” in drippy red letters.

129. For a short time after closing, the mall’s parking lots were converted into soccer fields. I never went to Carolina Circle mall during those few years when our lives overlapped. I never saw the soccer fields, but I can’t imagine that there was anything resembling grass, just concrete ready for knee scraping and maybe the occasional crabgrass patch. But then you don’t actually need grass to play soccer; you need flatness, which both Greensboro and parking lots have in abundance.

130. Demolition began after Walmart bought the property in 2005. Billy Coore recorded the debris with a camcorder from the backseat of his dad’s sedan. In Coore’s footage, the mall is a twisted rubble: crushed cinder block, rust-stained tiles, and galvanized ductwork made flimsy like gum wrappers.

131. The early nineties of Billy Coore’s nostalgia is the setting for a public access documentary titled “A Closer Look at Rave in Greensboro, NC.” The spaced-out ramblings of one young raver offer another way of situating the city. We hear the heartbeat of the rave, but we’re not on the dance floor. We’re stowed away in some back room with the window blinds drawn. The room is dark except for a lamp illuminating the kid’s face and the houseplant behind his shoulder. He says: “The people here in Greensboro seem to wear New York fashion, they seem to emulate New York, but they have these southern accents. And the people in New York are emulating the people in London. And the people in London must be imitating the people from Saturn.” There’s a big pause before each “and.” He rubs his neck



and looks around like he's really thinking it through. After he lands on "Saturn," right before the film cuts to the next shot, he cracks a small smile like he's impressed with himself for coming up with something that deep. And, like, he's *right*.

## IX

*The draining exposed colonies of freshwater mussels. They were close enough to the lake's edge that I could reach them without walking too far in the not-yet-dry mud. I remember coming home with buckets full. I thought I'd find a pearl. We hosed the mussels off and left them to bake on the patio until they didn't smell like the lake anymore. They live in the dining room now, in a tall glass vase by the window.*

132. For decades after the rest of the mills left the city, White Oak survived on small orders from luxury denim brands. Right now, Levi's is selling a pair of jeans made of denim manufactured at White Oak for \$295. A description of the jeans on Levi's website details the historic relationship between Levi's and Cone. The relationship began in 1915 when Levi's asked Cone to manufacture the denim for its 501 jeans.<sup>38</sup> The agreement, known as "The Golden Handshake," proved vital for White Oak.
133. I watched an interview with a woman who had worked at White Oak for fifty years. She said that sometimes orders came in so fast that they couldn't keep up. This was good, she explained, that meant they would stay open.
134. By 2012, when the interview was filmed, White Oak had been downsizing for years in order to bring production costs down. In October 2017, the *Greensboro News & Record* reported that the International Textile Group (ITG), which acquired Cone Mills in 2004, finally decided that even the patronage of luxury brands couldn't justify the high costs of keeping the old mill running.<sup>39</sup>
135. Wilbur Ross, the President Donald Trump's Secretary of Commerce, was the owner of ITG when the corporation purchased Cone Mills. In November 2017, *Forbes* revealed that Ross had been lying about his assets for the past thirteen years in order to be included in the publication's list of wealthiest people in America.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Alex Williams, "No Room for America Left in Those Jeans," *The New York Times*, November 10, 2017, accessed April 29, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Richard M. Barron, "After 112 Years, White Oak Plant to Close," *Greensboro News & Record*, October 19, 2017, accessed April 29, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Fred Barbash, "Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross 'Lied' about His Wealth to Make Richest Americans List, Says Forbes Magazine," *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2017.

136. In one photograph of White Oak, you can only see what seems to be the back of the mill. From this angle, the mill is a long one-story brick building with a flat roof. Brick walls that reach higher than the roof divide the large, low building into smaller subsections. Each section has an identical back door accompanied by a set of stairs to the ground, because—by the way—the building is standing on stilts. The stairs lead down to five small buildings that might house utilities or hide some infrastructural blemishes. The mill crosses the photograph diagonally, with the right end of the building closest to the foreground, while the left side reaches out of the frame into the horizon. To the left of the mill, in the foreground, is a scraggly field spotted with shrubs and patches of water making their way to another dried up lake.
137. In recent years, Greensboro has begun to rebrand itself, in the way so many other mid-size nowhere cities have, as a hipster destination. Microbreweries have sprung up in parts of the city no one used to go: South Elm Street and that wasteland surrounding the intersection of Battleground and Wendover. A bus ships tourists—I guess this is what they are—from microbrewery to microbrewery. Down the block from one of the breweries on Elm is an old thrift shop turned “living” museum with artist residencies and unpaid interns. Further up Elm, there’s a taco place with a special called “the fedora.”
138. Denim is also a part of this rebranding. At precisely the moment when large-scale manufacturing is making its exit from Greensboro, the raw denim movement has arrived. To its followers, raw denim is a return to a more active relationship to consumption. And in Greensboro, the trend acts as an entry point that allows its followers to interact with the city’s larger textile tradition.

139. An acquaintance from high school is deep in Greensboro's raw denim scene. He studies apparel design at UNCG and posts videos of his vintage singer sewing machine on Instagram. His name is John Richard but he goes by J.R. Some of the sewing machines at the pop-up were his; he had rented them out to Wrangler. He appreciated the way the company was acknowledging the city's history. Wrangler was engaging with the community in a way that ITG never bothered to.
140. J.R. uses a word when he's talking about denim and Greensboro that had never occurred to me: fashion. Greensboro, he tells me, has its very own fashion week. He attended a few years ago when it was held at Revolution. Before J.R. found fashion, he thought he would have a career in theatre.
141. It's from J.R.'s Instagram that I learned how some rips are patched, but others should be darned—or stitched back together so that the stitches form a patch of their own. The heavy denim is made to last, but that doesn't mean it won't tear. Some knowledge of basic stitches is helpful. It's for this reason that the cult of raw denim preaches against washing, which is just another unnecessary stressor on the delicate fabric and seams. They'll tell you that jeans were "never meant to be washed," as if referencing the dictum of some obscure denim god. And, as in any worthwhile cult, there are rewards in store for the faithful disciple. A three-year-old pair of handcrafted, raw denim jeans—faded-out in the thighs, ripped and darned at the knees and crotch—is a kind of trophy.
142. The philosophy of raw denim exists at the intersection of two seemingly opposing ideas. On one hand, there is faith in the fabric itself. The denim knows what to do. Its processes are far beyond the grasp of our understanding; it's best we don't interfere. On the other hand, the jeans need us. Without the daily movements of the wearer, raw denim remains a blank

canvas. The jeans are at once self-reliant and hopelessly impressionable, their value dependent on the unconscious influence of their wearer.

143. Raw denim is sold fresh off the loom, washed only once, or not at all until you wash it.

Because of this, the unpasteurized pants are known to sweat blue. “Denimheads” are advised to avoid light-colored furniture before the first wash. I like to imagine they call this the baptism. The bleeding stops, but the denim, like the looms it comes from, continues to shed. The outer “crust” of the fabric erodes slowly with each wear. They say it erodes in ways individual to its wearer. No two pairs have the same fades. The idea is that you shield the jeans from nothing but detergent for as long as you can manage. You want to control the build up and break down of dirt on their surface, not outsource it to your laundry machine. You want to be sure that you are the only one responsible for their markings. Your jeans should be proof of something.

144. It’s as easy to make fun of this world as it is to be drawn into its romance. I’m hesitant to discount anyone who knows that fabric is almost as intimate a thing as skin. Our clothes see us intimately, but raw denim is different because it both witnesses *and* reflects our image back to us. There is some confusion, however, about whether the denim represents us, or *is* us “like a thumbprint.”<sup>41</sup> If denim is us, it would explain why my first thought immediately after ripping a pair of jeans beyond repair, was that I should fly them from a flagpole. I didn’t end up making a denim flag from my jeans but I haven’t thrown them away either. I understand J.R.’s passion as something like a pursuit of texture, or at least some structure within the flatness. In denim, he finds something Greensboro is lacking.

145. Or, maybe it’s just that raw denim can stand up on its own.

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<sup>41</sup> Jeremy Markovich, "At Hudson's Hill, Denim Is the Deepest Blue," *Our State*, August 5, 2015, accessed April 29, 2018.

146. Denim doesn't have to be vintage to be raw, but all raw denim is manufactured using vintage techniques. Each new pair of raw denim jeans is nostalgic for an era when all denim was raw. In this way, the shift to raw denim is motivated by a salvaging impulse. Salvage is what Greensboro native, Evan Morrison, did when he opened Hudson's Hill on Elm Street in 2013 at the old location of Hudson's Overall Co. He transformed the historic space into the first store in town to sell not only raw denim, but also the selvage denim that was being made just miles away at White Oak. But he's not just interested in selling the denim; Evan is interested in translating the stories the fabric tells. Evan can interpret from the locations and angles of the creases on a pair of well-worn jeans the occupation of its owner. In telling these stories, Evan hopes, too, to preserve Greensboro's history. He taught J.R. everything he knows.
147. The vintage Levi's 701s are one of three pairs of "Women's" jeans for sale at Hudson's Hill. The stitching on the selvage is pink instead of red. They are high waisted, boot-cut and \$198.
148. Evan and J.R. took a trip to the Print Works just before Alexander Co. announced its renovation plans. They wanted to take whatever they could find, "any small piece of history," J.R. said, before someone else did. They collected scraps of fabric, loose bricks, signs, anything.
149. These small pieces and the selvage denim Evan and J.R. wear connect them to a lineage that is tangible. In this way, their preoccupation with material is primarily nostalgic.
150. In 1937, textile artist, Anni Albers wrote: "Civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials, that is, from materials in their original form."<sup>42</sup> Albers led the textile and

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<sup>42</sup> Anni Albers, *Anni Albers: Selected Writings on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz and Nicholas Fox Weber (Hanover [N.H.]: Wesleyan University Press, published by University Press of New England, 2000), [6].

weaving program at Black Mountain College from 1933 until 1949. The college was in Asheville where the eldest Cone daughter and her family lived on a hill overlooking one of their mills. Two hours up the Blue Ridge parkway is Moses Cone's Flat Top Manor in Blowing Rock where Etta Cone spent years in a depression after her brother's death.

151. Albers blamed our estrangement from materials for everything from general confusion to nervous breakdowns. The only solution to the chaos of modern life was to reunite with the materials we had once known so intimately: "we must come down to earth from the clouds where we live in vagueness, and experience the most real thing there is: material."<sup>43</sup> If we only listened to them, the limits and demands of material would provide absolute "certitude in the belief that we are taking part in an eternal order."<sup>44</sup>

152. And, also, it's easier to be proud of something you can hold in your hands: "At any rate, he liked to see things grow under his hand, he liked to produce something that he could see, and touch, and say, "This I made."<sup>45</sup>

153. Albers has a weaving called *La Luz I*. Like all of her weavings, it is the result of "listening to the dictation of the material."<sup>46</sup> *La Luz I* could be a topographic map where different weave heights represent different elevations. It could be an image of the cross from the perspective of someone looking up from underneath it. Each thread of the weft seems to be a different color, but most are from families of red, orange, olive, light blue and beige. From far away, these tones blend together into earthy neutrals in a way that seems impossible considering their individual vibrancy. And when the weft fades into a lighter, more muted shape towards the center of the weaving it's a miracle; another dimension (and there were

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *Making of a Southern*, [41].

<sup>46</sup> Albers, *Selected Writings*, [9].



already three!) Still another shape, an elongated rectangle, appears inside it like an open door.

154. “That’s not Cone anymore,” is what J.R. said when I asked him what he thought about White Oak closing. It was sad, he admitted, but White Oak hadn’t *really* been Cone since 2004 when ITG bought it. The corporation had been less than warm towards Evan and J.R.’s efforts to preserve and sustain the city’s denim history. Under ITG’s helm, White Oak had become just another a snag in their plans. J.R. saw ITG’s departure as an opportunity for locals to reclaim their city’s denim.

## X

*After the draining came the true dredging. Metal claws and hydraulic scoops delivered the dregs into dump trucks. The dredging also excavated remnants of a wooden lifeguard stand. Swimming in Lake Hamilton was the epitome of Scales's original vision for a neighborhood built for recreation. Seashells and sand were trucked in to create a beach on the lake's southern bank. Neighborhood teens spent the summer tanning on the manmade shore, lounging in the water, and fishing off the concrete dock. Now the old beach is covered with moss and weeds and Canada geese.*

155. On the Friday before Christmas, I woke up in Greensboro at five in the morning. By six, I was waiting for Sal in the parking lot outside of White Oak. In the lot, it was dark the way it had been when I left New York the day before. The Virginia license plates reminded me that the border I had crossed so recently could be within commuting distance of Greensboro. Sal came through an opening in the twelve-foot high barbed wire fence, rubbing his hands together to keep them warm.
156. Sal's brother, Andres, works for my mom at a locker manufacturer in High Point called Treeforms. Sometimes Sal picks up extra hours at Treeforms with Andres, but for the past sixteen years he's worked at White Oak for a company contracted by ITG to clean the mill. I followed Sal through the dark, down a covered walkway to a brightly lit entrance. Before he opened the door, Sal reached into his jacket pockets to retrieve something. He handed me a pair of neon earplugs sealed in plastic and pointed to a sign like the one at Lowell that said "Ear Protection Required Beyond This Point." When Sal opened the door, I could barely hear the machinery through the foam of the plugs, but I could tell it was louder than the Lowell weave room.
157. In 2015, Cone—really just a subsidiary of ITG at that point—produced a short documentary to celebrate the company's 110th birthday. It's called "Still Made in America." All of the workers interviewed for the documentary have the same earplugs Sal gave me strung around their necks. They talk about how indigo only adheres to the exterior of the yarn and how White Oak's weave room is the size of four football fields. Most of the drama in the six-minute documentary is devoted to opening a rusty Cone Export and Commissions safe from the old corporate headquarters on Maple Street, the road I always forget to take on my way to the mills. Employees take turns speculating on what could be inside the safe. One

man says he hopes it's not a dead body. A master safecracker is called in to finish the job.

Inside: a single dime, dated 1985.

158. Without windows, White Oak felt subterranean. I only realized that I was, in fact, above ground, when Sal suggested that we go down to the basement. Everywhere the brick walls of the mill were painted a pale blue to remind us of the sky we couldn't see. The darker blue of decades of lint dust outlined the cracks in between bricks where mortar, under the paint, held them together. The cement floors were painted another shade of blue, this one closer to gray. On the machines, the dust looked like mold. These shades of blue are White Oak as much as the denim is.
159. Sal walked me through sections of the mill that had already shut down, which was meant most of them. Some were decommissioned recently, others had already been abandoned by the time he started working at the mill. By 2015, only forty out of White Oak's 2700 looms were in operation. At its height, the plant employed almost 2000 workers, but it's hard to imagine what all those people would've been doing at White Oak. The machines seemed content to churn away without interference.
160. Cone followed up "Still Made in America" with another video titled "The Symphony of Cone Denim." The natural hum of the mill is disguised under Rossini's Overture to *Il Barbiere Di Siviglia* while a montage of machinery follows the manufacturing process from raw cotton all the way to packaging and shipping. There are dancing spools and carefully choreographed looms. There is not a single worker in sight.
161. In one area of the mill there were rows of empty cubicles. The chairs faced a wall of finished denim instead of desks. Each cell was underneath a belt of denim that curved up and over it from behind guided by pipes hanging from the ceiling, so that some engine could pull

the denim from a roll on the other side and through the system for inspection. The tunnel created by the wave of denim was dark except for the lights illuminating the fabric under evaluation. The unit hadn't shutdown yet, so inside the cubicles were bulletin boards personalized with calendars, school pictures and holiday cards.

162. In the room where the cotton is spun into yarn, I found a sign listing ways to identify non-conforming yarn. It listed twelve ways for yarn to rebel:

Weak Yarn

Cut or Damaged

No Tail

Wild Yarn

Package too Big

Tangled

Bad Tail

Pattern in Cloth

Quality Problem

Wrong Pattern

Wrong Tube

163. As Sal led me out, the next shift of mill workers began to trickle in. One woman was wearing a Christmas vest and reindeer antlers. Everyone wanted to stop and chat with Sal when they saw him. By the time we were outside, the sun had just barely begun to rise, warming the black night to an indigo morning. It was the morning after the Winter Solstice. From here the days would get longer again. White Oak was supposed to close in a week. The

guard said Merry Christmas. I asked Sal if he'd miss working here. He nodded.

164. After several false-stops, White Oak officially closed on January 31st, 2018. While most employees were phased out earlier in the month, Sal worked through the last day, cleaning and shipping what was left of the mill. He saw the equipment shipped out to ITG's mills in Parras and Yecapixtla, Mexico, where the company will continue produce denim under the Cone name. Samet Corporation, a local developer, bought the White Oak property, but hasn't announced any specific plans.
165. Sal gave me three scraps of denim from White Oak. The two larger pieces of fabric seem to have come from the same indigo roll. One piece is cut fairly straight on the sides, but the other is all jagged, hacked apart so that it has these denim teeth, or thorns sticking out of the right side. Both pieces are 28-inch wide selvage denim. The jagged piece has the number "5464" handwritten thick yellow-gold just below the strip of white and red that tells me it's selvage. "5464" and its sibling scrap are hearty thick weaves, but they aren't rigid enough to be raw.
166. The third scrap is much smaller. It gives when I pull on the edges: stretch denim. It's softer and lighter and greener than the others. It is not selvage. I can tell it's been washed and treated more than the others because of the way the blue and white threads blend together. On the other scraps, the indigo warp seems almost painted onto the white weft. Denim is always a color that is two. The back of the denim (the inside-outside) is as beautiful as the reverse. It's denim in negative. The white is thicker than the indigo and the two colors form intricate diagonal pinstripes. From far away, the stripes blend together in a stormy grey. Up close, it can look like the indigo dye was drawn on with a felt tip pen. It has to be softer because it's the side you feel.

167. I think these fabrics might tell me something. They've been tacked to the wall above my bed for a few months now and they've just barely begun to lose their shape. I can still see the wrinkles and fold lines from the way they were crumpled in the bag from Sal. The denim is impressionable, stubborn even. It can't lie about where it's been. It remembers the way it was folded to fit back in the drawer. All fabric does, but especially denim. Its heft tells us that it shouldn't.
168. White Oak was not only Greensboro's, but also the country's last selvage denim mill. Selvage is a way of constructing the edge of a piece of fabric to prevent it from unraveling. It's a kind of woven seal. Regular hems fray but selvage won't. Selvage sounds like *salvage*. Salvage is what White Oak became when it closed.
169. Weeks after the mill closed, Ralph Lauren debuted its uniforms for Team USA at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics. The denim for the "moto-inspired" jeans was sourced from some of the last reams made in Greensboro, at White Oak.
170. There was another White Oak. Before there was a mill—before there was even a city—there was a tree. A century before Cone, people knew where they were based on where the White Oak was.

## XI

*In 1960, dozens of dead fish floated up to the glassy surface of Lake Hamilton. Residents were concerned, but not enough to give up their suburban oasis. And maybe in years earlier, when neighborhood was still a town, the incident could've been ignored, but by 1960 Hamilton Lakes had been annexed by the city. The Guilford County Health Department heard about the die-off and opened an investigation on the lake. Soon after, they staked the beach with signs prohibiting all swimming and fishing.*



171. According to Preservation Greensboro, the use of fieldstone, as opposed to some other rock, in the stonemasonry of neighborhoods like Hamilton Lakes is a feature that distinguishes Greensboro from other Piedmont cities.<sup>47</sup> Preservation Greensboro is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to, “build thriving communities by protecting and renewing our historic and architectural treasures.”<sup>48</sup> The organization runs a store that sells used home wares called Architectural Salvage. They fundraise by leading tours inside historic properties.
172. The “Resources” page of Preservation Greensboro’s website points to links that instruct visitors how to explore their own local history. One link leads to the State Historic Preservation Office’s interactive map. The map shows every registered historic site and district in North Carolina. Sites on the national register are blue symbols, while sites on the state register are green. The map also highlights potential sites, places determined eligible for preservation, with red and green triangles. For Preservation Greensboro, these sites are the new frontier. The fieldstone bridge over the Lake Hamilton dam on East Keeling is one of these red triangles.
173. The multicolored stone is found mostly in New England and in the Great Plains; in *fields*. Early settlers would turn up fieldstone while plowing land for farming. Soon enough they started collecting it to build walls around their plots. The stone is flat like the fields it’s named after so it’s good for stacking. While fieldstone is not abundant throughout North Carolina, a significant deposit resides in the soil underneath Greensboro. This stone and the salvage were Greensboro’s native materials.

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<sup>47</sup> Briggs, "The Secrets," *Preservation Greensboro* (blog).

<sup>48</sup> Preservation Greensboro Inc., "About," Preservation Greensboro, last modified 2016, accessed April 29, 2018, <https://preservationgreensboro.org/about/>.

174. Preservation Greensboro suggests that fieldstone was chosen, not only because it belonged to the land, but to enhance the resort-like quality Scales imagined for the neighborhood. The stonemasonry of Hamilton recalls Asheville's Grove Park Inn, a mountain retreat built where there used to be a tuberculosis sanitarium by a pharmaceutical millionaire. The millionaire was counting on the mountain air to cure his hiccup episodes, which could last for weeks at a time. The resort is a gorgeous pile of granite boulders hauled over from nearby Sunset Mountain.
175. At the beginning of his essay "Stone and Its Substitutes," J.B. Jackson reminds us that one of the twelve apostles was an architect. In India, St. Thomas the Apostle promised a king that he would build him a palace of stone. Instead, he gave all the king's money away to the poor and traveled the countryside spreading the gospel. When confronted, Thomas told the king that he had built him a palace, a heavenly one.
176. What Jackson is concerned with is the distinction the apostle makes between wood and stone and what that means for the value of the latter material. Through what associations could a stone palace become a heavenly one? Jackson concludes:
- "And (in view of his religious interpretation of that palace) it is likely that he would have defended the distinction between wood and stone by pointing out that many man-made objects in the landscape were meant to last much longer than others; that only a few things in the world were intended to last more than a lifetime; that only things having a sacred character deserved to be carefully designed and made; that in fact most of the objects used in our everyday existence can and indeed should be temporary and makeshift and forgettable. All that we ask our landscape, Thomas

would have said, was a monument or two of stone, a series of landmarks to remind us of what we believe and of our origin and identity.”<sup>49</sup>

177. In Hamilton Lakes, the native fieldstone was used to craft such a series of landmarks: dams, bridges, and culverts to service the neighborhood’s water features.<sup>50</sup> There’s also a little fieldstone amphitheater built out of the side of a hill next to Lake Euphemia, where pets are not allowed. The lake is named after Scales’ mother, Euphemia, and not the saint Euphemia, who was tortured for refusing to make sacrifices to Ares, the war god. Saint Euphemia was captured and fed to wild animals in another amphitheatre somewhere in what is now Istanbul. The lions refused to harm her, but other beasts were less charitable. A mural at the Basilica Saint Euphemia shows the martyr collapsed on the floor of the arena clutching her chest and looking up at a pair of cherubs while the two lions protectively lick her wounds. In Hamilton Lakes, swans, not lions, guard Euphemia.

178. Or, at least, they did.

179. On May 11th, 2017, the Hamilton Lakes and Parks Neighborhood Association Facebook page announced that the second of two neighborhood swans had died:

“We are saddened to report that, after losing the female swan on Lake Hamilton last month, our female swan on Jim King Pond has now, too, passed away due to unknown causes. We know that our residents enjoy watching the swan pairs, and in time we hope to find replacements for the two females we have lost.”

180. Neighbors flocked to the comments to speculate on the circumstances surrounding the swan’s death. “Heaven forbid we lose another,” begins one commenter, who goes on to

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<sup>49</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), [107].

<sup>50</sup> Briggs, "The Secrets," *Preservation Greensboro* (blog).

suggest sending the swan's remains to a pathologist in Raleigh for an autopsy. Next, the page administrator responds, promising to "keep this information in mind" but admits that "there is some evidence that our swans are being killed by larger predators...potentially foxes." The following comments support the "larger predators..." theory. One person reports that she routinely sees a large fox in the neighborhood. She writes, "Always thought it was hunting something by its behavior. Scary." Another commenter claims to have seen a coyote in her yard. She wonders, "Is there anything we can do to thwart nature?" No one answers this question so she posts another: "Did the family with the lost pig (Rosie) ever find her?"

181. It was common to see deer in the Carolina Circle Mall parking lot and, on at least one occasion, inside the mall. An account of the 1977 incident appears in a chronology of the mall published in the News & Record in 1996:

"At 10:30 on a Sunday morning, three deer, apparently startled by cleaning equipment churning through the mall parking lot, panic and run through two plate glass windows. The deer then fall 18 feet to the mall floor, near the ice rink. One doe breaks its neck and dies. The other two are captured and released."<sup>51</sup>

182. During the last summer I spent in Greensboro, I found a dead goose on the side of the bridge over the dam on East Keeling, the one determined eligible for preservation. I left home with my dog during that in-between time when the street lights are on but the sun is still out and everything is golden and green and crickets. By the time we looped back around toward Henderson, the sun was gone and the air was heavy with mosquitoes and humidity. I didn't see the goose until it was at my feet. The headlights of an oncoming car illuminated the animal's beak just inches away from my toes. It was a Canada goose, the kind that have

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<sup>51</sup> Scott Andron, "The Rise and Fall of Carolina Circle Mall," *Greensboro News & Record* (Greensboro, NC), July 27, 1996, accessed April 28, 2018.

black heads and black necks with a white stripe under the beak that's known as a "chinstrap" even though birds don't exactly have chins. Below the chinstrap, the goose's neck was still graceful if crooked. The left wing was half-extended in a final attempt. The right wing, the one closest to the road, was tangled up underneath the animal, unidentifiable from the rest of the mass of blood and feathers. Displaced downy undercoat feathers left a white wreath around the body. It was just to the left of the white line marking the outer limit of the road. It hadn't died there: someone had moved it out of the way.

183. Canada geese are migratory birds, which means they typically only spend winters in the south, but, in recent years, many have traded seasonal migration for the yearlong hospitality of man-made lakes and golf courses in temperate climates throughout North America. An especially sizable population of Canada geese established a permanent address in the Triangle region of North Carolina, just forty miles east of Greensboro. While these permanent communities thrive off of living in close proximity to humans, they're also known for their aggression towards their bread-throwing neighbors. In case of attack, humans are advised to remain facing their aggressor; a confrontational goose is only made more hostile by its target's passivity. Above all else, it is crucial to maintain eye contact.
184. I took a photo of the dead bird so I could examine it later, undeterred by the dog's pulling. The camera's flash had bounced off the shiny part of the goose's eye, so in the picture, it looks like the animal is staring back at me.

## XII

*With sediment, runoff also carries lawn fertilizers and household detergents into the water. The chemicals spur the rapid growth and death of aquatic plants and algae. Bacteria consume large amounts of oxygen in the water in order to decompose the dead blooms. Fish need oxygen. When bacteria deplete oxygen levels, fish suffocate. This process, called oxygen depletion, is the most common cause of fish-kills. Oxygen depletion isn't immediately dangerous to humans, but it wasn't to blame for the fish-kill at Lake Hamilton. The health department concluded that it was mercury poisoning that killed the fish.*

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*When I was 18, I swam in the lake. I was disappointed to find that my feet could touch the bottom.*

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