

## TEN

# Wildness, Eschatology, and Enclosure in the Songs of Townes Van Zandt

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### INTRODUCTION

Loss and tragedy were present in the earliest days of American country music in part because it emerged from the great urbanization of America. This was a time of massive relocation when American life quickly and violently became city life. Country music, like folk music before it, was born from the shock of urbanization.

Lola Scobey, in the liner notes of Van Zandt's 1978 release *Flyin' Shoes*, remarked: "Townes carries the terror and the sorrow of a deeply sensitive man who has looked into the abyss and seen...the abyss." But this is too romantic; there is no abyss. Van Zandt looked at the folk on Main Street and wrote about it; however, this makes it sound too obvious, perhaps too naïve. Van Zandt is anything but naïve. His observations cut to the bone and reverberate upon the fractured psyche of America gone wrong, an America suffering from loss. I would contend that he wrote about the dark side of the American dream, or, perhaps, that he wrote mini-documentaries of the American dream becoming nightmare. However, sloppy words such as these do Van Zandt an injustice. These are the words of platitude and marketing, of Hallmark sentimentality. Van Zandt does not choose these words; instead, he strikes out against marketing corporations and entertainment companies who ingest romanticism and replace history with an imaginary vision of an ideal past. Culture is transformed from a living system, developed to help the individual deal with the vagaries, dangers, and paradoxes of life, into a constellation of consum-

able products. Fairy tales and mythologies of birth, transformation and death, the very wildness and unpredictability of living, community, and nation are domesticated. And in this domestication, which is the construction of a psycho-social enclosure, something happens. While on the surface domesticating myths seems harmless enough, folk stories are transformed, the endings often "improved," the death taken out, the suffering eliminated, all to sell stuffed animals and cartoons to children. The marketing makes the stories more consumable but no longer capable of communicating any lessons about life or loss. The necessary complexity of life is surgically removed, and behind its shiny replacement a darkness grows. These are the songs that Townes Van Zandt writes. These songs are about the strange desires we pretend not to want, songs about the loss that we keep to ourselves, the fear of our own death, the fear of being unremarkable, the madness of creativity and imagination, and the essential wildness of a life well lived.

In his work Van Zandt struggles with the darkness of wildness; the free place where freedom comes with the risks of physical and psychological dangers, even death. Much of his work revolves around the violence of civilization that kills and buries wildness and the inevitable haunting that occurs with its return.

## WILDNESS

The wild has been both demonized and romanticized. Rarely, however, is it understood as a central human experience. In *The Practice of the Wild*, American beat poet Gary Snyder explores the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of the wild to illustrate this point. In the English language the wild is not a concept that stands on its own. The wild is defined as uncivilized, rude, unrestrained, insubordinate licentious, dissolute, loose behavior, violent, destructive, cruel, unruly, artless, free, and spontaneous. All of these definitions, Snyder points out, rely on negation. The wild is an antithesis, an opposite number that does not have positive qualities. Snyder, however, is interested in exploring the positive essential elements of the wild and proposes a counter definition. Wild individuals are

following local custom, style, and etiquette without concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. Proud and free. Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, bad, admirable, artless, free, spontaneous, unconditioned. Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic. (Snyder 11)

From this new definition Snyder suggests a link between autonomous citizens, psychological and ecological health, and a virtuous wildness central to American individuality, independence, and democracy. Wild-

ness and civilization are not opposite; they are necessary partners. The seemingly oxymoronic notion of the "autonomous citizen" works with the partnership between wildness and civilization: in order for democracy to function properly, the citizen cannot be understood as simply a single person within a mass of undifferentiated persons, as a citizen is a developing individual struggling for full self-realization among other interconnected autonomous individuals. The tension that exists between the discipline required for collective action and the independence of thought essential for innovation comes from wildness, and it is as necessary as it is incommensurable with discipline. This is an irreconcilable tension that few artists explore, let alone as deeply as does Townes Van Zandt.

Van Zandt, in "Our Mother the Mountain," draws out this tension by eroticizing it. He places wildness in the body of a woman. It is a dark tale of desire where the wild powers of nature materialize in the body of a lover whose dark hair is radiant with the "moon's dancing purple." The lover arrives, accompanied by her ladies in waiting, holding a "rose on her bosom." Perhaps it is Barbara Allen, a great lover from old English and Scottish ballads, returning from beyond the grave. After all, Barbara Allen was buried with a rose which became entwined with her lover's green briar.

Drawing upon a ballad character harkens back to the original folk "revival" which began with the concept of *the folk* first articulated by J. G. Herder in the late eighteenth century. He recognized that urbanization was impacting geography, life-ways, and cultural formations, and in particular a special type of musical practice he called folk music. In it he saw the creative expression of "a folk whose aesthetic creativity sprang from nature" (Bohlman xix). Already in 1767, however, Herder could lament, "our poems are no longer written for shepherds but for city-dwelling Muses, our language is limited to the language of the book" (Herder 33). Herder noticed that something natural —something wild—was going missing from human culture. He articulated folk music as a counter expression of urbanism and industrialization (and indeed courtly and religious music). Even perhaps if he did not entirely grasp the social changes that were occurring around him, he did grasp that social production was changing the ways people were relating to themselves, each other, and the natural world. Folk music was both cultural wildness and in it Herder would find the spirit of the nation.

Van Zandt draws these elements out of folk music, its cultural wildness, and brings it into country music. However, if it is Barbara Allen, accompanied by the other great lovers of the folk ballads, she does not say. Instead she imparts that she comes from "my mother the mountain," from the very earth of the surrounding hills; the personification of the American wilderness and as such, from the heart of what it means to be American.

Reflecting on American democracy and the frontier, Percy Boynton wrote: "American democracy [was] born of no theorist's dream. . . . It came out of the American forest, and it gained strength each time it touched a new frontier" (Boynton 53). The folk living on the American frontier brought with them the tales of Barbara Allen and made them American by understanding them in the context of frontier independence. Just as Herder suspected, art exists in an uncultivated (non-courtlly) context, and the folk ballads are evidence of this. Van Zandt draws upon Barbara Allen, and she returns as the erotic dream of frontier American wildness, back from the dead, this time to haunt suburban America. The great heroine of folk songs has been kept alive long past her death by the folks who made a life free of European control, in the free hills of frontier America. There they nurtured their dreams of freedom and infused them into the image of the American wilderness in which they lived their lives. The desire for freedom in America is mixed up with this history and is likely often experienced as erotic desire for a mystic lover who comes from *our* mother the mountain.

This erotic draw is strong, and we are caught in the desire to reach out and touch her as she further bewitches us with a medallion that she twirls in front of our eyes. The pull gains strength: "I watch her, I love her, I long for to touch her / The satin she's wearin' / Is shimmering blue." Hypnotized by desire, time seems to stop. In the stillness of this moment the hunting dogs outside have all fallen silent, but here Van Zandt creates temporal insecurity, and we are not sure where and when this story is taking place anymore. Is it Barbara Allen who has come back to life or have we awoken in a hunting cabin in the hills of mythic Appalachia? And if we have returned to the frontier, is it to find the romance that Charles L. Sanford called the *Quest for Paradise*, a return "to nineteenth-century America [where] every individual was as new as Adam. Each was the first man, each the new unfallen. The American experience was like a moulting season, 'a gradual sloughing of the old skin,' said D. H. Lawrence echoing Thoreau" (Simonson 36). Perhaps this desire is "idealism that stretched out into mysticism" (ibid). The desire for this freedom, this connection to the wild core of Americanism, to possess it and experience it is a powerful force which propels the narrator forward.

Just as he can take no more, he reaches out to her only to find her  
 ...Eyes turn to poison  
 And her hair turns to splinters and her flesh turns to brine  
 She leaps 'cross the room, she stands in the window  
 And screams that my first-born will surely be blind

Desire for the wild is dangerous and not without great cost. But the terror that she becomes after her transformation does not arrest the desire of the narrator. He runs after her, still sure that this is who, or what, he loves:

She throws herself out to the black of the nightfall



She's parted her lips but she makes not a sound  
I fly down the stairway, I run to the garden  
No trace of my true love was there to be found

The song ends with the narrator's halfhearted and ironic warning to be careful whom you love, but we know the narrator cannot help himself. His advice is empty because it is opposed to his desire. Regardless of the terror and horror that she might bring him, and the trials that he will go through to find her, she, wildness, remains necessary.

Michael Taussig remarks that there are many powers at play when we think of wildness; powers which are destructive as well as redemptive: "Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol... Wilderness pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage and a grinding articulation between signifier and signified" (Taussig 219). It is no wonder, Taussig writes, that wildness has been demonized for thousands of years. Further, Bernheimer reminds us that the central authority of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages constructed wildness in opposition to "Christian norms and the established framework of Christian society" (220). So perhaps fittingly, Van Zandt's "Rake" is an exploration of wildness in the form of a vampire protagonist:

I used to wake and run with the moon  
I lived like a rake and a young man  
I covered my lovers with flowers and wounds  
My laughter the devil would frighten

Rake, a character from a vampire movie or an Anne Rice novel, is a fashionable and powerful young man who narrates his desire for flowers and violence. Living by night, with "wine and guitars," the otherworldly narrator explores his sexual power unremorsefully. An ode to the dark power of youthful male sexuality, "Rake" is an exploration of the wildness and vigor of youth and the wildness of time and the violence it exerts on the body.

Presented a vampire narrator, it is impossible for us *not* to reflect upon the vampire in eighteenth-century popular imagination: "the figure of the vampire represents the degenerative effects of luxury and self-interest" (Michaud 62). This is surely evident in "Rake," especially so if we consider vampirism more generally and try to make sense of it within country music, a musical style more associated with church, family, and salvation than with haunting. Van Zandt is not undermining country music or sneering at its conventions. He is drawing upon literary traditions, just as he has reached back to Appalachian ballads in "Our Mother the Mountain." This time he is recalling a folk music hero of the American imagination, but undead and closer to the American gothic imagination (Lloyd-Smith, Ringe). "Rake" is a living-dead country music hero, and perhaps this is Hank Williams or Jimmie Rodgers back from the dead; an American country music vampire is a fitting character for post-1970

country music, after all. In America, a country focused on progress, the return of country music, at least of the type that Townes Van Zandt was composing in the late 1960s and 1970s, was indeed a ghostly return:

The vampire's return challenges the idea of time as progressive and ordered, and of man moving ever forward to a state of perfection. In a political culture determined to contain ambiguity of meaning as well as social and political deviance, the vampire is the ultimate enemy; an equivocal and barbaric other, an invading pathogen whose virulence is matched only by its duplicity and insatiable hunger for power. (Michaud 66)

But perhaps Rake is not a vampire at all. The narrator may be nothing but the fantastic dream of sexual domination fuelled by socially produced sexual repression. After all, the narrator's trembling and broken older body does not look capable of the sexual power that he claims are in his possession. But Rake demands that we "hold our tongues" until after he has spoken; he needs our attention just as he has needed the attention and admiration of the young women whom he claims to have covered with "flowers and wounds."

Rake mocks our bourgeois suburban civilities and us, boasting about the pleasures he has known and laughing at our Christian guilt and need for forgiveness. The narrator reminds us that wildness is outside of Christianity, outside all that is God. Taussig comments, "European ideas and sentiments separated pagans from the great chain of human being so that the pagan entered, with the utmost ambiguity, into a nether zone between the animal and the human" (Taussig 215). With the dismissal of the pagan, the discourse of the wild is lost. Snyder and Taussig argue for the importance, the preservation, of the inner territory of wild imagination: "The world is our consciousness, and it surrounds us.... The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas, and that is where a bobcat is right now" (Snyder 16). By blurring the lines between the inside and outside of consciousness both Taussig and Snyder argue that wildness is as essential for a healthy psychology as it is for a healthy ecology. Preserving wildness is not just a good idea—it is essential for health.

In this context Rake's experience is a psychological break that occurs when the forces of civilization limit access to essential wildness. In a desperate desire to find freedom the narrator turns to the delusion of the vampire. And this delusion drives him to insanity. By the song's conclusion Rake laughs in the face of forgiveness. The laugh itself comes alive, anthropomorphized, and turns around with "round eyes blaring" saying, "my friend we are holding a wedding." Rake buries his face and vainly tries to hide from himself, but the violence of the wildness that he has given in to becomes his destroyer. His psychological youth, like a wall protecting him from the realities of age, comes crashing down to expose

the mercilessness of time. This violence, once as insignificant as a stream next to an ocean, becomes a great force. Rake's terror turns the safety of night against him: "And now the dark air is like fire on my skin / And even the moonlight is blinding."

Wildness is an ever-present theme in Van Zandt's work. Sometimes it takes the shape of the wilderness of human relationships, where love is somewhere between truth and lies, deception and indulgence, where fantasy, drama, and reality are entwined and often confused. In "Loretta," Van Zandt writes lovingly about a relationship with a barroom girl who "wears them sevens on her sleeve." Again he chooses a heroine that others might overlook or dismiss as tragic. Loretta, however, is neither. She "dances like a diamond shines," lies about her age, and tells Van Zandt "the lies that he likes to believe."

John Kruth compares "Loretta" to the Grateful Dead's "Sugar Magnolia" or the Band's Sweet Bessie in "Up on Cripple Creek" (Kruth 202). All of these heroines lovingly engage in the possibilities of unconventional life with their wild protagonists, perhaps finding a way to be together while also allowing each other the freedom they need to remain wild. This is the wilderness that Snyder suggests is a "place where the wild potential is fully expressed" (Snyder 12). Is hazel-eyed, free-spending Loretta helping to keep the narrator wild, by "loving me like I want her to"?

An aspect of this love is the constant denial of domesticity. He asks Loretta to stay with him, to which she responds by asking him to put his guitar on, to take a shot of booze and sing a "blue and wailin' song," certainly referring back to Jimmie Rodgers's Blue Yodels, the legendary "singing brakeman." The guitar "rings a melody, my guitar sings Loretta's fine." Loretta helps to push away the momentary guilt swelling up from the social pressures to "settle down," the acceptance of domestication. He is able to return to his wild ways now that this threat has passed, and Loretta returns to her former status as sexualized object, presumably the way they both prefer it. She is "long and lazy, blonde and free" and the narrator remarks that he can "have her" anytime. No longer concerned about staying with her or her staying with him, he is free to hit the road again. Loretta is left behind with "dancin' slippers on," and they both look forward to the next time he returns to town.

Wildness in Van Zandt's work is always under the threat of domestication. He draws upon Hank Williams and from literary explorations of themes much older than country music—themes as dark and psychologically complex as the frontier experience of American modernity itself. This allows Van Zandt's work to speak across folk and country, to inspire outlaw country and alternative country, as well as punk and grunge. In wildness, there is a voice that speaks to the libertarian and revolutionary republicanism of North America, a theme that emerges from all of the popular arts, but it is also the very thing that comes under threat as

American wildness becomes enclosed. For instance, the suburb of early twentieth-century America offered the individual an opportunity to "be your own unique self; to build your unique house amid a unique landscape," but too soon it became "a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible" (Murphy 70). This is the enclosed frontier tragedy, and with it comes a gap between what one dreams for in life and what life might provide. This gap becomes dangerous when "one's life-long dreams get further and further ahead of one's limitations, the only serious philosophical problem, as Camus said, is suicide" (Simonson 43). There is a constant dance between wildness and domestication, freedom and enclosure, and living and killing oneself, and these battles are a constant tension in Van Zandt's work.

But these tensions are not opposite ends of a continuum; instead they define a state that is under a form of dialectical pressure. The two forces pull against the subject but refuse to dissolve, and therefore Van Zandt's freedom is not without domination and submission. "Loretta" might be read as a song about sexual freedom, as I have argued above, or as a song about male sexual domination and the systemic disempowerment of women. However, the song is arguably about both topics, and the sophistication of Van Zandt's stories is found in their subtlety and compact structure. Like tricksters, Van Zandt's characters say contradictory things against shifting contexts where meanings of the entire songs can shift on the inflection of a line, or the look in the eye of the narrator that lets us know if what is said is statement, joke, or deception. But Van Zandt does not tell us what might be found in the eyes; he leaves us to our own imagination.

## ESCHATOLOGY

The atomic bomb burned into the American consciousness as surely as it burned into Japan. Concerns about the end times enhanced the expanding threat of nuclear destruction brought on by the Cold War and do not fully solve the rise of American eschatology in the twentieth century. Eschatology, the often theological study of the end times, deals with death and final judgment, and these stories continue to be very public explorations in American popular culture through the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, *2012*, a film about the apocalypse directed by Roland Emmerich and starring John Cusack, made over \$100,000,000.

In country music the end times are often understood through the Christian ontology of salvation. Perhaps this is also the meaning of the heavily orchestrated and pop-infused Nashville sound of the late 1950s; it is the orchestra of salvation heralding the end of rural life, an ascension ritual that beatifies rural America. The 1960s is surely the end times of the American frontier. Country musicians in this period seem interested in



creating a fantasy of rural life, perhaps to preserve the dream of the American frontier, as if the heavy string arrangements, romance, and rhinestones could hide the urbanization. Rural life and wild culture are enclosed by development both in life and in music. The string sections that smooth out the rough edges of country music are fences that enclose the lands of wild imagination. The implications of this are dire:

Inevitably the closed frontier becomes an eschatological matter. "What will America do—," asks Perry Miller, "what *can* America do—with an implacable prophecy that there is a point in time beyond which the very concept of a future becomes meaningless?" This prophecy is Christian eschatology, brought to America by the Puritans who pondered *Revelation* and the words of Jesus in the Gospel of St. Luke: "I am come to send fire on the earth." (Simonson 126)

In the remainder of this essay I will explore Van Zandt's eschatology. I will deal with three different degrees of enclosure that all lead to suicide. In the first part, I will focus on death and dying in "Pancho and Lefty," and illustrate how the death of a hero is connected to the end of a historic period. In "Black Crow Blues," I will show how Van Zandt connects suicide to the institutionalization of creativity. Finally, in the last three examples "Tecumseh Valley," "Lungs," and "Waitin' around To Die," I will discuss the American tragedy of enclosure hastened by the advancement of a particular form of American capitalism called neoliberalism, which seeks to account for all aspects of life through economic utility. Van Zandt challenges neoliberalism by telling stories about characters that refuse it or are cast out by it.

In "Pancho and Lefty," Van Zandt once again utilizes an autobiographical voice to celebrate the open road and wildness, but just as in "Our Mother the Mountain" and "Rake," the dialectical forces of wildness work on the narrator. The road was "gonna keep you free and clean" but instead, this man, his mother's favorite son, ended up with "skin like iron" and breath "as hard as kerosene." This is the transformation that occurs, Van Zandt tells us again, when you choose the free life on the road, but unlike in his earlier songs, "Pancho and Lefty" tells another tale.

The story of Pancho and Lefty, as John Kruth asserts, is "something of a sonic Rorschach test, drawing a different conclusion from everyone who hears it" (154). The main story line is either about a pair of outlaws, about two separate outlaws, about Townes Van Zandt and his manager, or about Jesus and Judas (155-58). However, beyond the speculation on whom Van Zandt may have modeled Pancho or Lefty, it is a story about death. In the story, Pancho is a bandit who "wore his gun outside his pants / For all the honest world to feel," until his death in a Mexican desert presumably at the hands of Mexican federal police. In the third verse we are introduced to Lefty later in his life, and he can no longer

"sing the blues all night long like he used to." The connection between Pancho and Lefty turns on the lines midway through this verse:

The dust that Pancho bit down south  
 Ended up in Lefty's mouth  
 The day they laid poor Pancho low  
 Lefty split for Ohio  
 Where he got the bread to go  
 There ain't nobody knows

Here is a veiled suggestion that Lefty has profited from Pancho's death, sold him out, and perhaps used this money to relocate to Ohio and that the federales, because of this bargain, let him slip away. It is a Faustian deal; Lefty has sold out Pancho for profit and ended up living the rest of his days in a cheap hotel in Cleveland, Ohio, and the hot romance of bandits and the Mexican desert is replaced by "Cleveland's cold."

The tragedy of "Pancho and Lefty" emerges in the last verse and chorus when Van Zandt asks us to save a few prayers for Lefty because he "did what he had to do," like Judas perhaps, and now he's left to grow old alone, reminiscent of Van Zandt's earlier "Waitin' around to Die." A "few gray federales" who survived are given the last words. Here, recalling the ancient protagonist of *Little Big Man* who recounts the last days of the Indian Wars in an attempt to reclaim history, Lefty seems a pathetic pawn. The federales say that they could have had Lefty any day but "let him go so wrong, out of kindness I suppose." This is a cruel kindness; he has been allowed to live out his days in a version of freedom, but one emptied of any of the wildness of a life lived. Lefty is cursed because either he directly has sold out the bandit Pancho, or indirectly, because he has sold out the wildness that Pancho represents. Lefty becomes the stand-in for those who sell out their inner bandit to a "system" that offers the reward of domesticity and a slow, unremarkable death.

"Pancho and Lefty" is also a parable about the dangers of neoliberalism and tells a story about the domestication of human life and the costs associated with it. The death of Pancho is the source of poetic imagination, but Lefty's death is the end of poetry, where poetic words are turned into a mouthful of sand. Selling out Pancho ensures the progression of American enclosure and, at the same time, is the suicide of Lefty's creative self. His biological life continues but only as a shell of what it has been or could have been.

Living a life of imagination is not without its dangers, but these dangers are a crucial part of living. An early song, "Black Crow Blues," hints at the consequences of delving into the wildness of imagination and the rewards of creation that make the danger worthwhile. The first three verses instruct the lover left behind to not "lie lonesome after I'm gone." Life, Van Zandt instructs, is difficult and requires companionship. He tells his lover to go out and find a "strong man to stand beside you." The

narrator asks his listener not to sentimentalize his passing; he should be remembered as a friend once known. It is not until the final verse that the song shifts its focus and becomes something else, and the perspective shifts to the third person:

Well, the black crow's a-screaming, the yellow sun's warm  
And the grass tumbles tall down the hill  
There's a cold wind building, it's bringing' a storm  
When the call of the black crow goes still  
When the call of the black crow goes still

It is here that "Black Crow Blues" takes on another dimension. Van Zandt describes one of Vincent Van Gogh's last paintings completed just before his suicide at age thirty-seven in 1890. In remarkably compact language the tension of Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*, the painting most connected to the artist's suicide, comes alive. "Black Crow Blues" becomes Van Gogh's suicide letter, left for his lover, perhaps addressed to all of us. The death of Van Gogh, in this context, becomes entwined with the end of imagination, the ultimate cost of Van Gogh's incarceration in a mental hospital. *Wheatfield with Crows* is painted from within the institution, as he peered out the windows of his asylum. The call of the black crow, the voice of the trickster, the mysterious forces of life, goes still. The stillness created by the enclosure of wildness, caused by the death of creativity, precipitates the suicide of the artist. Van Zandt argues that creativity is connected to hope, and the end times arrive with its death.

In "Tecumseh Valley," Van Zandt, in a narrative style, describes economic end times and the psychological and sociological impacts that come with it. It is a story of a beautiful young woman named Caroline who, because of a downturn of mining work in her village, is forced, by her father, to travel from her home in Spencer to the nearby Tecumseh Valley. She finds employment as a bartender in a brothel called "Gypsy Sally's," and Caroline saves money that she plans to take back to her father. However, by spring her father has died, and instead of leaving, Caroline, now without a family and crushed by the news of her father's death, "turns to whorin' out in the street." In a short time the tragedy of both the loss of her family and the loss, presumably, of her freedom, leads to her suicide. She is found under the stairs leading to Gypsy Sally's brothel with a suicide note that reads, "Fare Thee Well, Tecumseh Valley," signed Caroline. The narrator also adds a eulogy: "The daughter of a miner / Her ways were free, and it seemed to me / That sunshine walked beside her."

Van Zandt takes a different approach in "Lungs." Here he explores capitalism's destructive center. "Lungs" opens with a plea from the author: "Well, won't you lend your lungs to me? Mine are collapsin'." Van Zandt recalls for us Caroline's mining father and perhaps explains what has happened to him. Poisoned by his life in the coal mines, he is left

somewhere between life and death, left to "stand among the ones that live in lonely indecision." The author, left with little physical ability, descends into the realm of the mind, distant from the concerns of capital, to a place where gold is "only moonlight." The dream of the capitalist, he warns, is ultimately empty; money is an illusion, or a mirage at best. He warns "If you try to take it home your hands will turn to butter."

Living a life with money as its central desire has long been known in popular culture to have dangerous consequences for the human spirit, but this changes within neoliberalism, and salvation is no longer through communion with community or God, but through the economy. Van Zandt writes that

Salvation sat and crossed herself  
 Called the devil partner  
 Wisdom burned upon a shelf  
 Who'll kill the raging cancer

With religion, and even Dickens, burned on the shelf and therefore lost to us, "who will kill the raging cancer?" Neoliberalism kills the environment as mercilessly as capitalists solely focused on profit kill workers. In a quest for profit, entrepreneurs "seal the river at its mouth. / Take the water prisoner. / Fill the sky with screams and cries. / Bathe in fiery answers."

Surrounded by all of this violence and destruction we are, like the Jews in Egypt, kept as slaves to the Pharaoh of capital. But even the biblical Jews are seen as outsiders and strangers who "cry in foreign tongues. And dirty up the doorstep" with the blood of sacrificial lambs they use to mark their homes against the coming vengeance of the Old Testament God. But what do the rest of us do, the narrator asks, just before he answers:

I for one, and you for two  
 Ain't got the time for outside  
 Keep your injured looks to you  
 We'll tell the world that we tried

He situates himself with those who begin to realize that economics does not hold the only answer, but who are afraid or incapable of imagining another possibility. An economic end time is fast approaching, and instead of preparing to get through the economic Passover that will kill off the first-born of neoliberal faithful, we stay inside and claim to have nothing to do with it all. The hopelessness of the last verse, however, is not simply Van Zandt's throwing up his hands. He is provoking us to consider our lack of imagination and its implications. Supporting Van Zandt, the shrinking of imagination, has, according to psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, dire consequences in a struggle with neoliberalism.



Felix Guattari and Antonio Negri wrote, long before Negri and Hardt's recently vaulted works on *Empire*, that "we have in place one vast machine, extending over the planet an enslavement of all mankind" (26) and that this enslavement is orchestrated by "empty-headed economists" who dominate and ensure that the "planet is devastated" (27).

Guattari argues that the core danger in corporate capitalism, what he calls Integrated World Capitalism, is the direct, and limiting, impact on the development of individual subjectivity and that

there are specific semiotics of subjectification deployed by Integrated World Capitalism to delimit and impoverish consciousness and that these are, in some instances, introjected by subjugated persons who have come to desire oppression; this is akin to the 'intensive' reach of reification such that certain mental faculties, modeled on the fate of labour power, are detached from human consciousness and then placed at odds with one's personality...detached and disposable item of a reified consciousness, that is at odds with the convictions of subjectivity, and a sorry compensation for real, political convictions and feelings, that instead are "prostituted." (Genosko 57)

Guattari is concerned about subjectivity in the same way Van Zandt is interested in creativity. In fact, what Guattari sees as subjectivity is the same "organ" Van Zandt credits with creativity. Subjectivity/creativity is threatened by neoliberalism because it limits "information and communication [which] operate[s] at the heart of human subjectivity, not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects and unconscious fantasm" (Guattari 4). Subjectivity itself is under the threat of enclosure, as a healthy subjectivity is a wide-open space that can become as varied as the human imagination allows. Part of the role of art, perhaps, is to expand subjectivity. The enclosure of imagination is the next step in the tragedy of the enclosure of the American frontier. Lefty, Caroline, and Van Gogh were all imprisoned by the limiting of their possible futures; suicide was their only way out. The end time is the enclosure of creativity; it is the fence of civilization and mass production by global information and entertainment corporations. It is the transformation of culture into culture products and the replacement of experience with consumption.

This is the tragedy in "Waitin' around to Die," where the narrator loses hope, and therefore any access to the future. The narrator begins the tale: "Sometimes I don't know where this dirty road is taking me. / Sometimes I can't even see the reason why." The protagonist keeps moving and entertaining himself with a life of gambling, alcohol abuse, and traveling, simply because it is "easier than just a-waitin' round to die." This is a road song, but not one that romanticizes the life of a traveler. It is certainly not Steve Goodman's "The City of New Orleans," nor is it Goebel Reeves's "Hobo's Lullaby"; the road is not romanticized, and travel-

ing is not mythologized. "Waiting around to Die" is a story of forced dislocation and psychological trauma closer to Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail," than Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land," or Lead Belly's "Rock Island Line." Motion and travel are essential for the narrator partly because they offer the only way to live for someone born into dislocation but also because motion is creativity and experience, and without this there is only waiting around to die.

In the second verse we discover the source of the protagonist's dislocation: "One time friends I had a ma, I even had a pa. / He beat her with a belt once cause she cried." The protagonist's mother escapes the abusive marriage and flees to Tennessee but leaves her child behind. The mother escapes because it's "easier than just a-waitin' 'round to die." With such a difficult childhood it is not surprising that the narrator comes of age "in a Tuscaloosa Bar" with a woman who steals his money and disappears. Defeated, he turns to alcohol and "hopped a train," again, because it is "easier than just a-waitin' 'round to die."

Unlike other road stories where life on the open road is an escape from abuse and the demons of psychological trauma, Van Zandt's protagonist, like Robert Johnson's in "Hellhound on My Trail," has "blues fallin' down like hail" because "the days keep on worryin' me there's a hellhound on my trail." Incapable of holding down a job and building healthy relationships in a society not interested in providing an opportunity for healing, the protagonist soon finds himself turning to make "some easy money." He is soon arrested and sentenced to "two long years" in a prison system that leaves inmates a-waitin' 'round to die.

Two years later, with no counseling, the protagonist is left to face his life alone. But what possibilities remain? Every experience in his life has beaten him down until finally he is left with one friend. This friend will not "steal or cheat or drink or lie." This new friend is codeine, a powerful opiate often used to block emotional pain but has terrible consequences for the liver, the heart and "can cause hallucinations, depression, sexual problems, agitation, tremors, and seizure" (Clear Haven Centre). The protagonist, finally beaten down completely, addicted to codeine, is going to wait around and die.

Suicide is the only way out of a system that provides no time for healing and no community. Though not explicit in the song, the background of the song emerges when we ask why no one reached out to help. Van Zandt provokes us to ask why we allow a broken child to struggle alone through life, and if just only for a few minutes, that the homeless we walk past have complex histories worth writing about. We leave them to commit suicide because they do not "do" anything. They do not "contribute" to society, which really means that they do not produce products for anyone; they are "useless" and are fit to be cast out.

## CONCLUSION

Townes Van Zandt is a towering figure in late twentieth-century American culture. As a songwriter he is profoundly important, and as a poet and chronicler of American life in the throes of economic change, Van Zandt will be long remembered and listened to. As a songwriter, he unromantically explores wildness and the tragedy of the lost American frontier, and I believe this will be Van Zandt's lasting influence on the American musical canon.

I have suggested in the introduction that Van Zandt creatively explores the cleavage that occurred with American industrialization, the cleavage that created country music. Van Zandt reached back into the myths of folk music and sought to reinvigorate country music with symbolic significance. But it does not end here. One of the difficulties of discussing Van Zandt solely within the country tradition is that his impact goes well beyond these borders. While alive, his influence was already being felt in rock: "He had heard Mudhoney's recording of 'Buckskin Stallion Blues,' and been very happy with it, and proud. 'I'm the mold that grunge was grown in,' he had said" (Hardy 246). This is due in part to his artistic decision to shun "the finger-pointing politics of Phil Ochs's and Bob Dylan's early protest songs, Townes became the quiet champion of the dispossessed" (Kruth 52).

As a champion, in a time when the ranks of the dispossessed increasingly included everyone who did not fit into the neoliberal dream, Van Zandt spoke to the great number of artists not interested in mass production. He wrote against the end times of independent creativity and local culture. As a writer of eschatological songs, he created the symbolic possibility for liberation—not the salvation—of the country music psyche. While he did not provide a way out of the system, Van Zandt urged for a return to free creativity that may exist in the emptiness of the end. Perhaps I am too much an optimist; I refuse to accept that the social symbolic value of art has been lost to commerce for good. I cannot help but think that each story about death creates a little more room in my imagination, by creating, perhaps, a little more compassion, and that songs about the real terrors of life offer new myths that help us become more human. Perhaps Van Zandt will be retrospectively seen as an early contributor to Altermodern aesthetics:

The use of the prefix "alter" means that the historical period defined by postmodernism is coming to an end, and alludes to the local struggles against standardization. The core of this new modernity is, according to me, the experience of wandering — in time, space and mediums. But the definition is far from being complete. (Bartholomew 2009)

Maybe by not ensuring salvation he encourages me to use the freedom of my imagination. Is this the ultimate politics of art in the neoliberal age of

mass-produced fantasies and religious salvation? In using the freedoms of imagination, we may well find ourselves imagining new symbolic worlds for ourselves, and pushing back against the tight grip of mass-produced fictions, finding just a little space to make our own.

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