

Same As It Ever Was?: Portrayals of Appalachia in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*



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This paper will investigate representations of Appalachia and Appalachian communities in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*. In his novel, Gibson sets one of two alternative futures in Appalachia, though he does not clearly name it as such. Yet instead of leaning into one-note depictions of backwoods drug dealers and fundamentalist preachers preying on rural white trash, Gibson presents a complicated picture of the region that views Appalachia as an internal colony within the United States. He also layers his near future Appalachia within a second layer of colonialism, a colonialism defined by the far future reaching into the past to monetize and manipulate alternate versions of history. This layering allows Gibson to create an intriguing commentary about place-specific stereotyping and the need to create communities that insulate themselves from critique. I therefore posit that by presenting Appalachia as an internal colony within the United States and emphasizing the idea that place matters, *The Peripheral* complicates and questions both the colonialism more overtly present in the relationship between the different timelines in the novel, as well as the usefulness of colonial models for understanding such complicated and paradoxical relationships.

To begin such an analysis, we need to look into Gibson's ties to the mountains. Gibson was born on the coast of South Carolina, but lived most of his early life in Wytheville, Virginia. As Gibson mentions in his autobiographical essay "Since 1948," his experiences in southwest Virginia influenced his own interest in things not of this world. He notes, "I'm convinced that it was this experience of feeling abruptly exiled, to what seemed like the past, that began my relationship with science fiction" (Gibson, *Distrust* 22). In a question-and-answer session during a book signing in 2015 at Joseph-Beth Booksellers in Lexington, Kentucky, someone in the audience asked Gibson where the book was set. Gibson answered that he had originally thought the book was set in southern Ohio, somewhere rural, but the more he thought about it, the more he suspected that the book was set very close to Wytheville, where he grew up ("Questions"). In an earlier interview for Tor.com in 2014, Gibson is less willing to point to Wytheville as the setting of the novel, however. He mentions that he wanted the setting to be in Pennsylvania, "right across the Virginia line" ("Gibson on Urbanism"). Yet Gibson goes on to say, "But inevitably, in spite of my wanting that, I think what happened was that my experience of my own childhood colored it all. And so it feels more like a southern small town than anything else. [. . .] There's a kind of inadvertent generic quality to it that stems from that idea I had that I could make it kind of Everytown. But in the end I guess it's not really." Interestingly, all the locations Gibson mentions fall within the traditional boundaries of Appalachia, so even if the novel does not take place in Wytheville exactly, it is still affected by its location somewhere in Appalachia. And though, as Steve Fisher notes in a

discussion of Appalachian cultural identity and political activity, “many use the term ‘Appalachian’ in a way that glosses over the diversity of the region and some ugly parts of its history,” there is still a cultural (mis)understanding of the region that allows readers to pick up *The Peripheral* and know exactly where it takes place (Fisher 58-59). The main character’s hometown may not be Wytheville exactly, but its feel, its undercurrents, and its customs reflect an Appalachian way of life, even if its geography doesn’t.

We must therefore next tackle an understanding of how popular notions of Appalachia and Appalachian stereotypes play out, in scholarship concerning the region as well as in popular adaptations, including Gibson’s novel. The Appalachian way of life most readers will pick up on is usually based on very specific stereotypes. In a discussion of stereotypes in Appalachia, Barbara Ellen Smith mentions that “within the national imaginary, Appalachia is a land of backward, inbred (always implicitly white) hillbillies whose very degradation—in the manner of most binary oppositions—functions to valorize the intelligence and culture of the normative, middle-class American, who is decidedly not from Appalachia” (54). The hillbilly, as a representation of all who live and work and function in Appalachia, is therefore the opposite of everything America stands for, yet still resides within the limits of American culture: worth less than the rest of country, but still white; and deserving of poverty and ridicule and hopelessness perhaps because of their rejection of the rules and strictures they are supposed to live up to.

To combat this view of Appalachia, Helen M. Lewis and Edward E. Knipe suggest the colonialism model as a way to understand Appalachian social, cultural, and economic structures. This model:

describes the Appalachians as a subsociety structurally alienated and lacking resources because of processes of the total economic political system. Those who control the resources preserve their advantages by discrimination. The people are not essentially passive; but these ‘subcultural’ traits of fatalism, passivity, etc. are adjustive techniques of the powerless. They are ways by which people protect their way of life from new economic models and the concomitant alien culture. (15)

Viewing Appalachians as native inhabitants attacked by alien invaders calls into question multiple assumptions made by the stereotypes projected onto the region by both internal and external sources.

In their study, Lewis and Knipe therefore turn to a definition of colonialism, specifically internal colonialism, first introduced by Robert Blauner in a 1969 study of African Americans in the inner city. Blauner’s definition includes multiple steps in the ongoing act of colonization, including “a forced, involuntary entry,” “rapid modifications in values, orientation, and the way of life of the colonized,” “a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered by representatives of the dominant group,” and finally, “a condition of racism” (Lewis and Knipe 16). A comparison between the situation of African Americans in the late 1960s and inhabitants of the Appalachian region is overtly problematic, on multiple levels, yet the

introduction of a social model that considers issues of colonization in the region have been fruitful and provide a useful way to think about how Appalachia is often seen.

So how does all this come together in the novel itself? To begin my analysis, we first need a quick overview of the novel's plot. In the introduction to an interview with Gibson, Tasneem Raja quips, "The new book, meanwhile, stars a bunch of downtrodden trailer park residents who get caught up in the deadly games of some time-warping elites from 70 years hence" (61). Though this description sums up the plot quickly, it also reveals inherent biases. Yes, the novel's heroes are rural and poor and trapped by a society that has no use for them, but the main characters don't live in a trailer park, nor are they as downtrodden as the word implies. The stereotypes in such a description highlight the ways in which place matters in the text. A better description of the plot might read: "The book follows a woman, Flynne, and her community as they deal with the impact of what happens when a group of time travel hobbyists from seventy years in the future decide to meddle with the past. Flynne witnesses a murder in the future, though she thinks she is playing a video game. This leads to two rival powers from the future using her present as a gameboard for their ongoing feud. Flynne must therefore travel to the future through the use of a peripheral body, which allows her to live in her world but interact with theirs, in order to personally identify the murderer and stop the violence that rages in her own timeline."

This is where a reading of the text from an Appalachian studies perspective becomes useful. If we read Flynne's hometown as doubly colonized, invaded by the future and internally ostracized by the rest of the United States, we can begin to understand not only how we are supposed to react to her world, but also how we are supposed to reflect revelations within her world back onto our own society. The far future's colonial attitudes toward the near future are introduced very clearly in a conversation between three main characters. No one knows much about this time-travel hobby, so Lev, a prominent hobbyist, tries to explain it. He says, "The act of connection produces a fork in causality, the new branch causally unique. A stub, as we call them" (Gibson, *Peripheral* 103). Lowbeer, a high ranking member of what amounts to a police force in the future, asks, "But why do you? [. . .] Call them that. It sounds short. Nasty. Brutish. Wouldn't one expect the fork's new branch to continue to grow?" (103). Lev replies, "We do [. . .] assume exactly that. Actually, I'm not sure why enthusiasts settled on that expression" (103). In response to this confusion, one of Lev's employees interjects, "Imperialism [. . .] We're third-worlding alternate continua. Calling them stubs makes that a bit easier" (103). This conversation very clearly introduces an imperialist, colonialist agenda into the novel's use of time travel. Thinking back to the definition of internal colonization Lewis and Knipe use, we can read this as "a forced, involuntary entry," one recognized as blatantly capitalist and hypocritical by onlookers who are not enthusiasts (16).

This becomes all the more complex if we view the near future, Flynne's world, as an internal colony within greater U.S. culture. We can see that internal colonization within the fabric of Flynne's community even before it is touched by Lev's hobby. The "forced, involuntary entry" in this case is not coal companies that Lewis and Knipe highlight in their study, but drug manufacture, a clear reference to the opioid crisis in rural America. In an assessment of the

economy in Flynn's timeline, one of Lev's employees in far future London states, "County's economy is entirely about manufacturing drugs" (Gibson, *Peripheral* 108). Tommy, a cop in Flynn's world, explains to Flynn that building drugs is the only way to make real money in their community: "if we all woke up one day and [. . .] that building economy had been taken up to heaven, after a few weeks most people around here wouldn't have any money for food" (233). The drug trade therefore serves as a mechanism of colonization, bringing a type of predatory capitalism into the region that, like coal, doesn't actually boost the economy or bring any development for the region or investment in the people.

For Lewis and Knipe, the second step of internal colonization is "rapid modifications in values, orientation, and the way of life of the colonized" (16). We can see this second step both within Flynn's world before the intervention of far future London as well as through that intervention. Flynn's community reflects these modifications, as the novel contrasts her childhood home and the homeplace feel of much of the countryside with the modernization and capitalist neglect of the town and its drug dealer leaders. Flynn's world, though ruled by technology in some respects, is grounded in its sense of place: the endless fields, the rushing creeks, the wind in the trees. This closeness with nature is contrasted by one of the novel's villains, Corbell Pickett, a politician and community celebrity who also runs the local drug syndicate. His power serves as a reference to the third aspect of internal coloniality that Lewis and Knipe also reference: "a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered by representatives of the dominant group" (16). When characters drive to Pickett's home, they pass "a long stretch of white plastic fence, fabbed to look like somebody's idea of Old Plantation" (Gibson, *Peripheral* 291). As for the house itself, "They'd painted everything white, she guessed to tie it together, but it didn't. Looked like somebody had patched a factory, or maybe a car dealership, onto a McMansion, then stuck an Interstate chain restaurant and a couple of swimming pools on top of that" (292). All of these details speak to Pickett's status as both a colonizer and a representative of the effects of colonization. Pickett's home, like Pickett himself, reflects a different worldview than Flynn's homeplace. While Flynn's family has been in their home for over a century, and that home reflects its connections to the past and to family ties, this is obviously a new building, frankensteined together out of consumerist kitsch. The influence of the drug trade is stark here, revealing the paradox of the region: the modifications the drug trade has made to the community and the power money has over everything else.

The interaction between far-future London and Flynn's world only deepens the us versus them mentality set up against Flynn and her community. The changes in their way of life, as well as the implication that Flynn's world is not actually in charge of what is going on, is most clearly obvious in a conversation Flynn has with Macon, a friend of Flynn's who is one of the first know that they are dealing with interference from the future. Macon asks:

“Know what ‘collateral damage’ means?”

“People get hurt because they happen to be near something that somebody needs to happen?”

“Think that’s us,” he said. “None of this is happening because any of us are who we are, what we are. Accident, or it started with one, and now we’ve got people who might as well be able to suspend basic laws of physics, or anyway finance, doing whatever it is they’re doing, whatever reason they’re doing it for. So we could get rich, or get killed, and it would all still just be collateral.” (*Peripheral* 279)

Flynn, her brother, her friends, her family, all have to deal with the reality of this situation. They are part of this plot not because of who they are, but because they were originally preyed upon by Lev and his hobby. All of this randomness leads to Flynn and Macon and all the rest being collateral damage, for good or ill.

This is also where an understanding of Appalachia and the internal colonial model reveals a more nuanced reading of the text. This model creates an intriguing picture of insider versus outsider and what that means for how we can read communities and citizens who have been stereotyped as backward and dispossessed and downtrodden. Barbara Ellen Smith and Steve Fisher lay out why such a model is so enticing for Appalachian scholars, even as it is also problematic. They note:

The analytical power and emotional appeal of the internal colony model lie in its capacity to interrelate spatial or place-based exploitation (Appalachia as dispossessed *region*) with cultural degradation (Appalachia as America’s *Other*). It thereby creates Appalachia as a regional collectivity, no longer pathologized but oppressed, and enables us to situate ourselves within a shared cultural geography that recognizes all residents as heirs to a special, place-based identity. Although [. . .] this depiction obscures internal class processes and relationships (along with much else), the stark invocation of thievery, arrogance, and smug condescension by outsiders draws an undeniably powerful line between innocent victims inside the region and profiteering elites on the outside. (Smith and Fisher 76)

The internal colony model allows citizens of the region to create a narrative that sets them not as the Other, but as the protagonist in a plot aimed against them. This understanding of self, founded on a place-based myth of righteousness against outside aggressors, gives Appalachians a way to see themselves as heroes, innocent victims, and righteous underdogs.

Within that context, we can begin to understand why it is so easy for readers to side with Flynn and her community against outside forces, be those forces internal colonizers or colonizers from the far future. Flynn’s identity as part of an already marginalized group helps us to understand her plight and allows us to easily see her as capable and heroic, even if she does live in a place and time that most would consider backwards and primitive. Interestingly, Gibson’s

description of his inspiration for *The Peripheral* echoes these sentiments. In an interview in *Mother Jones*, Gibson says:

I'm interested in how we came to automatically think of the inhabitants of the past as having been rubes. [. . .] The people in my 22nd century initially assume that anyone they're dealing with back in 2025 or whenever is just kind of a hick" (Raja 62)

Just like the inhabitants of Appalachia, the inhabitants of the past are much more than they seem, and the internal colony model reinforces the agency, intelligence, and resourcefulness of people who have normally been overlooked or underestimated.

This doubled coloniality in the novel bolsters how we might view the end of the story, too. The final two chapters of the book present a conclusion that seems a bit too easy. The story jumps several years ahead, presenting Flynne happily married to Tommy, with a child on the way. Most of Flynne's family and friends seem to have paired off nicely, and everyone lives together in new buildings in and around Flynne's original homeplace. Several critics, scholars, and reviewers have called it a happy ending and left it at that. Others, however, see it as rather more sinister. This ending—which Gibson himself has said, "gave me the creeps!" ("Gibson on Urbanism")—becomes that much more creepy when read from the vantage of a doubled coloniality. In explaining his rationale for being disturbed with how the novel ends, Gibson continues, "Really, its potential for not being good is really, really high. [. . .] I mean, she's lovely, but what are they building there? It's got all kinds of weird third-world bad possibilities. . . . I wasn't expecting that actually, and it completely weirded me out, and I still haven't really gotten my head around it" ("Gibson on Urbanism"). Gibson's reference to "third-world bad possibilities" brings Flynne and her community back to where they started, in a sense, though they are no longer the poor denizens of Appalachia just trying to make some money and get ahead. Now, Flynne and her people have joined the colonizers, both in the future and in their own society. We want to root for Flynne because she is an underdog, one of the oppressed workers in Appalachia, but once she crosses the line and can no longer be seen as an underdog, we must question what we think of her and her future.

This becomes especially apparent if we read the end through an Appalachian studies lens. One of the major arguments against the internal colonial model is that it hides what Smith and Fisher call internal exploiters. They note:

[B]laming "outsiders" for regional economic problems is an over-simplification, if not outright distortion. When we focus on where people are *from* as the main problem, we run the risk of exonerating everyone in the region as good and implying that we who live here are, in this most fundamental respect of residence, all the same in our righteousness. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation—all are secondary to our zip code. Perhaps most important, this perspective conceals and exonerates *internal* exploiters [. . .] without whose actions the exploitation of Appalachia would not be possible. (47)

From this perspective, using the internal colony model to help understand Gibson's text, Flynnne and her family can seem to have a happy ending, and we can feel good for them because their potential for chaos and harm is hidden from view by the assumption that where they are from defines who they are. Their hillbilly-ness, their rural ways and Appalachian values, mask the possibility that they could be something else, something far more in keeping with their own colonizers than anyone, including the reader, would want to acknowledge.

Place is therefore of utmost importance in this novel, even if that place is never clearly stated outright. Flynnne's world, as both situated in a version of the past that is our near future, as well as situated in an Appalachia eerily similar to today's, is ruled by multiple colonialities. This doubled coloniality questions both temporal and geographical stereotypes because of the way Gibson approaches his characters and their places in both time and space. The complex nature of the internal colonial model, however, causes us, as readers, to make certain assumptions about the characters. We see them as capable, intelligent individuals, but they are also flattened because they are defined by place in a way that homogenizes them, ignoring the complex intersectionalities of the region as well as the lived reality of people who are there right now. The internal colonial model that seems to be written into the cosmology of the text therefore also affects our understanding of how the future looks back at the past. Whether or not Flynnne's community is able to save themselves, they still have to rely on the future for security, money, and power. The colonial model in that scenario flattens them as well, creating temporal myths that counteract stereotypes but also build a future that is probably going to look very much like the one they are trying to avoid. Saving the world probably doesn't actually save the world. *The Peripheral*, then, asks us to pay attention to how place matters in the text. It also asks us to interrogate the usefulness of colonial models, not only for understanding place-based marginality, but also for expressing the complexities of communities that can't and shouldn't be defined by just one thing.

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