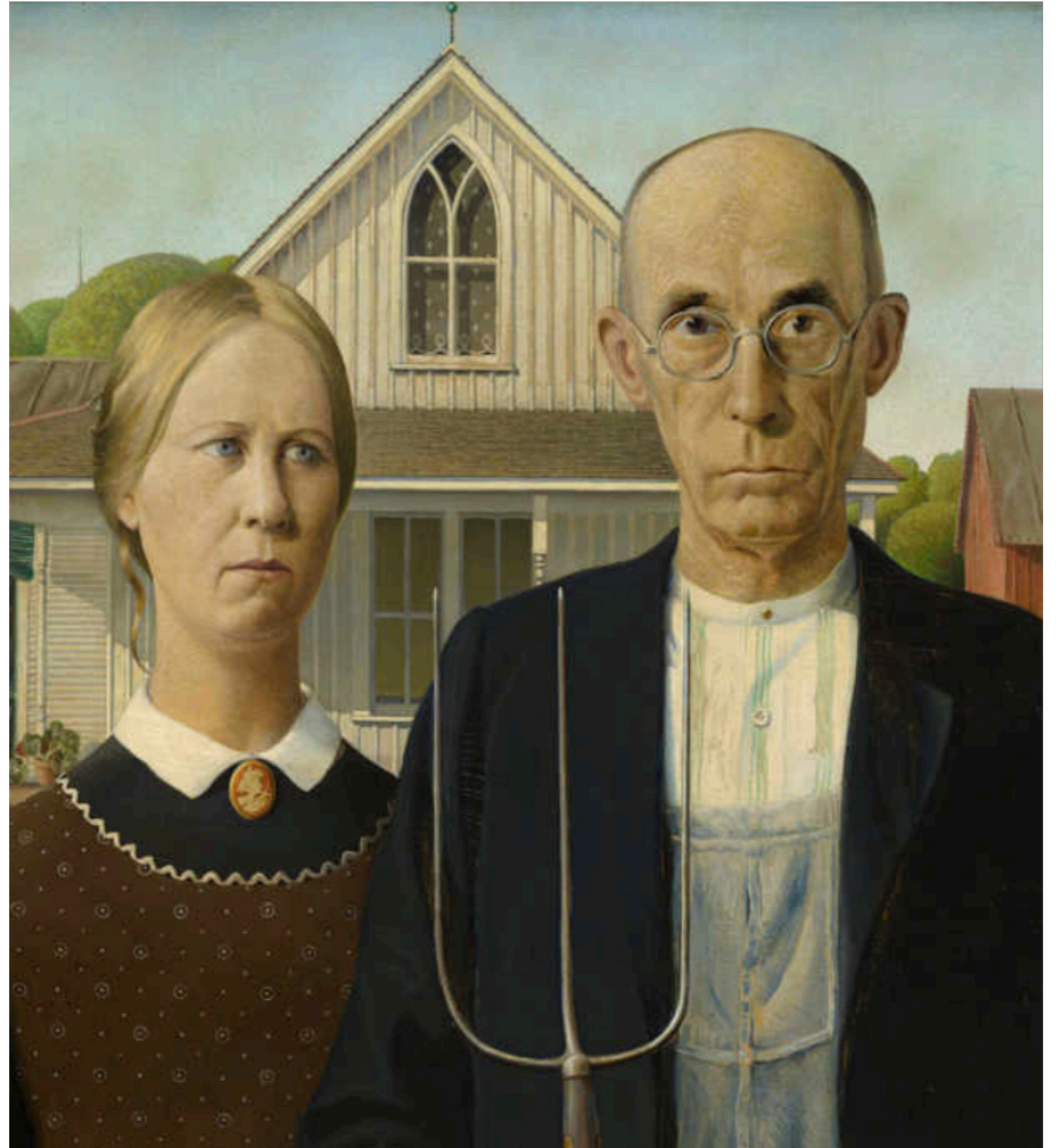


# American Gothic

Grant Wood,  
oil on board,  
1930.  
Art Institute of Chicago.

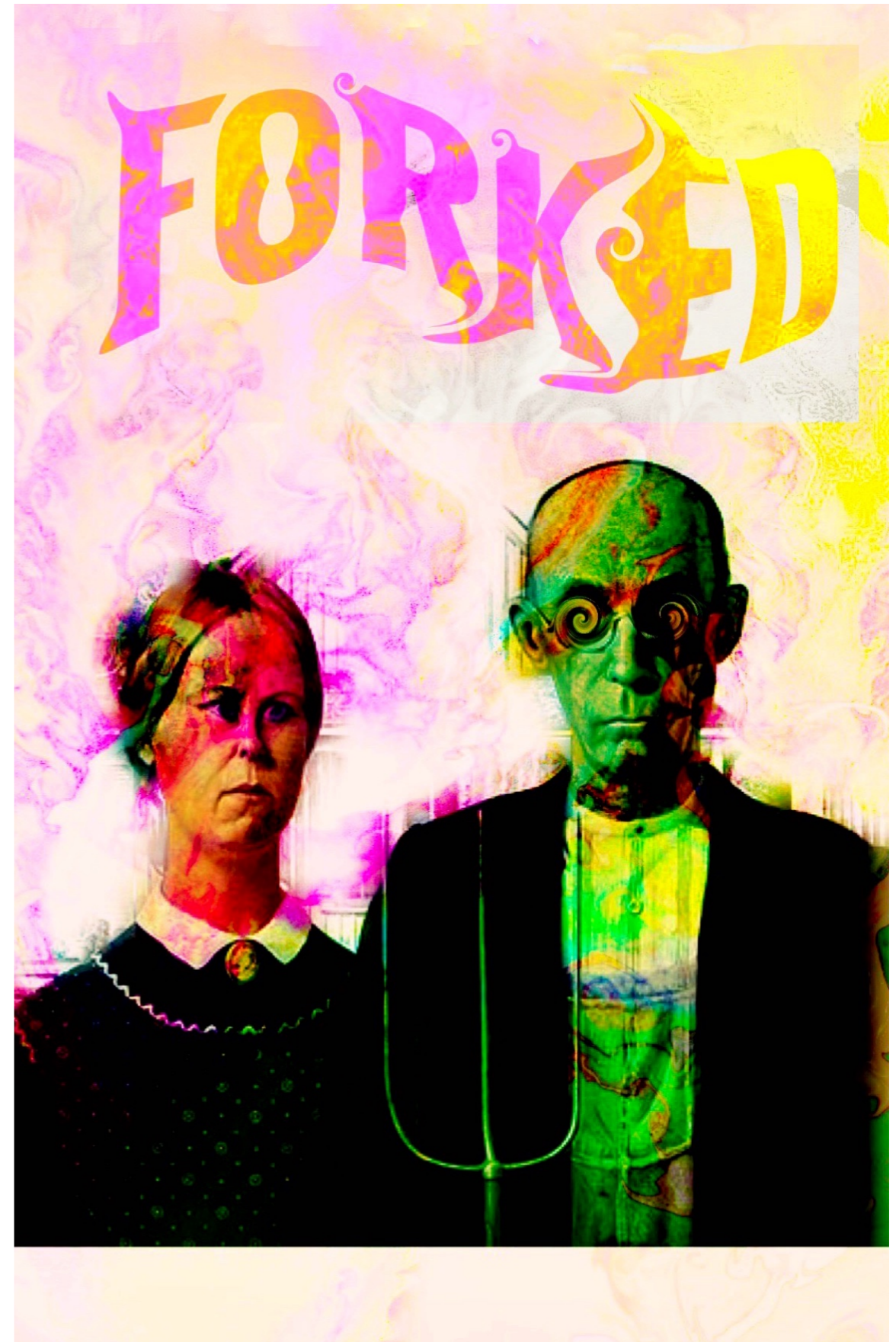


## An Insignificant Roadtrip PA - NY (Harrisburg to Niagara)

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**“But what does it mean?”**

What is American Gothic? It’s slippery. It defies simple description. I mean, sure, it’s a 30 ¾ inch by 25 ¾ inch oil painting, completed in 1930 by Grant Wood. It shows two characters – one male, one female – stood before a wood-framed house – a house with a “gothic” style window on the upstairs. It’s straightforward enough, isn’t it? It’s one of the world’s most recognisable images, and is considered one of the cornerstone artworks of American culture. None of this answers the question: “what is American Gothic?”





*Overlaid homesteads from the road north through Pennsylvania and New York State*

I'm drifting. As a passenger in an SUV, being driven along the valleys of central Pennsylvania and western New York, I can do little else. Highways wind through forests and alongside rivers. Townships come and go. Farmsteads – identical, but for the differences – dot the spaces in between. Outside many of them are lucky stars, nailed to the wooden boards. I'm half asleep. A dreamscape passes me by. An old guy on a bike

overtakes on my side. He has no helmet and has a huge hand rolled smoke in his mouth. I sit up and watch. He's wearing a sleeveless denim number, his grey hair streaks out behind like a smoke trail. It'll be ages before we reach the lakes. The distances here are barely comprehensible for us Brits, used as we are to the confines of our insignificant island.

There is something not quite 'right' about the image. Firstly, it is a work of extreme artifice. Grant Wood only visited the village in which it is set once. He based the building on a single sketch and some later photographs he had sent over to his studio. The couple are not, as depicted, a couple of farmers, but Wood's sister and his dentist. They never posed together for the painting. This 'fakery' is nothing in itself – all art works are constructions of one form or another. However, in the context of Wood's subsequent comments on the work, it is pertinent. Secondly, what is it Wood constructed? The subject matter is so blank, so ambiguous, as to invite interpretation.

The river names remind us this is stolen land. I'm a tourist. My brother is an immigrant, but is a citizen now. My nephews were born here. On their mother's side, their roots here go back a fair way. None of us belong here. Not in these woods. Few humans do. This is a form of wilderness we don't experience back in Europe (outside, possibly parts of the Balkans, Belorus and the Caucasus). And this is the easy bit. On a road map, we are a thumb's width from New York City, Buffalo, Pittsburgh. Cornell University is just over there. Niagara Falls are an inch away. Rochester and Harrisburg are within a finger's distance. It's nothing. It barely counts. The State forests here are thousands of square kilometres. Put them together and they are twice the size of our largest parks. They hardly register. Maps lie in the USA.

Is the artist being at all sincere, or is this work intentionally parodic? If, indeed, it is a parody: of what? Is Wood poking fun at the characters (for that is what they are), or depicting a

hardworking mid-west couple in all their grim honesty? Are the couple "Pinched, grim-faced, puritanical Bible-thumpers", or were they embodiments of the steadfast pioneers who farmed America through the Great Depression. Wood himself always promoted the latter interpretation, stating "All the good ideas I've ever had came to me while I was milking a cow". The question, however, is far from answered by Wood. Why go to such lengths to produce a studio created, clearly staged, image? Why title the work after a somewhat anachronistic window in the background of the painting? And why the long faces?

It's easy to lose yourself here, despite having all the latest GPS stuff. You can simply float away here. No one would know. You could be buried alive quite easily in these little towns. You'd settle down for some pancakes in a roadside stop, and before you knew it, you'd be still there as they pronounce you dead from old age. There'd be a few of your old buddies stood around chucking the dirt down on top of you, and that would be that. Give it a few hundred years and even the town would be back as forest. There are bodies everywhere here: some of them human, some of them beast, some of them of uncertain origin. You look at your phone again. Great reception for a road in nowhere land. Down below us there's a town with factories, wood yards, restaurants and sports fields. David Bowie comes on the stereo: by My Wife. My head's swirling around. I feel my eyes spiralling in their sockets. The aircon is having a strange effect.



It's become an icon, parodied and revered in equal measure. Wood had a genuine post-modern take on things. He'd been to Europe. He knew modernism. He wanted something different. Ironic, really; his most famous creation became a poster work for a new meta-modernism. American Gothic was picked up by the '60s counterculture as both an object to mock and venerate. Something about those stoic-to-the-point-of-emptiness faces, that pitchfork, those 'fake' windows, those clothes, lent themselves to commentary. They summed up so much about America in a manner the

likes of Crumb, Leary and Burroughs would both appreciate and denigrate. American Gothic is Lynchian, or rather, David Lynch is American Gothic. This is a dreamstate nation, perhaps best viewed through the haze of a five hundred mile journey. It's not so much a pioneer state as a restless one. For an outsider, it is all too easy to see these picket fences, roadside shopping marts and highways so long they cross timezones and think it all eternal. But this is a manufactured eternity: fake, if you will. That stare, of the woman there, it's not real you know.