Can the Heartland Be Healed?:
Challenges to Community Organizing in Poor White Rural America

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During the second half of 2016, I spent six months doing field work in Oregon County, Missouri, working at the Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-op in Alton, a small town in the Ozark Mountain region of Southern Missouri. I chose this field study based on my ties to the Midwest and Midwestern culture. I had recently visited relatives in Springfield, Illinois, and was shocked by the state of the community: affected by drugs, crime, and an economy that seemed to consist only of strip malls. At the same time, the jovial and welcoming demeanor of my relatives and their fellow Midwesterners impressed me. Wanting to delve deeper into the factors affecting the decline of Midwestern communities, I focused on this region and found the Oregon County Co-op. I am greatly inspired by Grace Lee Boggs' theory of community-based change, in which she suggests that community members create local alternatives to the systems and institutions that disenfranchise them. The Co-op's theory of change matched Boggs' theory impeccably well. The organization claimed a commitment to creating an alternative and sustainable food source for the community. The Co-op also endeavored to facilitate barter and trade among community members as an alternative to the capitalist economy which kept so many dependent on food stamps to buy groceries from the one overpriced and poorly stocked grocery store in town.

When I was arranging my field study in March of 2016, the presidential election was on the distant horizon. I did not expect that my working conditions at the Oregon County Food Co-op would be so directly impacted by the politics that led to the election of Donald Trump. However, I found myself in a regional hotbed of conservative fervor. Despite the poverty and resource needs of the area which seemed to beg for Democratic governmental reinvestment rather than Republican funding cuts, I found myself speaking with conservatives and Trump

supporters every day. I happened upon an opportunity to study the conservative beliefs that bolstered Trump's support, and my observations became an important part of what I soon recognized as a major challenge faced by community organizations like the Oregon County Food Co-op.

I spent my days at the Co-op organizing community events, helping with the administrative aspects of organizing the shop, working with the Co-op's Youth Council group to renovate and reopen a local roller rink, and participating in and facilitating monthly organizational meetings. I also collaborated with a drama teacher at the local high school and taught a discussion-based class on social justice topics. The course culminated in a skit on the issues that the students were most passionate about that was performed before the entire school. Their choices were domestic violence, gender equality, and consent and sexual assault, all of which were issues both in their own lives and the larger society. Many of the students in the class were girls who recounted incidences of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination from men in the community. They also had classmates whose families were deeply affected by domestic violence issues. Additionally, during the course we discussed the fact that human trafficking is a huge problem in the Ozark region. Their environments and experience prompted their attention toward these issues.

I spent a fair amount of time working with community members of all different ages, including these high school students. During the experience, I reflected deeply on my class status, and how class intersects with whiteness. Though almost everyone in the community I worked in was white, I had the highest socioeconomic class standing of any person I knew. Noticing this led me to realize how deeply my education separated me from many people in the

community in terms of my perspective on the world and even in my material possessions and prospects for the future.

The gap in education between myself and members of the community, even between our high school experiences, was extremely evident. I benefited from biology teachers that were not compelled to teach creationism over evolution, a large student population offering a diversity of perspectives, and most importantly, well-funded classrooms with up-to-date technological equipment, textbooks, and other supplies. The gap between us was the result of poorly resourced local schools, which relied on meager state and federal funds and did not benefit from a wealthy community willing to donate and fundraise the same way as my high school had. Differences in our high school experiences also arise from the contexts of our schools. While I went to high school on the edge of the Silicon Valley where I was regularly exposed to innovation and new technology, Alton High School's science classes are circumscribed by Southern Baptist creationists and most people in the school come from the same background and have the same views. Meanwhile, nearby Couch High School even lacks access to internet.

Through the eyes of a community organizer and social scientist, I see that these contrasts illustrate one of the many manifestations of poverty, rurality, and conservatism, as well as the effects these factors have on the lives of individuals and communities in these circumstances. Poverty, rurality, and conservatism have deep effects and also strongly impact the work of community organizations seeking to mitigate their detrimental effects, like the Oregon County Food Co-op.

Alton contains 871 people and occupies a small geographical area. (For maps, see Appendix A). One can easily walk across the entire town in about twenty minutes, circumnavigating ungridded residential streets and the "downtown" business loop alike. Alton is situated close to the Mark Twain National Forest Preserve and the Eleven Point River. The forest preserve accounts for a large percentage of the land in Oregon County, leaving a generous stretch of land uninhabited. County population density is 9.8 people per square mile, creating a sparsely populated landscape (Social Explorer 2016). To reach a major highway with more than two lanes, one must drive about an hour west to the nearest decently-sized town, West Plains, home to about 12,000 people. The nearest hospital is an hour away, and it was said to me that the nearest one "you would want to go to" is two hours away. Many people are members of a helicopter evacuation service which airlifts you to this hospital in case of an emergency (Luster 2016). Many locations within the county do not have broadband access, including one of the public schools (Mackey 2015). These details offer a picture of the rural isolation and barriers to accessing resources many community members of Alton and Oregon County face on a regular basis.

One hundred percent of community members in Alton are white-identifying, according to census data (Fact Finder 2010). I did meet a few people who were mixed-race or non-white, but the overwhelming majority of the populace is comprised of white people. Religion is taken very seriously in the area. My supervisor and the founder of the Oregon County Food Co-op, Rachel Luster, in giving me some preliminary information about the town, told me there were "more

churches than businesses" in the area (2016). Though this may not have been numerically correct, there are seventeen churches serving the Alton area, most of them Southern Baptist.

Most people in the area are either affiliated with the Republican party or tend to agree with conservative views. The overall political milieu is deeply conservative. Many community members are also very poor. Oregon County is one of the thirteen most impoverished counties in Missouri, with 26.4% of residents living below the poverty line (Sheeley 2015). (For a map comparing poverty rates in Missouri by county, please see Appendix B). Roughly 60% of county residents depend on some type of government assistance program (Luster 2016). The programs that residents seem to most utilize include Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for food resources, Medicare and Medicaid, and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidies. These facts give life to the imagined poor white conservative; Oregon County is populated with many people who easily fit this description.

Close proximity to the river provides opportunity for a small tourism industry of a few canoe rental shops in and out of town, and brings regular visitors to the area, especially during the summer. The other main local employers include somewhat dangerous and low-wage jobs at the local timber mills and at in-home care agencies working as a caretaker for a severely disabled person. Another option is cattle ranching, an occupation only accessible to landowners, and often identified as the only way "to make any real money."Aside from cattle ranchers, there are a few people in town who are better off than most. Ron Campbell, the local "slumlord," as he is called by some, owns many of the houses for rent in town. The owner of the Alton Bank is purported to own "half the town." These individuals do well amongst the widespread poverty around them.

Broadly speaking, occupations and class are highly polarized. Many are poor and work unskilled, dangerous jobs, while a few own many of the town's resources and institutions.

The history of the area is sown with violence. The town of Alton was officially founded in 1859, but the area was settled in the earlier half of the nineteenth century when the land was violently wrested from the control of the indigenous Osage and Quapaw peoples. Oregon County was just below the Mason-Dixon line during the Civil War, meaning the territory was highly contested by the North and the South. During the war, it was taken over by the Bushwhackers, a gang of outlaws who pillaged the area and killed most of the people who remained. A utopian Irish-Catholic settlement that had been set up within the county was completely wiped out under the reign of the Bushwhackers (Luster and Sallings, 2016).

This history of long-sustained and fairly recent violence has created a legacy which Alton continues to honor in its own modern-day patterns of violence. It is important to acknowledge that present-day Oregon County draws on this violent past. Later in this essay, I identify police corruption, domestic violence, and high rates of youth suicide as several ways in which Alton carries this legacy of violence today.

Against this community backdrop stands the Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-op. The co-op grew out of the Coalition for Ozark Living Traditions, or COLT, that was co-founded in 2006 by my field study supervisor, Rachel, and her husband at the time. COLT hosted events geared toward creating opportunities for social interaction and education within the community, and also encouraged barter and trade and community support networks. Their work drew upon the traditional culture of Ozark subsistence farmers, who had often relied on each other for resources and company in this sparsely populated area. After a few years of

this, eventually the group endeavored to open a storefront for community producers, and opened the co-op in 2013.

The initial group that joined Rachel to found and open the co-op began with this mission:

We are a collective of farmers, ranchers, artisans, and concerned citizens working toward a holistic approach to community renewal and sufficiency with a mission of sustaining the local communities and economies of Oregon County, Missouri through the local sale and trade of the products, skills, and knowledge of area residents.(Luster 1).

This mission statement is somewhat vague because the Co-op embraced many different goals, concerns, and interests. During my stay, the Co-op's primary functions were cooking and serving a Pay What You Can Lunch to community members, serving as a social venue, hosting community events, and providing a physical space for local food producers and crafters to sell their work. The Co-op was initially structured as a consensus-based space to give community members agency and leadership development opportunities, though this aspect of our mission was abandoned as conditions within the organization became increasingly desperate. Lastly, the co-op also served as an inclusive and sheltering space for disabled or elderly individuals, battered women, people of color, and people whose views fell outside of the dominant white, heterosexual, Christian narrative that holds a firm majority in Alton. Due to financial factors and internal issues, which will be discussed later in this essay, the co-op closed its doors in February of 2017.

Theoretical Explanations for Persistent Rural Poverty and White Conservatism:

To analyze my experiences in the field, I draw upon two bodies of theory. The first of these derives from the original culture of poverty thesis. This theory was originally put forth in the 1960s by anthropologist Oscar Lewis as a way to shift the focus of poverty discussions from

individual habits and values to the community level. Lewis (1966) sought to explain behaviors of the poor that seemed to keep them trapped in poverty, and presented these behaviors as a natural coping mechanism within individualized and capitalist society. Later, others utilized parts of this thesis to attribute the persistence of poverty to the values of the poor. The Moynihan Report, released in 1965, infamously concluded that the culture of impoverished black neighborhoods was ultimately what barred the black community from achieving economic and political equality. Similarly, the Coleman Report released in 1966 attributed the academic achievement gap between black and white students to the dynamics of black families.

Sociologist William Ryan (1972) discussed in his work how both of these reports blamed the victims of poverty and inequality for their circumstances, both citing the culture underlying the victim's situation as the cause. Whether the cause of inequality was attributed to family dynamics or "ghetto culture", as in the Moynihan Report, both of these reports invoked a similar perspective (1965). They attributed the inequality black individuals experienced to the culture surrounding them. As both of these reports continue to affect public policy and shape opinions today, it is important to acknowledge this problematic materialization of the culture of poverty thesis, although this is not the framework I use to analyze rural poverty (Cruz 2015).

The iteration of the culture-of-poverty thesis put forth by both William Julius Wilson (1987) and Cynthia M. Duncan (1999) is a new, more critical take that departs from blaming individuals and communities for their poverty and instead points toward the need for support and community resources. Referencing the work of sociologist Ann Swidler (1994), Duncan refrains from discussing the values of the poor, and instead suggests understanding the "culture" element of "culture of poverty" as being a "'tool-kit of symbols, stories, rituals, ...worldviews...more like

a set of skills or habits than preferences or wants"'(Duncan, 1999, pg. 235). In understanding culture this way, one can see that poverty is encouraged by the conditions existing within a community which shape the social world of the individuals experiencing poverty. Duncan (1999) uses this interpretation to point out the lack of role models, resources, and other surrounding cultural tools necessary for traditional success and upward social mobility, which are not available to the same degree in poor rural communities as in affluent ones. Community members' cultural toolkits are circumscribed by these limited local resources.

Another proponent of the reworked culture of poverty theory is sociologist William Julius Wilson, who maintains that the social isolation and resource deprivation of poor communities prevents the cultural learning of the necessary skills and attitudes to attain social mobility (1991). Though Wilson's (1991) research findings are based on urban conditions, Duncan (1999) asserts that rural communities also experience social isolation and inadequate resources. This isolation is an important component in her explanation of rural poverty's persistence.

The second body of theory supporting my argument draws on fields of sociology, anthropology, political, and cognitive science, pooling a group of theoretical proposals to form a framework explaining the conservatism I observed in the community members of Alton. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild proposes a "deeper story" behind what she calls the "Great Paradox," namely the fact that many people on or in need of government assistance vote and campaign against it (Hochschild, 2016, pg. 18). This deeper story is one which connects the poverty and hardship that Hochschild's (2016) subjects and many other rural Americans are experiencing to the raw anger that many of these individuals feel. Their anger, Hochschild (2016) proposes, is based on a sense that they are being "cut in line" - that their "earnings" are

being usurped by other groups who are gaining rights, attention, and assistance with what they see as unfair speed. The groups often pointed out as "cutting in line" include people of color, immigrants, trans individuals, and other marginalized identities. Poor rural conservative whites see these people as usurpers, and when the usurpers gain attention and recognition from the government, these individuals see the government as discriminating against them, and turn away from it (Hochschild, 2016). This explains the rampant anti-government streak of conservative ideology, even among people dependent upon the state.

In the present political moment of Donald Trump's rise to power, theories explaining extreme conservatism take on new significance. Aligning with Hochschild's emotional perspective, Andrew Rojecki's (2016) work discussing the political belief systems creating support for Trump points to today's economic uncertainty as a main generator of the xenophobia, hatred, and anger of the far right (pg. 1). Rojecki (2016) attributes Trump's popularity to a "politics of insecurity," what he proposes as a "new normal" for American politics, due to new insecurities arising from unfamiliar national issues (pg. 1). Rojecki (2016) identifies environmental insecurities stemming from climate change, the ongoing threat of domestic terrorism, and economic insecurities continuing to effect the U.S. in the wake of the Great Recession as the three main sources of fear that Trump was able to capitalize on and cultivate into a hate-mongering political stance. In explaining the sources and depths of fear shaping the current American political landscape, Rojecki's politics of insecurity theory directly relates the hateful and conservative beliefs of a growing portion of the population to these fears. Perhaps the most relevant issue among these for poor rural white Americans is the economic insecurity and

income inequality that continue to reshape their livelihoods in the face of increasing

technological change and neoliberal policy (Rojecki, pg. 1, 2016).

Fear is an animating force both in Trump's recent ascendance and in conservative values. This has been studied and discussed in the field of cognitive science as well. George Lakoff's work on the differences between American conservatives and progressives uses a parenting metaphor to describe political affinity (1996, 2002). Lakoff explains that conservatives adhere to a Strict Parent model, which promotes discipline and an aspiration to morality, and sees those who don't succeed as lazy and personally at fault for their misfortune, which is the case for many conservative views on poverty, discrimination, and other issues (1996, 2002). As Lakoff describes, those with a strict parent mentality believe that those who "win," or dominate, deserve this status (1996, 2002).

This unmerciful worldview leads to policies promoting subjugation of other non-dominant groups and the subsequent fear dominant groups adopt in the face of "losing" their supremacy, dominance, and control over their circumstances, a narrative which is similar to Hochschild's (2016) line-cutting notion. Both of these phenomena can be seen at play in the appeal that Trump seems to possess for his xenophobic, white supremacist, poor rural white supporters, who feel disenfranchised by usurping minority groups. Similar to Lakoff's theory, cognitive researchers Amodio and Jost (2011) also attribute xenophobic and supremacist characteristics of extreme right-wing individuals to fear and anxiety, and aversion to uncertainty.

Hochschild's work builds on the legacy of Bill Bishop's (2008) "Big Sort" theory, which discusses how Americans are increasingly segregating themselves into geographically defined

ideological bubbles, and creating extremism on both sides of the political spectrum within these enclaves. Bishop's work came out in 2008, and has been disputed somewhat since then, notably by Abrams and Fiorina (2012), who criticized the theory on the grounds that American life is continuing to retract from the geographical public sphere as more Americans neglect to establish relationships with their neighbors. However, in rural communities with a large amount of social cohesion, such as Oregon County, this criticism misses the mark.

Indeed, Bishop's (2008) theory dovetails well with the culture-of-poverty-based proposals of Duncan and Wilson, in that both help to explain the prevalence of a conservative milieu in poor rural white areas. According to Duncan's proposal of the cultural toolkit, the conservative values of the community are incorporated into each individual's toolkit. Therefore, these values are reinforced in a feedback loop whereby the individuals learn from their community socialization, and then these conservative individuals act and interact within a small, rural community. The effects of this feedback loop of socialization and individual beliefs are enhanced in insular rural communities because of the higher likelihood that community actors will interact with each other on a regular basis, due to the social isolation dictated by rurality and community size.

For example, in Alton, it was rare to walk down the street without knowing almost every person one saw. This simple fact increased the frequency of interpersonal interaction among community members and therefore enhanced the feedback loop of socialization. This feedback loop is similar to Bishop's proposals that ideological clustering enhances itself by reinforcing a community's political leanings and encouraging the development of fervor and even extremism in the absence of dissenting opinions or dialogue (2008). The theory of geographical ideological

segregation can be traced as far back as the Civil War, when geographical regions of the nation were both literally and ideologically at war with each other.

The breadth of theory applied here demonstrates the fact that there is no single theoretical explanation for the complex issues influencing activist efforts in poor rural white communities. Writing from the perspective of a community organizer, I am compelled to invoke cognitive and psychological, sociological, and political theories in order to analyze the diverse range of factors affecting community organizing work in this context. The challenges a community organizer faces in a poor rural white community stem from community, societal, and global issues. All issues, and their interactions, must be considered alongside each other to gain a full understanding of the obstacles at hand and what can be done to address them.

The next sections of this paper elaborate my argument with field study experiences. The discussion is divided into two parts. First, I explore the reasons rural poverty discourages successful community organizing in poor rural white areas. Next, I move on to consider white rural conservatism and its similarly adverse effects on community organizing projects.

I. Rural Poverty:

My experiences in the field working to mitigate poverty and create food access at the Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-op are an excellent case study of the challenges rural poverty presents to community organizers and anti-poverty interventions. Rural poverty is extremely persistent and undermines interventions and attempts to alleviate its effects. Poverty and rurality interact to create a community climate that is very difficult to organize in. Rural poverty impedes community organizing projects by impacting the personal circumstances of community organizers and therefore the community organizations themselves, by burdening the

larger community with damaging patterns that reinforce poverty and are difficult for

organizations to disrupt, and by lowering community morale and creating a widespread sense of

hopelessness, defeat, and anger.

Negative Impacts on Organizations:

Poverty and rurality both directly undermined the Co-op's efforts and had detrimental

effects on many of our attempted functions. The Co-op served as a marketplace where local food

producers and crafters could sell their work, and also offered a Pay What You Can lunch

program during the week providing fresh food at low cost to people who couldn't afford a good

meal. These efforts were the backbone of the Co-op's endeavors to provide food access,

encourage community relations by bringing people together, and create additional income

streams for community members. However, all were undermined by recurring internal theft

within the Co-op. Instances of money theft cropped up repeatedly throughout the Co-op's

organizing history prior to my arrival, and these instances impeded our ability to carry out all of

the functions we serve because money was an issue. This issue also made people heavily

involved in the Co-op suspicious of other volunteers, sometimes creating an unhealthy group

dynamic.

It is important to note that the motivation for this theft lies in the deep poverty of the area,

something that suspects within the Co-op certainly were not exempt from. Recall that Oregon

County is one of the thirteen poorest counties in Missouri, with 26.4% of its residents living in

poverty (Sheeley 2015). (See Appendix B). Theft is common in the community in addition to

within the Co-op. Many of the community members I interacted with either experienced theft

during my field study period, or related stories of theft that had occurred prior to my arrival.

Providing crime statistics is difficult, as many of these thefts went unreported or uninvestigated. The police sometimes refused to track down the culprits, reinforcing the low report rate for theft. Several community members even reported to me that the police burglarized homes themselves. Theft also commonly occurred between friends and family members. The ubiquity of theft created community conditions much like those within the co-op, making community members regard each other with suspicion. Surrounded by this social atmosphere, and within a community besieged by poverty, Duncan's (1999) theory of the cultural toolkit explains how the suspicion and distrust ingrained in Oregon County culture is reinforced as individuals are socialized to reproduce it. This attitude encourages more theft and other dishonest behaviors, and prevents successful interventions by complicating the operations of organizations, as in the case of my experience at the Co-op.

Another effect that rurality and poverty had on the functioning of the Co-op manifested through a very difficult situation involving my supervisor and Co-op founder Rachel's family. Rachel's husband had been abusing her two sons and threatening her own safety to such a degree that Rachel finally fled their home. She filed a protection order against him, as he soon began stalking her and even tapped her cellphone. Though she made many reports to the police and calls to Family Services, neither did much to help her. Of the fifteen instances in which her husband violated the protection order, only once was he arrested for his offense. She also engaged in a legal battle which would determine the custody of her children.

This situation weighed heavily on Rachel's mental and emotional well being, and prevented her from working at the Co-op to her fullest capacity. As the founder of the organization, she possessed important knowledge and was essential to most of our endeavors and

projects. Her continued absence from the work was detrimental to the efficiency and the quality of the community organizing efforts we carried out, and often impeded progress on projects altogether. As time wore on, she and her children were continually endangered. The legal situation was going in her husband's favor, presumably due to his favorable relations with the court system.

For example, when her husband was attempting to regain custody of their children, her attorney told her that she had two options: to allow him weekend custody or put the children in foster-care. She later recounted this to a Family Services agent, who informed her that the situation had been an illegal ploy on the part of her attorney. It seemed Rachel's attorney was somehow working with her husband. Unable to continue paying her lawyer's legal fees and keep her children safe, she made a plan to move to Arkansas, where her brother, who works in the court system, could move the trial to that county and bias the decision in her favor. She left the Co-op in the hands of the remaining volunteers, who were rather ill-prepared for leadership. The Co-op closed its doors two months after her departure.

Rachel's familial travails can be traced to factors related to poverty and rurality. Her experiences of domestic violence exemplify formal studies conducted on the subject. According to studies cited by the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 22.9% of women in rural areas of America are victims of intimate partner violence (2015, pg. 3). They are more likely to have their property destroyed by their abuser, as Rachel experienced. Additionally, social factors in rural communities, such as the enforcement of traditional gender roles and high rates of social cohesion in rural communities, make it more difficult for women experiencing violence to get help. It is often likely that, as in Rachel's case, the entities that

might help in this situation, such as law enforcement and the court system, may have a personal relationship with the abuser and make it less likely that they will be prosecuted ("Intimate Partner Violence in Rural America.", 2016) These statistics draw a clear connection between Rachel's situation and her rural context. Had we been in an urban area with a denser network of institutional support, she may have found help more easily and been able to continue organizing with the Co-op. However, because of these social factors related to rurality, and because of the personal effects of poverty which thwarted her abilities to pay legal fees with her low-paying local job, she was forced out of the community and out of her important role as an organizer. Her situation demonstrates how organizers, and by extension, their organizations, can be deeply impacted by their rural context.

Poverty Reproduced by Damaging Patterns

Poverty and rurality both contributed to the dysfunction of the Co-op itself, impeding its ability to carry out its mission by affecting its volunteers and creating a social dynamic within the organization riddled with distrust. However, these factors also affect the larger community of Alton and Oregon County in ways which further challenged the organization's mission. The creation and reinforcement of destructive patterns entrenched poverty ever more deeply into the fabric of the community.

One such pattern is the meth economy, which exerts a powerful influence on Alton's economy as well as its social world. In Nick Reding's (2009) work around meth in small town America, one of his subjects describes meth as a "sociocultural cancer."(pg. 11). This is an apt description of the way the drug affects the community of Alton. The drug creates spikes in crime and leads community members to distrust one another. It also disrupts families. I met many

people who no longer had wives, mothers, fathers, or siblings due to their involvement with meth. One elderly woman told me about how her daughter struggled with meth addiction for many years and spent time in and out of rehabilitation centers, before finally overdosing (Field Notes, July 30, 2016). This woman was fairly well-off in terms of socioeconomic status, but many people are not able to seek rehabilitation services or other medical care. Perhaps half the people I met during my fieldwork no longer had teeth due to meth usage, another effect of the meth economy.

All of these negative effects seep into the fabric of the community. Duncan writes, "The behavior of young people [in poor areas] is often similar to that of inner-city youth - they drop out of school, have children out of wedlock, 'run wild', and depend on welfare,"(Duncan, 1999, pg. 237). In applying the theory she proposes, one can see that this behavior follows the learned "cultural toolkit" and lack of resources in the area, both stemming from the social isolation the community endures (Duncan, 1999). Meth use is a behavior learned and adapted via the socialization process. This behavior reproduces persistent poverty by encouraging crime and jail time, as well as breaking up families, causing expensive health problems, and degrading the overall health of the community. Meth's resilience makes it very difficult for community organizers to create solutions that will interrupt this pattern and mitigate poverty itself.

Something that lends the meth economy even greater permanence in Alton is the fact that the police protect and profit from it. Early on in my field placement, my supervisor Rachel told me the story of her friend's husband who had been framed by the police for murder to protect their hand in the meth economy. I described the situation in my field notes thusly:

> Rachel believes that the sheriff's department is definitely siphoning off money from the meth industry here. She says that something similar happened with a marijuana grower in the area, and that before the newly elected sheriff came up for election, they decided to

bust the guy after years of getting paid not to bust him, just so Eric King, the new sheriff, would look good (Field Notes, August 26, 2016).

From this incident and others, it is clear to the community that the police department is involved in the meth economy and doing very little is to address the issue of meth in the area. Rachel also told me that the meth bust rate in the area was one of the highest in the U.S. until a few years ago, when busts virtually ended. However, an event I recorded shows meth is still being produced in the area. "...Fairly recently a house right on the road and very close to the Couch School, a school district in the county about fifteen miles from Alton, burned to the ground in about a minute. It was obviously a meth lab explosion…"(Field Notes, August 26, 2016). Community members easily understand that the police are not doing their job in this instance, but instead allowing their interest in personal profit to undermine the safety of community members and, in this example, school children.

The police force has a history of corruption and inaction even outside their dealings with meth, according to many accounts from locals. One woman reported that some of her male friends had been blamed for a series of burglaries perpetrated by the police themselves, who had then run the men out of town (Field Notes, November 24, 2016). This occurred about 20 years ago, but the pattern of police corruption continues today. As discussed above, similar instances of police either perpetrating or refusing to investigate theft continue to occur. The police were also very little help to Rachel in her situation of domestic abuse, practically refusing to enforce her protection order against her husband and therefore endangering her and her children. In another instance I heard about, a local women's advocate named Jan was beaten to endangerment of her life by her husband. When the officers called to the scene refused to arrest him, Jan's sister permanently relocated her away from Oregon County. Thanks to the Oregon

County Police, the local women's shelter lost the county's only trained women's advocate (Field

Notes, November 12, 2016).

All of these instances of police misconduct create an unsafe community, one that is

difficult to organize due to the often life and death safety concerns of community members.

These incidents also feed the erosion of trust among community members. In a locale where

theft, abuse, stalking, and even murder go unpoliced, suspicion, paranoia, and desire for security

is the natural response from community members. These responses are socialized into

community members, who grow up not trusting or relying on one another and accepting a

community marked by crime and police corruption. Duncan takes note of these processes

through which unsafe conditions and unequal relations between the powerful, in this case the

police department, and the weak, those in the rest of the community, are normalized. She asserts

that, "When people [in a rural community] question the patterns of inequality, they are likely to

face retribution from those in power, but they also are distrusted by those who have accepted life

as it is."(1999, pg. 239). The allowance of these crimes, rather than inciting the town against the

police department, instills a sense of hopelessness in community members, who complain about

the issue with apathetic anger. During a discussion with local youth about what to do in response

to the increasing instances of domestic violence in the area, a young girl asked the group, "If the

police aren't going to do their job, then what can we do?" (Field Notes, September 12, 2016).

This question sums up the hopelessness with which community members perceive their situation.

Responses to police corruption, including distrust, paranoia, increased crime, and

hopelessness, all inhibited the Co-op's ability to enact its vision of change. Though we existed as

a community center, this function was undermined by the suspicion with which community

members regarded each other. Community members were not inclined to socialize with one another outside of their own clans, which compromised the Co-op's grassroots approach to poverty mitigation. There are several organizations in town that also deal with poverty issues, but these organizations tend to be religiously affiliated food banks or charities. The extent of their services amounts to doling out food and other material resources donated by other community members. While these resources are important and well-utilized, they reinforce poverty and class divides. They do so by allowing the upper classes of Alton to stay estranged from the poor, as the charity model rarely encourages interaction among community members. The co-op's approach to poverty mitigation through community support was more radical, requiring community members to overcome their fear and distrust of one another. This was a lot to ask of a community so marked by theft, crime, and corruption.

Meanwhile, rampant internal theft impeded the co-op's ability to pay bills and stay afloat. Additionally, apathetic hopelessness paralyzed community members and prevented them from joining our organizing effort to change the community for the better, and also allowed police corruption to continue, furthering this damaging pattern. This hopelessness was an important component of overall community morale.

Community Morale

Community morale in Alton is very low, and this impacts community organizing efforts. Residents often express or exude feelings of hopelessness, anger, and depression, uttering phrases such as "Nothing will ever change here." Suicide and depressive tendencies are common among the people of Alton. Several young people took their lives during the course of my fieldwork. According to a recent study, suicide rates among youth are nearly double in rural

areas as compared to urban communities (Fontanella, Hiance-Steelsmith, and Phillips, 2015).
Youth there may indeed feel hopeless, and impacted by general community malaise. For
example, one young woman told me about her experience being on the high school cheerleading
team, saying that it was unpleasant because people would mock her if she made an effort. She
recalled that none of the cheerleaders ever smiled, because enthusiasm was a mockable quality
(Field Notes, November 24th, 2016). Even cheerleaders can't be cheerful.

These examples affirm Wilson's theories about the ways aspirations of local youth are
limited by their contexts of poverty. Wilson asserts that "The lack of neighborhood resources, the
relative absence of conventional role models, and the circumscribed cultural learning produce
outcomes… that restrict social mobility" (1991, pg. 463). Wilson claims poor youth lack the
resources and mentors to achieve past their own contexts of limited opportunity and poverty.
Youth are socialized in an environment of limited options that can lead to the type of morale
many young people exhibited to me during my fieldwork, one of hopelessness and apathy.

These limitations of hope and aspiration, which are grounded in real challenges, are not
limited to youth. People of all ages carry similar attitudes of defeat. One woman, who had grown
up in Alton in the 1950s, showed me a photo of the Alton Christmas parade taken during her
childhood. It depicted a large gathering, with many participants and spectators filling the town
square. When I asked what the parade was like now, the woman chuckled darkly and replied,
"Oh, it's piddly, it's nothing."(Field Notes, November 24th, 2016). Many people who remember
the past often reflect on how it had been better then, how there had been more to do, and so on.
Ruminating on their community's decline undoubtedly further instills their feelings of
hopelessness.

The low community morale in Alton negatively affected the Oregon County Co-op's organizing efforts. Feelings of anger, hopelessness, and apathy made it difficult to attract community members to our organization simply on the grounds that they did not believe their conditions would change. They had simply accepted their town as it was. This acceptance is understandable, given the challenging circumstances. The Co-op's Youth Council in particular had a difficult time grasping its own agency, even though there were many youth involved. When I told the youth I would be leaving, their immediate inquiry was if I had found someone to replace me. I told them I believed they were powerful enough to ensure the completion of their project, the renovation and reopening of a local roller rink, without me. I left them all necessary information in the Youth Council's binder and instructed them on where to find it (Field Notes, November 21, 2016). Their alarm at my coming absence was understandable. These youth are not equipped with the know-how of community organizing, nor are they socialized to believe that they can truly make an impact on their community. It was very difficult to maintain their participation and interest in the project, as though they believed the project would not truly come to fruition. In an environment like Alton, where hopelessness and apathy in regards to the state of the community abound, few believe they can have a positive impact.

The collective morale of the community also impacted the co-op's volunteers, as we too were part of Alton's larger social world. Feelings of hopelessness strongly inhibited our ability to carry on with our work. One of my colleagues, Thomas, was particularly impacted, often upset by the seemingly low impact of his own efforts as well as the apathy within the community. He eventually left the co-op for many reasons, but one was the low collective morale and the feeling

of ineffectiveness that permeated our actions. His example is one which demonstrates the way community morale negatively impacts community organizing efforts in poor rural areas.

Community organizing projects like the Oregon County Co-op are deeply affected by conditions in poor rural communities. By directly impacting community organizers and their organizations, reproducing itself through damaging patterns embedded in the community, and lowering community morale, rural poverty creates great challenges to organizations seeking to mitigate these conditions.

II. White Conservatism

As discussed above, rural poverty creates challenging conditions for community organizations in poor white rural areas. White conservatism must also be considered as an obstacle to community organizing projects in these contexts. White conservatism is a challenge to community organizing because it leads individuals to oppose ideas, interventions, and organizations that appear liberal. Conservative beliefs also undercut public resources and accept and reinforce class structures, impeding progress for organizers attempting to disrupt endemic poverty. White conservatives and the violent attitudes they may espouse also discourage liberals and activists who might otherwise transformatively organize these communities for economic justice. In Alton, all of these effects of white conservative sensibilities impact the Oregon County Food Co-op's work and the community at large.

Opposition to Liberal-Appearing Ideas and Organizations

Ideologically speaking, Oregon County is a conservative stronghold. In a place like this, ideas and interventions that appear liberal are met with outright disdain by many community members.

This disdain can be observed simply in the conversations one might engage in within the community. For example, one day a friend of mine visiting from Santa Cruz happened to be sitting in the co-op's dining space reading a book on food justice. An older couple walked into the room and inquired on the topic of her book. Upon learning of the book's focus on social justice, the man launched into a tirade aimed at besmirching liberalism altogether in an attempt to influence her opinion. The man's chief concern seemed to be identity politics, an agenda which he deemed as being anti-white. To paraphrase his protests,"They're trying to organize voting blocs for unmarried women's rights and colored people. What about the rights of white unmarried men, and married people?"(Field Notes, November 3, 2016). His vehement resistance to liberal and leftist politics, on the grounds that his own rights were being disregarded, is reminiscent of Hochschild's "line cutting myth"(2016). Hochschild proposes that the angry opposition to identity politics and social justice agendas comes from this myth (2016). Anger in particular often surfaces as a habitual reaction to anything with liberal or leftist connotations, as the conversation above exemplifies.

In some cases, this anger manifests in violent and extreme actions. Many incidents of this nature occur in Alton. For example, Joby Steele, the principal of the Alton public school district and pastor of a large local church, Macedonia Baptist, violently beat his son and attempted to disown him after learning he identified as gay. He even went so far as to proclaim what he had done to his congregation as a demonstration of his unwavering faith (Sallings 2016). Marilynn Townsend, a woman who volunteered at the co-op, tried to involve Joby Steele in funding the Youth Council's initiative to renovate a local roller rink. Thomas opposed this suggestion because of Steele's violent reputation, and because his involvement would violate the co-op's

underlying commitment to creating safe spaces for marginalized people. When Marilynn

persisted in her attempts to involve Steele, Thomas confronted her and revealed that he

personally would not condone the affiliation because of his own queer identity. Marilynn reacted

with rage, disrupting a co-op meeting the following day, publicly outing Thomas, and filming the

meeting without consent from participants (Field Notes, August 18, 2016).

Both Marilynn and Joby Steele's actions are examples of extreme conservative violence,

fueled by anti-gay sentiments. It is also important to note that both are heavily involved in one of

the local Southern Baptist churches. With Steele as pastor, this church actively condones

anti-gay violence. Steele is also the principal of the Alton public school district, kindergarten

through twelfth grade. School is a similarly homophobic environment. The local music teacher

related to me how several students in the past few years have come to her in tears, explaining

that they are scared of other students and the school administration because they are gay. This

indicates how hostile the community is towards anyone who does not fit the local conservative

norm. Local institutions such as schools and churches reinforce violent conservative behaviors,

and community members socialized in this environment adopt these views as their own (Duncan

1999). Bishop's theory describes the situation well, indicating how ideological pockets such as

Alton perpetuate themselves and create the extremism visible in the above situations (2008). As

a result, ideas, organizations, and individuals falling outside conservative norms are often met

with negative judgement and hostility.

It is easy to imagine how this conservative environment affected the Oregon County

Co-op's work. The Co-op was poorly received in the community. Volunteers would often report

overhearing snide discussions mentioning "those crazy liberals at the co-op" (Field Notes,

October 26, 2016). Rachel organized a few events, such as a social justice Bible study series and a #BlackLivesMatter banner drop, which continued to be a subject of disdain long after they were over. After a particularly liberal-leaning event, Rachel reported that community members "shunned the co-op for days or even months at a time."(Field Notes, October 26, 2016). Even when these individuals eventually returned with their patronage, there were many who simply refused to even associate with the Co-op at all. For example, Joby Steele told members of his congregation that he did not condone the Co-op's actions, and discouraged them from entering the place. To many conservative community members, the Co-op was a liberal anathema. This impeded the organization's mission of building community, because such a large portion of the community was unwilling to associate with the Co-op.

Those who did frequent the Co-op or volunteer at it were mostly liberal-leaning individuals who had moved in from other areas. Many of these individuals had started farms in the area because land was so inexpensive. For example, Jamie Stephens and her family had moved in about a year before my arrival from Madison, Wisconsin, to help run her father's beef ranching operation. She was a lead volunteer who handled the financial books and did fundraising, event planning, and also cooked Pay What You Can Lunches. She regularly expressed her appreciation for the existence of the Co-op, what she deemed a liberal oasis in the midst of a firmly right-wing county. Jamie was a typical Co-op volunteer. Most had some liberal opinions and all, with the exception of Thomas, had moved in from other areas. This population comprised most of the Co-op's member base.

Though these individuals helped support the Co-op, they comprised a very small population within the community, which overall was still averse to the Co-op's efforts. This was

not the case at Farm, Fork, & Fiddle, the Co-op's sister organization in Gainesville, a town of the same size about two hours west. The Gainesville co-op benefited from its close proximity to East Wind, a commune, and the county's higher population of homesteaders, hippies, and community enthusiasts. These individuals comprised a larger portion of the community, and their presence resulted in a more open and fluid community dynamic than that in Alton. As a result, Farm, Fork, & Fiddle had a larger member base than the co-op's, and also enjoyed more patronage and participation from community members. While Farm, Fork, & Fiddle continues to flourish today, the Oregon County Co-op was unable to continue due to various reasons, one being the disdain and disengagement the organization met in its conservative constituency. Gainesville's example provides a glance into the true effects of conservative ideology on community organizing projects like the Oregon County Co-op. The prevailing opposition to liberal ideas and organizations which stemmed from Alton's conservative milieu negatively impacted the organization's ability to carry out its mission.

Undercutting of Public Resources and Reinforcement of Class Structures

Another issue stemming from local conservative beliefs was the community's tendency to undermine or eliminate public resources, a practice that more deeply entrenched the poverty in an already impoverished community. One example of this is Proposition KIDS. This was a local proposition on the ballot in Oregon County during the election in November 2016, a measure to provide greater funds for a local school district in one area of Oregon County by raising local property taxes. According to community members, the raise in tax percentage was small, but the funding would be vital for schools (Field Notes, November 9, 2016). Nonetheless, the proposition was defeated by Oregon County voters. Though information on who suggested the

proposition is not forthcoming, the measure seems to have been largely opposed by conservative individuals. According to one woman who voted for the proposition, many conservative community members opposed it because they felt they couldn't afford any raise in taxes, and and also because they didn't see value in raising money for the local school district. Red yard signs dotting front lawns throughout the county emphatically encouraged drivers to "Vote NO on Proposition KIDS"(Field Notes, November 9, 2016). According to Hochschild's (2016) theory on conservatism, this behavior can be explained by the line-cutting myth that creates such angry anti-government sentiment among conservatives. In this case, the voters' conservative bent directly impacts the educational resources of community youth, thereby potentially limiting educational attainment and reinforcing the likely low-income status of future community members. The popular conservative ideology of the area reinforces the lack of community resources, which re-creates poverty. A conservative worldview is another feature of the area's cultural toolkit, one that directly limits the opportunities for class mobility available to community members (Duncan 1999).

This same voting pattern, in which voters turn against their own self-interest, is also seen in several of the issues conservative voters in Alton feel most strongly about. It almost goes without saying that the Tea Party and Donald Trump received enthusiastic support from Oregon County voters. 82.6% of Oregon County voters, 5,845 people, supported Trump in the 2016 election. Only 14.1%, or 998 people, supported Hillary Clinton (Missouri Election Results 2016). Taking into account the total county population of an estimated 10,979 people, it is clear that a majority of voting-aged county residents, who comprise about 80% of this total number, overwhelmingly supported Trump (US Census Bureau 2015). However, many individuals also

simply side with the party that supports their views on three issues: welfare, abortion, and gun control. Most voters in Oregon County are ardently against all three, and favored the Republican party's platform for these reasons. It may seem counterintuitive that a county in which about 60% of its inhabitants receive welfare services of some type would vote against welfare (Luster 2016). Abortion services and gun control policies also appear helpful in an area where unintended pregnancy and gun accidents are both common. In 2010, 51% of all pregnancies in Missouri were unintended (Guttmacher 2016). Meanwhile, the state legislature's repeal of a law requiring background checks for handgun ownership preceded an 18% increase in the number of homicides (Webster 2015). Despite conditions that indicate a need for welfare, abortion services, and gun control policies, conservative individuals continually vote against them. This phenomenon perfectly illustrates Hochschild's "Great Paradox" theory, which attributes these voting patterns to right-wing disdain for government (2016).

Voting patterns of conservative individuals directly undermine the institutions and regulations that would allow for better education, access to food and healthcare, fewer unplanned and poorly supported children, and safer communities. By limiting their own institutions and resources, the poor white rural conservative voters of Oregon County reinforce their own economic class positions. These decisions create more under-resourced and dangerous community conditions and make the social reproduction of poverty even more difficult to disrupt for organizations such as the Oregon County Co-op.

These voting behaviors also demonstrate very little sense of class consciousness, solidarity, or a vision of a collective "way out" of poverty. Rather than bolstering public resources, community members emphasize that the way out of poverty is through individual

education. One woman told me about her experience raising three children in Alton. Although she had lived her whole life in the town, she pressured her children to get out of the area as soon as they turned eighteen. She reported that "people here lacked big ideas and a larger sense of the world," citing this as her reason to urge them to leave (Field Notes, July 26, 2016). Many of the youth I met intended to leave the area by going away to college, and this seemed to be the common escape plan. Though at first glance this emphasis on education seems to lend itself to community support of public schools, the unpopularity of Proposition KIDS provides evidence to the contrary. Rather than emphasizing education as a public good to be funded by the community, individuals are inclined to view educational attainment as the result of a strong work ethic. This view of education and achievement aligns with Lakoff's Strict Parent theory, in which he indicates that conservatives believe "winners deserve to win" (1999, 2002). Conservatives believe success and achievement are earned and deserved only by certain individuals. For this reason, it makes sense that conservative individuals would not agree with providing greater funds to schools, because they believe that students who deserve to succeed and go to college will do so simply through their own efforts to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

In a community that intentionally strikes down school improvement initiatives, the effectiveness of this individualized solution to poverty is questionable. For example, Thomas Sallings attended University of Missouri in Columbia, and found he was poorly prepared for college-level work. He dropped out after a semester and a half in school. Anne Oesch's daughter went away to St. Louis University and felt similarly poorly prepared. Expecting students to succeed in higher education despite poorly resourced schools seems unrealistic in some cases. When students do succeed, they often leave the community and move to another area. This

contributes to a commonplace phenomenon in rural areas called "brain drain." The educational

success these students obtain does little to positively impact their home communities.

In either case, this individualized solution to poverty has little effect on the community at

large, and does little to disrupt endemic poverty. However, these attitudes do make sense in the

context of Lakoff's Strict Parent theory, which encourages belief in individually earned

dominance and supremacy, rather than public goods or solutions to community issues (1996,

2002). Education as the pathway out of poverty to material success is an example of this

mentality's manifestation in conservative values. Conservative beliefs about social mobility

reinforce and reproduce poverty and social class and complicate the work of organizations

seeking to mitigate their effects.

Deterring Activists

The conservative behaviors of area residents also have the unfortunate effect of deterring

activists and community organizers who might otherwise be effective agents in changing

communities like Alton for the better. The dominant conservative views of Oregon County

residents are opposed by a small pocket of liberals, who identify along the political spectrum

from Democrats to anarchists. Naturally, these like-minded individuals gravitate towards each

other, even within a predominantly conservative locale. They come together to form liberal

in-groups, and I found myself in one such group during my time in Alton. In the company of

other Co-op volunteers, as well as other liberal community members, I would engage in derisive

discussions concerning the political views of our fellow community members. Together, we

would remark on the unfathomable hatred that many individuals seemed to possess in a town

peppered with Confederate flags and homophobic churches. We often wondered at the

intelligence of our conservative counterparts as we pondered why so many supported a repeal of health care coverage, despite the fact that the in-home care industry, one of the largest employers in Alton, was almost completely funded by Obama's health care initiatives. We also shared feelings of anger when others in the community did something particularly offensive. After Thomas was publicly outed as queer, we spent many conversations discussing the incident and assuaging our feelings over the matter.

While this in-group had the advantage of connecting its members to like-minded political discussions and analyses of the community, it also had a polarizing effect on our mentalities. Often, we would discuss situations using "us and them" language. Bishop's (2008) theory on the formation of insular political bubbles describes the situation our group found itself in very well. In removing ourselves from the larger community dynamic, it became easier to blame and demonize "the other side" rather than communicate or work with them.This tendency was unhelpful for those of us working as community organizers, because although we were working to bring economic justice to community members, we also felt anger and hostility towards them because of their political and religious beliefs.

The conservative beliefs of this area were also greatly discouraging to the co-op's volunteers. It was difficult to keep organizational morale up, when the population we were attempting to serve deeply offended and negated our core beliefs. This was among the many factors ultimately affecting the co-op's longevity as an organization.

Indeed, liberal opposition to conservative views, especially those which violently affect others, is an obstacle to creating or sustaining activist efforts in poor, white, rural areas. This opposition is grounded in the real threats many marginalized identities face in these areas. I am

very aware that my own white identity kept me safe from racial violence in these spaces. Similarly, my ability to pass as heterosexual protected me from anti-queer violence I might have otherwise experienced. Individuals who belong to or support marginalized communities are correct in fearing the violence these conservative ideologies breed, as the examples discussed above easily show.

However, this opposition to the violence of extremist conservatives leads to an unwillingness to enter poor rural white spaces or empathize with the legitimate struggles that these individuals experience. Many liberal-minded people questioned my decision to go to Alton for my fieldwork, and many were also shocked to hear about the issues I observed and experienced. White rural poverty garners little sympathy or concern, at least in part due to the distasteful political views associated with the white rural poor. Rural sociologist Lauren Gurley explains that leftists who are sympathetic to urban poverty view rural poverty as the problem of poor, uneducated, and offensive whites, and therefore give the issue less attention. She indicates that "the fact that rural Americans tend to espouse conservative positions...does not make the liberal media or Democratic candidates any more sympathetic to rural American poverty."(Gurley 2016). Just as these views deter the media and Democratic party, distasteful and dangerous conservative views also deter liberal activists from working with the white rural poor.

The Co-op was met with opposition and hostility from the community because of its refusal to adhere to conservative ideologies, and this hostility discouraged Co-op volunteers from moving forward with liberal and transformative projects. For example, the social justice discussion course I co-facilitated at the local high school was nearly terminated because of

Anne's understandable fear of retribution from conservative parents. When I brought the idea to her attention, she said "This is the kind of thing that I want to teach, but I'm scared to," explaining that all of the conservative fervor in the community prompted her to keep her own liberal views to herself. Thomas and Rachel expressed exhaustion as a result of constantly working with a community whose views were so offensive to their own political and moral senses. Friends of mine who heard about my work wished me luck with my endeavors. Only after Trump's election did anyone express to me a real interest in the issues of white rural poverty, most likely because liberals can no longer afford to ignore the issue.

These responses to conservative views, which often endanger the wellbeing of liberals, are understandable. However, they present great difficulties for community organizing efforts in rural white areas. Though these communities could greatly benefit from the efforts of liberal activists, they are unpalatable and dangerous to the point that they repel individuals who might help alleviate their situations and participate in community organizations.

Community organizing projects such as the Oregon County Co-op are directly impacted by the conservative views of the white poor rural populations they intend to serve. Conservative individuals oppose liberal ideas and interventions, refusing to accept community organizations or engage with them. Conservative voting patterns undercut public resources and programs which might help alleviate poverty, thereby complicating the work of community organizations aiming to mitigate poverty. Additionally, conservative views deter organizers who would otherwise support the work of community organizations like the Oregon County Co-op.

Conclusion

My experiences working with the Oregon County Food Producers and Artisans Co-op in Alton, Missouri, reveal that community organizations attempting to organize for economic justice in poor rural white areas face many obstacles. The poverty and rurality of these contexts deeply affect the personal circumstances of community organizers and, by extension, their organizations. Poverty and rurality also perpetuate damaging patterns in the larger community, such as the example of police corruption and involvement with the meth economy reinforcing addiction, public health issues, and community distrust. These patterns are difficult for community organizations to disrupt.They also negatively impact community morale, which further depletes the abilities of community organizations.

Meanwhile, the conservative views prevalent in many poor white rural areas similar to Oregon County create obstacles for community organizations as well. Conservative opposition to liberal ideas and interventions leaves community organizations at odds with a constituency who refuses to accept them. Lacking public resources and beneficial public policies diminished by conservative voters create unsafe communities and further impoverish their inhabitants. These effects reinforce class structures and impede the work of organizations attempting to mitigate poverty and achieve community economic justice. Conservative views also deter individuals who might otherwise support the wellbeing of these communities through community organizing.

The impact that poor, rural, and conservative circumstances have on community organizing initiatives in these areas is extremely important to examine. Efforts such as the Oregon County Co-op are ever more important in today's political era of Donald Trump and the Alt-Right attack on liberal democracy. In order to build successful community interventions

against the conditions that have created today's political climate, we must learn from these observations.

Future Implications for Community Organizing Efforts in Poor, White, Rural Communities

My research findings have a range of implications for future organizing projects in poor, white, rural areas. Clearly, there are many challenges to address if community organizing projects in poor rural white communities hope to succeed in creating cohesive community dynamics, mitigating the effects of poverty and food insecurity, and ultimately achieving economic justice. To address these challenges, there are a range of possible solutions.

More people who are able and feel safe doing so must go to organize in these rural communities, and in larger numbers. People from outside these communities can provide new perspectives, mentorship, and resources to bolster the cultural toolkits of community members, and youth in particular. As Wilson suggests, the social isolation of these communities means that mentors with differing perspectives and experiences may prove helpful for the community and its members (1992). These individuals can also help bolster community organizations at times when local morale is low or the community is particularly resistant. Though this suggestion sounds eerily similar to colonization, if done in a manner that is sensitive to community needs, it could prove very helpful. It is also important to remember that engaging with these individuals and their resistance and hatred of the left is extremely important in today's volatile and dangerous political climate. Any effort to create productive conversations and bridge the political divide can help alleviate both political polarization and community poverty.

In a similar vein, organizations in poor rural white communities would do well to hold events which center around creating peaceful political conversations. Hochschild (2017) suggests

this as a solution to today's political climate. She cites examples that involve conversations hosted in living rooms, community centers, and other informal gathering spaces. All of these events are intended to bring political perspectives together and remedy extremism and opposition on both sides. At one point during his time at the organization, Thomas brought a similar suggestion to a meeting. Though at the time we lacked the resources or organization to put something of this nature together, we had already identified this idea as a potentially helpful strategy. Incorporating these conversations into the work of community organizations in places like Alton would not only decrease political divides. Doing so could also aid in building better trust and relationships between community members and between the organization and the community. Finding ways to gain more acceptance within the community is crucial for community organizations in these places.

The social justice discussion course Anne and I facilitated can be taken as a case study in success for this type of intervention. Through peaceful discussions, we were able to introduce nuance to the social perspectives of the students. During class, the students discussed challenging issues like race, sexuality, and religion. Many came away with altered perspectives after talking with their instructors and exploring the opinions of their fellow students. For example, one day we began by discussing the Black Lives Matter movement. Two students responded by confidently saying "All lives matter!" Anne and I questioned their ideas, bringing up issues of racial oppression and the recent treatment of black people in the U.S. One girl pondered these statements and then told the group that her boyfriend, who was half black, was unable to get a job in Alton because of his race. The students began to discuss local examples of racism and the treatment of black Americans. By the end of our lessons on race, all students supported Black

Lives Matter and better understood both racial oppression and the intentions of the movement (Field Notes, September 27, 2016). Calm discussion and meeting differing perspectives with questions and evidence allowed for positive change in these students' political orientations. Community organizations can utilize these same tactics to create similar conversations and alleviate political and social tensions between community members and the organization itself.

Initiating conversational spaces like these can lead to more community cohesion and collective consciousness. The individualist, "winners deserve to win" mindset that many community members possess in this area ultimately reinforces the poverty of the community at large, and also degrades individual well being (Lakoff, 1999, 2002). Through conversation and other methods, community organizations can help foster visions for a collective way out of poverty. Another important component to creating this perspective is through providing opportunities to learn new skills and build their personal and communal sense of agency. The Co-op's Youth Council was a project intended to do just that. Unfortunately, the project was poorly organized, and focused more on completing the renovation of the roller rink rather than providing learning opportunities for the youth involved. With greater emphasis on this goal, similar programs geared at youth and other community members could have an impact on the self-image of individuals and the community at large.

These solutions emphasize working with youth. This is partially because much of my experience was spent working with Alton's youth, but it is also because the youth of the area have a different perspective than that of older community members. Students are constantly encouraged to leave the area, and they understand that their community is not a truly nurturing place. Though community members of all ages were critical of the area, the youth I worked with

were often more open to ideas of change, and had not yet accepted community conditions as they were. Benefiting from more exposure to ideas thanks to internet access, youth have a less rigid idea of "how things are" than the generations before them. Combining their differing perspectives with their creative energy and critical consciousness of community issues can result in successful community interventions. The skit put on by the high school drama class I worked with addressed important community issues and reached a large audience, while the roller rink renovation continues to progress. Evidently, increasing efforts to work with youth can aid community organizations in these areas.

Places like Oregon County contain many dangerous and harmful conditions, and expose residents to great trauma. Rachel's experience is but one example of how this trauma affects community organizing projects. There is a great need to address the trauma of community members and organizers alike, and to make healing from this trauma a central part of the work of community organizations in these areas. Incorporating strategies and customs that center social healing within the organization and among the general population can aid in alleviating the effects of traumatic living conditions. These methods may also prove helpful in bolstering community morale. Ultimately, emphasizing healing can lighten the burden on community organizations and the organizers themselves, addressing some challenges to community organizing work in poor rural white areas.

This array of possible solutions was constructed in response to the issues the Oregon County Co-op faced in its organizing efforts. However, I recognize that these solutions may not address the deeply-rooted issues I have outlined above. Whether these solutions are successful or not, it is of the utmost importance for community organizing efforts to actively find ways to

address the obstacles they face, in order to adapt to their challenging poor rural white environments. These suggestions are an attempt to create better-adapted, more successful organizations. Implementing these strategies and forming new ones in order to create viable interventions for economic justice in poor white rural areas is an important project in today's political atmosphere, one that those who organize for social justice must take seriously.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that many of the issues community organizations like the Oregon County Co-op attempt to address may not be solved solely through community organizing initiatives. In confronting police corruption and the meth economy, there may indeed be a real need for intervention from outside law enforcement and rehabilitation resources. Community members would greatly benefit from greater federal and state funds for public schools, local government, and increased welfare benefits. Community organizing partnered with outside intervention and rural reinvestment can help address persistent rural poverty.

Appendix

Appendix A

Map showing the location of Oregon County in the

state of Missouri (Wikipedia 2017).
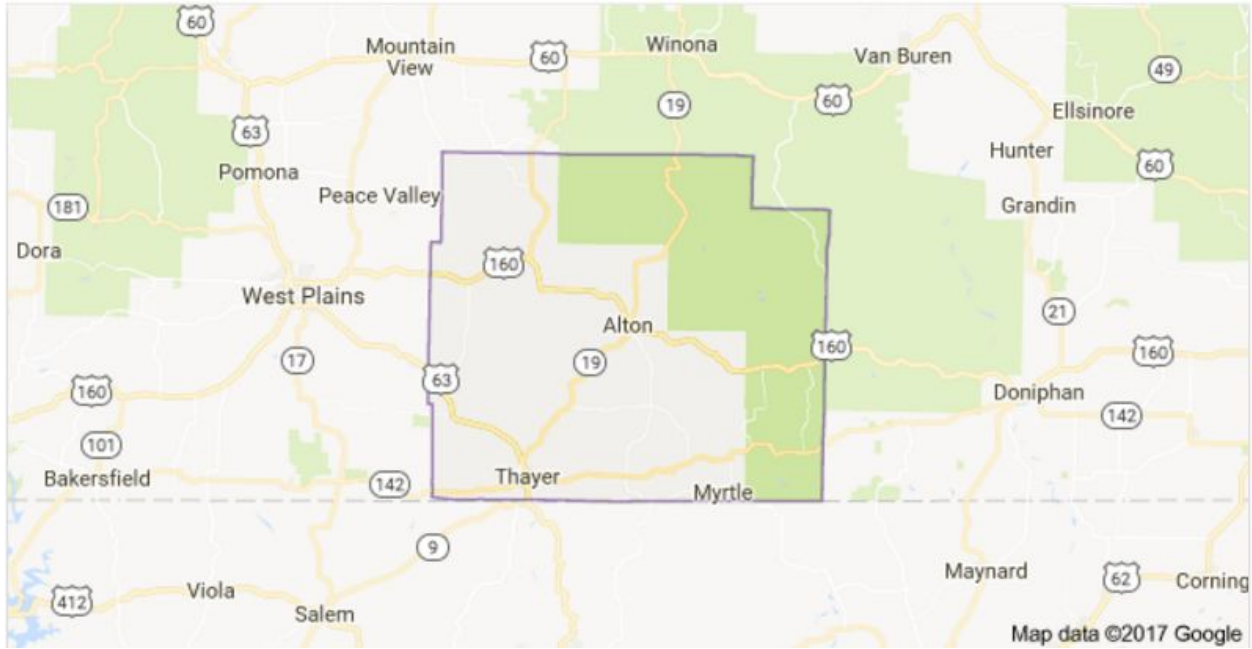
Map showing location of Alton and West Plains (Google 2017). Note that Oregon County

borders Arkansas. The green area indicates the forest preserve.

Appendix B (Sheeley 2015)

Oregon County can be seen on the southern border of the state, bearing the percentage 26.4%, towards the middle of the border between Ripley and Howell Counties.

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