

# A Way of Life Worth Preserving? Identity, Place, and Commerce in *Big Business* and the American South

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## Abstract

Rather than suggest that *The Comedy of Errors* explores doubling and, ultimately, the finding of identity, current criticism suggests that the play reveals identity to be malleable, and, as such, that it participates in the discourse of an early modern crisis of self-representation. In contrast, Jim Abrahams's 1988 film, *Big Business*, at first suggests identity to be rather more essential, strongly rooted in place and blood. But, as the film explores the identities of its sets of twins — one located in Manhattan and the other in Jupiter Hollow, West Virginia — *Big Business* also negotiates the difficult and charged relationship between global commerce and local habituation, only to undercut its posited identification of identity with place and blood and therefore to suggest that globalization may co-exist with local habituation, that profit may co-exist with "the right thing to do," and that we still live in a time when markets remain subject to the socially derived moral imperatives. Though almost twenty years old, the film's negotiation of globalization and local habituation, and its mystification of that relationship, remains of interest in the current moment, as jobs in the United States continue to be outsourced, while rural places and natural resources are put under pressure by population growth and urban sprawl.

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## Introduction

As Jim Abrahams's *Big Business* (1988) edges toward its denouement, two sets of twins find themselves face-to-face in the ladies' room at the Plaza Hotel in New York. Separated at birth, some forty or so years before, and thus not knowing that each has an identical twin, the siblings undergo a recognition scene that, despite their screams and our laughter, requires them and us to reevaluate the foundations of identity and selfhood, including the importance of place, blood, community, and commerce. *Big Business* thus draws more than inspiration or even genre from Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, as it tackles "problems [of identity and selfhood] that haunted Shakespeare throughout his career" (Greenblatt 1997, 684) and does so, like *The Comedy of Errors*, by linking those problems to the individual's location in a (proper) communal or social space, space constructed and maintained through mutuality, through exchanges of recognition and

acknowledgment between self and other that constitute an institutional order defining citizenship, marriage, commerce, and so on.<sup>1</sup> As Joel Altman writes, *The Comedy of Errors* is "a play that has no other object of imitation than the conjectures and affirmations upon which people act" to "construct a reasonable world for themselves" (1978, 165).

Both play and film anatomize the effects on such "reasonable world[s]" when recognition and acknowledgment lose their meaning, when individuals find themselves out of their proper places, and both use an urban and commercial setting to do so — although I must emphasize that "commerce" resonates so differently in play and film that I hesitate to apply the same term to the face-to-face, transparent exchanges of merchants in early modern England and the opaque exchanges of corporations in late twentieth-century America. Certainly, and even though "money seems to bear within itself the seed of capitalism" (Agnew 1986, 44), my concern here is not to describe a continuum, much less a progression, in the ways *The Comedy of Errors* and *Big Business* construct commerce (or identity), such that, for example, Abrahams's film captures in "mature" form what Shakespeare's play captures in "nascent" form or in a moment of "historical transition" from feudalism to capitalism. Wary of approaches that account for historical experience either by "dissolv[ing] historical transition into genealogy" or by "hypostatiz[ing] feudalism and capital into pure and opposed constructions" (Holsinger and Knapp 2004, 465), I find myself drawn to practice in this essay what Douglas Bruster calls a "reckoned" rather than a "rash" criticism — specific, factual, historicist, and synchronic rather than playful, theoretical, metaphorical, and diachronic — but I do so in order to make a "rash" point (Bruster 2003). That is, the object of my analysis is, primarily, *Big Business*, and thus the present moment, but my quarry is a (Shakespearean) criticism that too often misses the point, perhaps because the "reckoned" critics, who have the facts, too often cede the political — a term conspicuously absent from Bruster's typology — to the "rash," who have the theory.

Before proceeding, and for those readers unfamiliar with *Big Business*, let me provide a brief plot summary, which I will flesh out as the essay progresses. In the 1940s, a rich businessman, Hunt Shelton (played by Nicolas Coster), and his pregnant wife, Binky (played by Deborah Rush), are motoring through West Virginia, lost on their way to some friends' summer home. When Binky Shelton goes into labor unexpectedly, the Sheltons discover that the nearby hospital is a facility owned by the Hollowmade furniture factory, whose services are available only to its employees. Undaunted, Hunt Shelton buys the factory on the spot, and his wife delivers twin girls in its hospital. At the same time, impoverished local residents Garth and Iona Ratliff also rush to the hospital, where Iona, too, delivers twin girls. An elderly nurse confuses the babies, giving a mixed set to

each couple, and Garth Ratliff follows Hunt Shelton in naming his girls Sadie and Rose. As a result, one Shelton twin grows up in Jupiter Hollow, as a Ratliff, and one Ratliff twin grows up in New York, as a Shelton, each feeling as an adult always and oddly out of place. The twins encounter one another again, some forty years later, when Rose and Sadie Ratliff (hereafter Country Rose and Country Sadie) travel to New York to protest the proposed sale of the Hollowmade factory by the Moramax corporation, Hunt Shelton's company, which is headquartered in Manhattan and now run by Sadie Shelton with scant help from her "wispy" sister, Rose Shelton (hereafter City Sadie and City Rose).<sup>2</sup> Mistaken for their city siblings, Country Rose and Country Sadie are given their sisters' suite at the Plaza Hotel, after which the hotel offers City Sadie and City Rose an identical suite adjacent to it. (Country Rose Ratliff and City Rose Shelton are played by Lily Tomlin, and Country Sadie Ratliff and City Sadie Shelton are played by Bette Midler.) Both nature and nurture affect the personalities of the twins: for example, Country Rose and City Rose share the habit of hiking up their skirts or pants from the waist, and Country Sadie is a much softer version of her City twin — after meeting her in FAO Schwartz, City Sadie's ex-husband shows up at the Plaza wanting to talk to her, because, he says, she reminds him "of a girl [he] used to know." But throughout the film, the twin who is in place (City Sadie and Country Rose) dominates the sister who is out of place (City Rose and Country Sadie).

Through the problematized identities of its sets of twins, *Big Business* negotiates a difficult and charged relationship between globalization — represented by the financial dealings of City Sadie, who wishes to off-load the Hollowmade factory to an Italian businessman whose purpose is to strip-mine the property — and local habituation — represented by Country Rose and Country Sadie and their family and friends, who live in Jupiter Hollow, West Virginia, "ten thousand acres of the most beautiful land God ever put on this earth," and who rely either directly or indirectly on employment at Hollowmade, where, according to a scornful City Sadie, "they actually still make porch rockers." It is a relationship that remains charged today, more than fifteen years later, when manufacturing in the United States continues to decline and natural resources, specifically the coalfields of Appalachia, continue to be stripped ever more efficiently and brutally. Rumbling beneath and radiating from *Big Business's* farcical plot line — the plan to strip-mine Jupiter Hollow is the dastardly, but arguably never really threatening threat driving the film, just as City Sadie arguably parodies rather than embodies *Dynasty's* villainous Alexis Carrington, suggesting that the city sisters will never run roughshod over their hillbilly siblings — is the reality of contemporary strip-mining in West Virginia and Appalachia more generally, as well as the reality of social class in America. For, in contrast to *The Comedy of Errors*, which adumbrates

social and economic inequality at the personal level, particularly but not exclusively through the master-servant relationships of the Antipholi and their Dromios, *Big Business* adumbrates social and economic inequality through social class. Country Rose and Country Sadie are not inherently inferior to their city siblings, but as the film makes clear and as I shall conclude below, only dumb luck, movie-magic, and public relations make it possible for Country Rose to stop Moramax from selling Hollowmade.

### The Country and the City

An "apocalyptic form" of strip-mining (Vollers 1999), mountaintop removal accomplishes what it says.<sup>3</sup> At huge mining sites, some approaching 25,000 acres, mining companies blast and raze up to five hundred feet of rock, using the same explosive Timothy McVeigh used in Oklahoma City, only ten times as much, over and over and over again (Reece 2005, 54). Huge electric shovels,<sup>4</sup> — some of them twenty stories high, with "high-lift scoops as long as a football field," — can then extract multiple, thin layers of valuable low-sulphur coal, which is a "resource the whole world craves" and one essential to reducing acid rain in the United States, a goal mandated by the 1990 Clean Air Act (Loeb 1997, 29; see also Vollers 1999; Mitchell 1988). Having extracted the coal, miners wield their enormous shovels to off-load tons of leftover rock and debris into the river valleys below, creating "valley fill" and choking streams and river headwaters, often with toxic pollutants, whose effects on wildlife are unknown.

Appalachia's topography is being permanently altered; shorter and deforested, some writers think the land "looks . . . like Kansas" or "the big-sky West" or even "the Southwest, a harsh tableland interrupted by steep mesas" (Loeb 1997, 35; Mitchell 1988, 82, 96; Reece 2005, 41). Maryanne Vollers thinks "it looks more like western Nebraska," since "what used to be forested ridges now resemble flat-topped buttes crusted over with rough grass and a few stunted trees" (see also Clines 1999; Janofsky 1998). According to attorney Tom Galloway, who has worked with conservation groups to slow down the pace of strip-mining in the region, many of the "reclaimed" acres have been designated as pastureland: "You'd think there was a cattle boom in Appalachia" (Williams 1992, 50-1). Perhaps somewhat less cynically, John Mitchell observes that reclamation produces, as if by magic, "a capital investment, a flat piece of real estate in an up-and-down country where flatness commands the topmost dollar" (82), pieces of real estate where, in fact, "several dozen buildings, including four schools and three jails, have been built — so far" (Loeb 1997, 29). But if jails are easily filled, one wonders how these schools will find students since, as many, many journalists have reported, "mountaintop removal is killing a way of life in West-Virginia's hollows. Explosions shower dust and rocks down on people who live below the

mountaintop mines. The foundations of their houses crack and their wells dry up. Whole towns are disappearing as people sell their homes and move away" (Vollers 1999; see also Clines 1999; Janofsky 1998; Loeb 1997; Williams 1992; Franklin 1987; Pollack 1984; Reece 2005).<sup>5</sup>

Ways of living are at issue, too, in *Big Business*. From the outset, the film problematizes identity by relentlessly contrasting the spaces and ways of life associated with the city and the country. The opening scenes, which chronicle the births of the twins in Jupiter Hollow, juxtapose the twins' parents, the Sheltons, of New York, and the Ratliffs, of Jupiter Hollow. Binky Shelton is established as an effete and mercenary woman, who must be bribed by her husband, Hunt, to reproduce, since the very idea of childbirth fills her with disgust, a feeling that wasn't altered at all by the birth of the twins. Relaxing in her hospital bed, while re-affixing her earrings, Binky says to her husband, "that was the messiest, ickiest, most unbearably primitive experience I've ever had." Iona Ratliff, in contrast, is established as a thoroughly earthbound woman, who accepts, as her own and therefore with some dignity, a life of childbirth and poverty. (After the Sheltons leave the Ratliff's homestead, where they have stopped, briefly and impatiently, to ask Garth Ratliff for directions to a hospital, Iona emerges from their battered, unkempt home, with a baby on her hip and patting her enormous belly. To her husband, she says, softly, "Garth, it's time agin." Four other children, dirty and dusty, watch their parents as the Sheltons speed away.) Less noble, perhaps, than his wife, Garth is resigned to a life of powerlessness and poverty, made worse by an unrelenting stream of children. When the physician brings news of the sets of twins, Hunt Shelton responds with joy and hope — "Wonderful!," he says, and after all, he has just been given two children for the price of one — but Garth responds with a firm but quiet "Damn!," revealing an awareness that his burdens have just become very much heavier.

Leaving behind the rural and poverty-stricken West Virginia of the twins' births, *Big Business* cuts to contemporary New York — fast, focused, and gleaming — where we discover City Sadie Shelton to be both the city's and her mother's daughter: she sweeps into Moramax, and as she does, the workplace changes; employees tighten up and brace, hiding their coffees and pastries, their newspapers and magazines, all to avoid the attentions of the "bitch goddess who spits out orders" (Corliss 1988), of the "lusty shrew [with] a taste for power" (Kael 1988, 69). Moments later, City Rose Shelton enters the Moramax headquarters, vaguely, aimlessly, with a stray dog in tow. She is late for a meeting with her sister, City Sadie, and the corporation's board. After much comic business with the dog, the elevator, and her own shoes, City Rose passes the receptionist, Judy (played by Mary Gross), and explains to her, "I'm just not myself today." To which Judy responds quietly, in a tone of amusement and wonder, "Or any other day." In the few minutes

remaining before the board meeting, City Rose explains to City Sadie that she's "not grounded, not centered in the way I should be" because she and her boyfriend, the physician Jay Marshall (played by Michael Gross) had broken up the night before, after

City Rose: I started talking about getting married and having kids and maybe a goat and some ducks. And a little garden with some fresh veggies. You know how I love to chop.

City Sadie: You are so completely out of sync. You're dreaming about growing old in the country while other women your age —

City Rose: Our age —

City Sadie: Don't interrupt — are thinking about tummy tucks. I tell you it's not normal. Now stop it. Stop it . . . Why can't you focus?

Rose is herself, is normal, and can focus in Jupiter Hollow — Country Rose Ratliff, that is. "Miss guts and gumption . . . Miss no-nonsense herself," Country Rose is, according to the Mayor, "more than a match for Moramax." Leading the town's fight to save Hollowmade, Country Rose urges a crowd of her neighbors to resist whatever Moramax plans for the Hollowmade site — "No tellin' what they got up their designer sleeves. Could be condos. A ski resort. Strip mining's one sure thing that comes to mind" — in order to save "our factory . . . our jobs . . . our way of life."<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Country Sadie Ratliff is a reluctant though hysterically funny activist, who follows her sister on stage at the rally to "Save Hollowmade . . . Axe Moramax." She sings the town's praises, and her sister's, while milking a cow, a moment that provides the lead for Pauline Kael's review of the film:

In 1938, when I was a student at Berkeley, I laughed so hard at Harry Ritz playing a hillbilly in *Kentucky Moonshine* that I fell off the theatre seat. (My date said he would take me to anything else but never to another movie. He became a judge.) I think I might have fallen off my seat again at *Big Business* when Bette Midler appeared as a hillbilly girl in a frilly short skirt and petticoats, milking a cow and yodeling, if the damn-fool moviemakers hadn't cut away in the middle of her song. (Kael 1988, 68).<sup>7</sup>

Following the song, which does rally the crowd, Country Sadie confesses to her sister that her heart wasn't in it: "I know it's small of me, Rose, but this doesn't strike me as a way of life much worth preserving."

At this Country Rose gasps, and stops for a moment in front of a quilters' booth. Pulling out a handmade quilt, she asks her sister, "How can you say this is a way of life not much worth preserving . . . just look at this. How can you not just love this place?" Country Sadie replies,

Oh God, Rose, I wish I knew. I, I feel like the real me is just cooped up inside, you know? And I want so many things. I want designer clothes. I want to see the world. I want a penthouse in the sky and a maid to pick up after me. I want to say things like, "Keep the change." Huh. God, sometimes I get so bored I find myself just praying for a UFO sighting. I'd stand here and say, "Come and get me! Come and get me!"

In these lines, Country Sadie establishes a principal point of contrast in the film's evocation of the city and the country. Country Sadie wants things, many things, commodities she associates with the city and with wealth, which she cannot obtain in Jupiter Hollow. That her image of the city is partial and heavily influenced by the television she watches — in particular, the prime-time soap opera, *Dynasty*, some of whose episodes she's seen "a thousand times," according to Country Rose, is both relevant and irrelevant. It is irrelevant because Country Sadie is correct to infer that the city does offer vastly more commodities than does Jupiter Hollow, even to those who are not Joan Collins.<sup>8</sup> But it is relevant in that the film assiduously evades the class politics it actively exploits, in this case, for example, by making a joke of Country Sadie's devotion to *Dynasty*, which may be seen to symbolize the complicated and contradictory possibilities associated with television-viewing by the poor and marginalized. For Country Sadie's admiration of *Dynasty* reinforces her own innate dissatisfaction with who she is and the life she leads (since television offers a vision of the material circumstances of Americans that is far from realistic, suggesting that our material lives are or, perhaps more accurately, should be more opulent than in fact they are and causing, therefore, many persons to engage in financially unwise behavior). At the same time, however, Country Sadie's devotion to *Dynasty* is a principal means by which she learns to be other than who she is — learning how to walk and speak like someone who wields power and authority, like her biological sister, City Sadie (whose own character, as I've already suggested, arguably parodies Alexis Carrington's). This training thus has important consequences for Jupiter Hollow when, in the film's denouement at the Moramax stockholders' meeting, City Sadie is unable to preside as she always does, because her sisters have locked her in a janitor's closet. Country Sadie must impersonate City Sadie, a feat the latter thinks she will never be able to pull off. She does, but only barely; able to ape a CEO's mannerisms, she is not able to command her knowledge, and City Rose must step in when Country Sadie fails to move beyond the script she learned from Alexis Carrington.

If the city is nothing but glitz and glamor for Country Sadie, for Country Rose the city is "A dangerous, dirty, low-down place" characterized by "noise . . . smog . . . crowds . . . muggers, sex fiends, white slavers, [and] politicians." Country Rose has "about as much use for it as a toad has for spit curls." In contrast, Jupiter Hollow is, for Country Rose, a place to love. Associated in the film with the natural and with people who are organically related to the natural — Country Rose, in particular, uses metaphors drawn from nature ("Oh, you got a heart the size of an unsoaked pinto bean"; "Is a frog's ass watertight?"; "I'm mad as a wet wasp"; "You can't out-snake me.") — Jupiter Hollow offers a life relatively free from commodification, a fact that is symbolized in the quilts produced by the women of the hollow. One of these quilts shows up in New York in the duffel bag of Boone Dimmick (played by Fred Ward), Country Rose's suitor, who follows "the girls" to New York when he finds they have gone there to protest Moramax's plan for Hollowmade, thus abandoning in mid-tournament his chance to win the "Mini-Masters," a professional miniature golf tournament televised by ESPN. For Boone the quilt is functional, something to keep him warm; in New York, it becomes a commodifiable object to be admired for its artisanal quality, as is the case for two Moramax executives, stereotyped homosexuals both, who come upon it while rifling through Boone's luggage in hopes of discovering his identity. Says Graham Sherbourne (played by Edward Herrmann) to his co-worker and lover, Chuck (played by Daniel Gerroll), "Will you look at this quilt?" Chuck does, and exclaims, "The workmanship!"

If Jupiter Hollow offers its people a life relatively free from commodification, it also offers treasures that are immaterial, as Boone makes clear when he finds himself dining at the Plaza's sushi bar with City Rose, whom he has mistaken for Country Rose, and Graham and Chuck, who have mistaken Boone for a Ratliff. Wistfully, Boone says, "I only been out of Jupiter Hollow one day, but I sure do miss it." Incredulous, Chuck asks, "What do you miss about it?" Boone, who "manages to be both the essence of rube and a forthright, attractive fellow" (Kael 1988, 69), explains:

Well, uh, my porch for one thing. Nothing like rockin' on your porch around twilight time. Your bones just go as limp as a willow tree. The shadow from the mountain makes its way up my steps like a, well, like an old friend coming to visit. And the stars . . . I mean that's about the only thing that's crowded about Jupiter Hollow. Right now, the sky'd be plum full of stars. You know, kids playin' in the schoolyard. Doors with no locks. Folks who'll look you straight in the eye and smile . . . When Mother Nature looks through her winda, Jupiter Hollow is the view that she loves best.

Graham and Chuck are struck dumb by these words. City Rose is enchanted.

### Land, Blood, and Identity



To Henry Caudill, a lawyer, activist, and writer whose family has lived in the Kentucky mountains since 1792, it is a plain fact that "land and people are inseparable . . . [and] if the one becomes poor, the other 'will sink with it into dusty oblivion'" (Mitchell 1988, 82-83, 88). *Big Business* agrees, initially, although with the codicil that sometimes people find themselves on the wrong land.<sup>9</sup> When the Ratliffs and the Sheltons find themselves on the same patch of ground in Manhattan, in adjoining suites at the Plaza, they are able, finally, to find their selves, although only after confusing, à la *The Comedy of Errors*, almost every character in the film. Indeed, a running joke in the film is the effort of a homeless man to warn new arrivals to the hotel that something is amiss: "If you stand here long enough, you see yourself come out . . . there's two of everybody in there."<sup>10</sup> Eventually, of course, in the ladies' room, and as a result of "an old mirror-image routine that Midler essays . . . lifted from Silent Comedian Max Linder and the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*" (Corliss 1988), we and the characters learn that the homeless man is right, or nearly right. As the sisters emerge from the ladies' room, their dialogue focuses on identity:

Country Rose: Rosie, Rosie, my sister Rosie? We gotta figure out who's who here. I sure hope I'm still me.

Country Sadie: Rose, there's a chance I could be her.

City Sadie: (Gasps.) [Undecipherable comment]

Country Sadie: Isn't she divine?

City Rose: Damn. I know for a fact, I'm not me.

Country Rose: I just gotta be me. Rosie, wait for me.

In the elevator, as the four sisters make their way to the stockholders' meeting, City Rose gushes, All my life, I've felt like I was out of place, like I didn't belong. And I didn't. I hate my job. I hate shopping. I hate New York in June. How about you?

Country Sadie: I hate grits. And I hate men who smell like beer and bean-dip. And I hate making love in the back of recreational vehicles. Am I rich now?

Flush with excitement at their discovery, the twins reiterate what we — and they — already know, what we've known since the film's first half-hour — City Rose and Country Sadie have lived their lives out of place, on the wrong land, and do not know who they are. Country Rose and City

Sadie have lived their lives in place, on the right land, and know exactly who they are. Country Rose has perhaps been shaken by what has befallen her in New York, but she is determined to "be me." Nary a moment later, she says, "We got a meeting to get to." City Sadie may be perturbed by what has unfolded around her, but she makes a point of not letting this show. She says nothing during this part of the scene, merely gasps in horror at Country Sadie's suggestion that "I could be her"; she is much too busy to be giddy. Aware of the implications of this discovery for Moramax, and particularly for the sale of Hollowmade, she is planning what to do next. She, like Country Rose, knows "We got a meeting to get to."

Until this point, until this scene of recognition, *Big Business* has posited a strong connection between land, blood, and identity; if "land and people are inseparable" in the hollows of Appalachia, what binds them together is blood, the peoples' blood, the tight networks of kinship that persist to this day in the mountains.<sup>11</sup> The film emphasizes this connection for both sets of sisters, fairly early on and rather obliquely for the City twins, and some minutes before the recognition scene and explicitly for the Country twins. Upon seeing Moramax's new annual report, which features a photograph of the sisters, City Sadie says,

Oh my god. How did I get so fat? I look like a wall-eyed salmon. What, did he use a wide-angle lens?

City Rose: No, he didn't. See, I look thin. I mean . . .

City Sadie: I know what you mean. I don't understand how it is that you, my own sister, can stuff your face and nothing happens. And I subsist on sixty calories a day or else blow up like a Macy's day float!

When Country Sadie, standing in the lobby of the Plaza, is given some money intended for City Sadie, she of course tells her sister about it. Country Rose infers, incorrectly, that they are being bribed by Moramax. Country Sadie wants to keep the money so that she can buy a new dress and justifies her desire by saying, "Well, just 'cuz we take a bribe, doesn't mean we have to do what they say." Disgusted, Country Rose replies, "Sadie Ratliff, sometimes I wonder if we got the same blood. My own sister. Damn!" But as the recognition scene develops, this tight connection between land, blood, and identity is stretched to its limit, and, in fact, beyond this limit. In the interests of comedy and, no doubt, mystification, the connection frays into incoherence:

Country Sadie: . . . Am I rich now?

City Rose: We're all rich.

Country Rose: Oh to hell with that. We got a meeting to get to.

City Rose: We're all on the same side, now that we're sisters?

Country Rose: Right.

City Rose: Right.

City Sadie: Of course. The meeting's already started. Now we can't all of us go in there, because the spectacle of all this seems to upset people. So Rose, you take them sightseeing and I'll go in, call off the sale, and then we'll all go to Elaine's for lunch.

Country Sadie: Elaine's?!

Country Rose: Elaine who? . . . . How do we know that you're going to call off that sale?

City Rose (softly): Oh, no. Don't.

City Sadie: Well of course I will.

Country Rose: Are you sure? That while we're out there looking at the Statue of Liberty you won't be in there voting so that Italian fellow can strip-mine Jupiter Hollow?

City Rose: Strip-mine?

Country Rose: Yes.

City Rose: You lied to me?

City Sadie: Would I strip-mine our birthplace?

The unspoken answer to City Sadie's question is "yes," and as the two Roses nod in agreement, Country Rose begins to struggle with City Sadie, pinning her against a wall. But City Sadie begins to wriggle free, and Country Rose asks her city sister for help. City Sadie warns her sister, "Don't you dare," but City Rose says, "Sadie, I just have to," leaving City Sadie to exclaim, "How can you do this to your own sister?" Then, in a telling move — perhaps Sadie Shelton recognizes for the first time that Rose is not her "own sister" — City Sadie looks to her actual twin and says,

Sadie, don't let them do this. I'll share it all with you. Join me in this and I'll show you a life that'll make your head spin. I'll introduce you to the most glamorous people in the world!

Country Sadie: Joan Collins?

City Sadie: Yes!

Country Rose: Sadie, no, I know you're shallow but you're not heartless. You don't want to help do in Jupiter Hollow.

City Sadie: You're not one of them. You're me! We've even got the same taste in clothes! Come on, Sadie, who needs these dumb old hayseeds anyway?

Suspense has been building throughout this struggle and this scene of temptation, and it continues to build, as Country Sadie briefly ponders her twin's last question. She then replies, softly, "I do." At this, Country Sadie grabs her bolting twin by the shoulder and nearly throws her (with some help from the two Roses) into a janitor's closet, whereupon her sister, Country Rose, says to her, "Ah, I knew you were a Ratliff deep down inside. I knew you were." Sadie warns her, "Don't push it."

But Country Rose is pushing it, because Country Sadie is not a Ratliff. She is a Shelton. By rights, by the expectation built into the film's script, by, perhaps, even the Shakespearean notion that "nobility will out," Country Sadie should succumb to the claim of blood, to her identical twin's temptation, her offer of money and power: "Who needs these dumb old hayseeds anyway?" But she does not, and while her decision may be thoroughly satisfying emotionally, setting the stage, as it does, for Hollywood's requisite happy ending, it also undercuts the notion that identity and selfhood are linked essentially to place and blood, which the film has posited throughout. That is, Country Sadie's upbringing, her nurture, in Jupiter Hollow has given her the milk of human kindness, which allows her to overcome the material temptation offered by her identical twin. This undercutting is furthered in the film's final scenes, in which the twins pair off with suitors, a thoroughly Shakespearean move suggesting that Country Rose, like her sister, Country Sadie, will remain in the city. Indeed, the pairings are disturbingly weird here: the two Roses switch partners and Country Sadie is paired with City Sadie's ex-husband. Only City Sadie is paired with someone from, as it were, the outside, the Italian businessman, Fabio Alberici (played by Michele Placido), and only City Rose appears to be headed to Jupiter Hollow. The effect would be similar, perhaps, in *The Comedy of Errors* if, at the end, Shakespeare had paired Antipholus of Syracuse with Adriana and Antipholus of Ephesus with Luciana. Perhaps the effect is similar to that in *Twelfth Night*,

when Sebastian marries Olivia on a whim, and Olivia discovers she has married someone she's never known.

### Saved by an Image Problem

In any event, the film's denouement, which undercuts its posited understanding of selfhood and identity, proceeds too quickly and too confusedly for me to conclude that the film is, at that point, modifying its understanding in a way that offers a coherent reading of identity and selfhood. That is, had the film's explorations of identity and selfhood stopped with Country Sadie's decision to join forces with the two Roses to thwart City Sadie and save Jupiter Hollow, we might say the film appropriately and uncontroversially reveals "nurture" to be as important to identity and selfhood as "nature." But the drive toward marriage (or, shall we say, partnering), and specifically the weird pairings of the two Roses and of Country Sadie, edges the film awkwardly toward the conclusion Douglas Lanier proposes for Shakespearean farce in general and for *The Comedy of Errors* in particular — the "unsettling possibility that character is perhaps never more (and no 'deeper') than a well-managed stage spectacle, a function of theatricality and the logic of marks" (Lanier 1997, 326) — and thus leaves the viewer either to suspend disbelief or to conclude that the film lacks a coherent point of view about one of its principal themes.

Furthermore, and more importantly for my purposes here, Country Sadie's decision to join forces with the two Roses also undercuts her own pressing judgment that the ways of Jupiter Hollow are not "much worth preserving," for they must be worth saving if they have allowed Sadie to overcome the temptation of blood, the temptation of money and power. A retrospective glow appears around Jupiter Hollow and its denizens, or more accurately, it is at this point in the film that one realizes how burnished, how partial, were the scenes set in contemporary West Virginia. The dirt and poverty of the film's opening vision of Jupiter Hollow give way to fresh faces, bright gingham dresses, and the sprightly sounds of a country fair; even the guys wrestling hogs somehow don't seem to be getting dirty in contemporary Jupiter Hollow. One realizes how ripe the people and the place are for the fate that awaits them, as window-dressing in Moramax's (and Disney's) drive for good public relations. For indeed, the reason to spare Jupiter Hollow, as City Rose explains to the assembled stockholders, is "the terrible image problem we've been facing." Rising to the occasion of speaking publicly and authoritatively, City Rose urges the shareholders to remember that

Moramax has the image problem of . . . of a . . . of a pit bull! Yes, look, everyone hates us, and now we're going to put five hundred hardworking, decent Americans out of work?

Ladies and gentlemen, we're asking you to please say "no" to this sale, not just because it's going to spare five hundred jobs, not just because it's going to save ten thousand acres of the most beautiful land God ever put on this earth, and certainly not just because it's the right thing to do, no, we appeal to you as businesspeople. We appeal to your basic business instinct.

Not missing a beat, Country Sadie adds, "Yes, to save your own asses!" But City Rose's plea, the film's denouement, is telling, is no joke; or, it is not only a joke.

Jupiter Hollow is to be saved because of a technicality, the fact that Moramax cannot afford another public relations disaster (earlier in the film, we are told that City Sadie had fired 300 Santa Clauses at Christmastime or, as Country Rose tells her folk, "300 Santy Clauses"). As a result, and certainly as part of its happy ending, the film is able to suggest that globalization may co-exist with local habituation, that profit — basic business instinct — may co-exist with "the right thing to do," that, in effect, we still inhabit a time when "the market economy [is] subject to socially determined moral restraints" (Genovese 1994, 98; see also Agnew 1986). But in other circumstances — if the corporation had been able to afford some bad public relations, or if low sulphur coal had been so valuable that even residents of the hollows, like Patricia Bragg of Pigeon Creek, West Virginia, could recognize its value to "the progress of the country" (Janofsky 1998) — a place like Jupiter Hollow would find no corporate defenders. And since such circumstances had already arrived when *Big Business* was in production during the late 1980s, the filmmakers arguably chose to finesse this fact — to mystify the relationship between globalized corporate control and local habituation and folkways — rather than to use the film to intervene on behalf of the real residents of West Virginia's real hollows, whose way of life at that moment was being devastated and would be continue to be devastated throughout the 1990s, as a by-product of strip-mining and mountaintop removal. In this, however, *Big Business* is, one might say, no guiltier than is *The Comedy of Errors* if, that is, one thinks Stephen Greenblatt persuasive about the play, which is, he claims,

cannily alert to social inequities — an innocent merchant is condemned to death for being in the wrong place at the wrong time; a husband is "master of his liberty," while a wife must "practise to obey" (2.1.7, 29); one set of twins is destined through poverty to be the servants, casually beaten and abused, of the other set — but it does not mount a strenuous protest or imagine a radical transformation. In the midst of the farcical confusions, characters repeatedly long for greater justice, equality, and emotional fulfillment, but *The Comedy of Errors* does not encourage us to believe that such an existence can be realized. There may be a happy resolution, but there is no escape from the pervasive, fundamentally inequitable

social order and from the mercantile world based on credit, trade, exchange, bond, and debt. (1997, 687)

Furthermore, *Big Business* is hardly more guilty in this than are the rest of us, if we did nothing ourselves. Patricia Bragg pointed out in 1997 that if the hollows must be sacrificed to the progress of the country, the hollows' residents alone are paying the price: "people raise millions to save whales and walrus and birds, but the state doesn't lift a hand to save the most precious thing in the world, a person's way of life" (Janofsky 1998). Of course, a person's way of life has no legal standing, but evidence suggests that people dropped the ball, lost interest in the environmental problems of the hollows. In 1990, journalist Ted Williams observed that once the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 became law, "environmentalists caroused wildly; then most of them rode off on the spoor of different dragons" (1992, 48). Says Cindy Rank, of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, "the megalopolises [seemed to have] more glitzy issues — toxic waste dumps, garbage washing into the ocean" (quoted in Williams 1992, 48). In the 1980s, no one or, more accurately, many fewer people minded the store of enforcement, and under the watch of James Watt and the Reagan administration, enough tinkering was done, according to John Mitchell, "to fix the law so it couldn't work" (1988, 92). And needless to say, as Erik Reece documented in 2005, the law does not work to this day. Under the Bush administration, Reece says, enforcement of the law has become Kafkaesque: "a drama of grand futility" (2005, 55).

Perhaps, then, it is time to return to Country Sadie's judgment about life in Jupiter Hollow — "this doesn't strike me as a way of life much worth preserving" — a judgment that, I have argued, is undercut, indeed reversed, by the mystification ensured in the happy ending of *Big Business*. At the outset of this essay, I stated that *Big Business* draws more than inspiration or genre from *The Comedy of Errors*, in particular its thematic concern for the problem of identity or selfhood and the ways both are rooted in communal or social space, a thematic concern that finds expression in *The Comedy of Errors* in its urban and commercial setting. Without asserting or even suggesting a continuum or a progression in the ways *The Comedy of Errors* and *Big Business* construct identity or selfhood and the individual's relationship to communal space, I would like to point out that when the film fudges its position on whether life in Jupiter Hollow is worth saving, it brings to our attention a question that also concerned Shakespeare — and Thomas Jefferson and Edmund Burke and John C. Calhoun and Karl Marx and scores of others — the question of how society controls a market economy, or whether, in fact, it should. Are there areas of social life that should not be subject to or affected by the pressures of a competitive and impersonal market, where money should not be the coin of the realm? (The university, perhaps? Health care? Churches?)

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude this essay with a brief and rough discussion of this question, for our judgments about it are central to debate about development and the environment throughout the country and perhaps especially in the underdeveloped South, whether in Appalachia, the Black Belt of Alabama, almost all of Mississippi, or the suburbs of Atlanta. Needless to say, I hope, it is easy to confirm that, say, we "oppose the attempt to substitute the market for society itself" or that "in searching for solutions to problems plaguing West Virginia . . . [we must] include considerations of poor women" (Genovese 1994, 98; Barry 2001, 117). But if we agree that the market should be kept in its place or that solutions should be found, it is much less easy to determine how to do so or what the solutions should be, particularly in a time when viable alternatives to capitalism do not exist, and when our political life is dominated by politicians who claim to defend traditional values and at the same time promote laissez-faire economic policies, policies that are the very solvent of those values — a point that was clear to Marx, who applauded the bourgeoisie and capitalism's cash-nexus, precisely because of their ability to dissolve traditional social orders, traditional social relations.

Even an intriguing attempt to rethink anticapitalism in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the concomitant collapse of socialist hope — Eugene Genovese's *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* — acknowledges (and, some might argue, founders in the face of) the difficulties inherent in reversing the market's penetration into moral, educational, and political life (cf. 6-9, 39, 40, 98-103). But the value of the ideas forwarded in *The Southern Tradition* lies less in their likelihood of immediate applicability than in the challenge those ideas present to the Left to rethink "first principles," in particular its dream of achieving "a radically egalitarian society of free and autonomous individuals" (37, 36); in their bold attempt to link the radical egalitarianism of the Left and the radical egalitarianism of the free-market Right (35-36, 40); and in their brazen attempt to recuperate "the achievements of the white people of the South" (including a faith in hierarchy and a Christian moral culture) by separating out those achievements from a racist history, all in the name of a critique of egalitarianism, capitalism, and modernization (xi).<sup>12</sup> Much in this challenging work is itself worth challenging, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to do so; for my purposes here, the value of Genovese's work is that it bases a critique of capitalism in an acknowledgment of the "historic achievements of capitalism — not the least of which has been an economic performance that has expanded the possibilities for individual freedom and political democracy for enormous numbers of people throughout the world" (37). Thus, like the Southern conservatives he celebrates (and like Marx and Pope John Paul



II), Genovese does not "attack markets [or capitalism] per se" but the transformation of markets into the market, into the sole "arbiter of our moral, spiritual, and political life" (15, 38). Like any excellent solvent, Genovese implies, capitalism should be used carefully.

What all this suggests is that in the new millennium, how best to protect nature and how best to improve the lives of people requires thinking outside boxes traditionally wrapped left or right. These are complicated and difficult questions, but they are now mainly political, not ideological ones, and cannot be understood or solved through mystification or doctrine, whether through the enforced happy ending of *Big Business* or the facile invocation of an impossible egalitarianism. This is why we need a "reckoned" criticism that is itself political, that can use its specific and factual analysis to assess the implications of policy on a variety of constituents, some of whose interests may conflict, and conflict badly. The need for such thinking was brought home in the spring of 2004 to the nation's leading environmental group, in a hotly contested election for the board of directors of the Sierra Club. As reported in the press, the election centered on whether the Sierra Club should return to a prior policy supporting population control and even population reduction (and thus strict controls on immigration), as a practical way to inhibit degradation of the environment, both rural and urban, in the United States. Standing in the election was an anti-immigration slate of candidates that included former Governor Richard Lamm, Democrat of Colorado, and Frank Morris, an African American who was, in the mid-1980s, the executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and who believes that legal and especially illegal immigration drives down wages for working-class Americans, particularly African Americans. Those opposed to Lamm, Morris, and the others, such as current board member Robert Cox, argued to members of the Sierra Club that an anti-immigration stance likely would prove politically disastrous: "we have partnerships with progressive groups, with labor, with organizations representing people of color . . . an anti-immigration message would send a shock through many of our existing allies and divert us from our core conservation mission" (Martin 2004). Clearly, this conflict revolved around policies supported by many committed environmentalists that threatened the political alliances of other committed environmentalists. I do not suggest an easy answer exists for the Sierra Club, or for any of us, but this explosion in the genteel and mainstream environmental organization, with its intimations of conflict between the interests of African Americans and Latinos, does indicate that in the future progressive choices may not be as clear cut as they have been, or have seemed to be, in the past. It has been my contention here that *Big Business* indicates the same. The environmental health of northeastern cities — cleaner electricity, a reduction in acid rain — requires the environmental degradation of West Virginia and the personal degradation of its people. So, whose way of life is

"worth preserving"? The country's, or the city's, or the suburb's? And whose mountain or symphony hall or shopping mall must we level in order to preserve it?

### Notes

1. Shakespeareans traditionally read character in *The Comedy of Errors* as representing a process in which persons lose and then find themselves, begin as incomplete and find completion, or some combination thereof (in 1971, Richard Henze argued that "the major themes of the play are the finding of one's self by losing one's self and the freeing of one's self by binding one's self" [35]); more recently, most have stopped positing a notion of essential personal interiority in order to see character as constructed through the expression and interpretation of superficial and external signs, a function of the self's interactions with others. For a history of critical approaches to the play, see Robert S. Miola's "The Play and the Critics."
2. All quotations are my transcriptions of the film's dialogue.
3. A "straightforward name," reports Penny Loeb in a 1997 article for *U.S. News and World Report* (28). Mountaintop removal has a long history in Appalachia, though it was an unusual practice in the 1960s and 1970s, and ironically, it was encouraged in the landmark environmental legislation of 1977, the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. The SMCRA included an exemption from one of its "toughest reclamation rules" — that, after mining, slopes must be returned to their approximate original contour, no more highwalls, no more scalplocks. "The exemption, of course, dictated the method, for there is only one way to strip-mine in mountain country without leaving a highwall or returning the slope to its approximate original contour, and that is to turn a mountain into a mesa by removing its head" (Mitchell 95-96, see also Franklin 1987, Galouska 1997, Loeb 1997). As noted below, the practice was further encouraged by the 1990 Clean Air Act, which made demand for low-sulphur coal even greater.
4. The machines indeed are electric. Loeb reports that "an enormous extension cord feeds [each one] up to \$50,000 of electricity a month" (34).
5. The destruction of rural life is not restricted to the specific areas where mining takes place. Reece documents the dispersion of pollution associated with mining in Appalachia to other areas of the country: one working-class woman agitated against the dumping of toxic waste in her town of Dayhoit, Kentucky, and after many years, and with the help of many others, she gained from the EPA a designation for the town as a Superfund site. As Reece comments, "the EPA excavated 5,000 tons of contaminated soil . . . then trucked it to Alabama, where it was stored next to a poor African American community" (47).

6. When *Country Rose* and *Country Sadie* leave Jupiter Hollow for New York, their vehicle receding into the distance, an image of a working strip mine enters the frame and fills it briefly. Ominous music pervades the background.
7. To be fair, the filmmakers do allow Midler to conclude the song, although perhaps it is but a truncated version of a song, just one verse.
8. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explain part of the allure of the fair in early modern England similarly: "Part of the transgressive excitement of the fair for the subordinate classes was not its 'otherness' to official discourse, but rather the disruption of provincial habits and local tradition by the introduction of a certain cosmopolitanism, arousing desires and excitements for exotic and strange commodities" (37). See also Agnew 1986.
9. In the scene with *City Rose* at the Plaza's sushi bar, *Roone* tells *City Rose*, "I know you'd do fine whatever spot on Earth they dropped you on. It's just *Rose*, I know you. You don't belong in New York City. That's in your eyes. It's all over your face. You don't belong in . . . that suit. I mean all this *Moramax* stuff is just bleedin' the heart right out of ya. You know you want a whole other kind of life than this." *City Rose*, almost overcome and certainly amazed, replies, "I've never told that to a living soul. How did you know?"
10. At the very end of the film, the homeless man's own double arrives, a well-to-do businessman.
11. In his essay on the life and work of Henry Caudill, Mitchell notes that a Caudill became the area's first resident in 1792, and so "it is proper and fitting that the name Caudill should appear 206 times in the slim nocal (sic) Letcher county, Kentucky, telephone directory, where Smiths and Browns tend to get outnumbered by Combses, Cornetts, and Campbells, and Caudills outnumber them all" (88).
12. Genovese summarizes the contemporary versions of that achievement as follows:

opposition to finance capitalism and, more broadly, to the attempt to substitute the market for society itself; opposition to the radical individualism that is today sweeping America; support for broad property ownership and a market economy subject to socially determined moral restraints; adherence to a Christian individualism that condemns personal license and demands submission to a moral consensus rooted in elementary piety; and an insistence that every people must develop its own genius, based upon its special history, and must reject siren calls to an internationalism — or rather, a cosmopolitanism — that would eradicate local and national cultures and standards of personal conduct by reducing morals and all else to commodities. (98)

## Online Resources

Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (Huntington, West Virginia). <http://www.ohvec.org/index.html>

*Big Business*. Internet Movie Database [cited 9 March 2006]. Available online at <http://imdb.com/title/tt0094739/>

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