

Twenty-five miles from New York City, twenty-eight miles from the scenic outskirts of Appalachia, and sixty miles from the New Jersey shore exists the suburb of Hillsdale, New Jersey. Hillsdale is my hometown, one that is best described to foreigners not by its own characteristics, but rather by its relative distance to places with more character. Hillsdale's two square miles of moderately developed hills and dales provide its approximately 10,231 citizens as of 2011 with a secure and comfortable environment to grow in, especially for those who intend to raise a family ("Hillsdale, New Jersey").

For better and for worse, Hillsdale is a vacuum that attracts expecting parents and provides them with a medium in which they can pursue their fantasies of the American dream, at least for two decades, give or take a few years, until their kin successfully graduate high school. At this point, these couples migrate south to smaller houses with low property taxes, considering the fact that almost all places have low property taxes in comparison to the New York City suburbs. These couples bring to Hillsdale whatever Caucasian, middle class culture they previously possessed and produce Caucasian, middle class children who are left to discover whichever Caucasian, middle class interests they feel most inclined to pursue before leaving Hillsdale themselves to receive a post-secondary education. In fact, those who conjure the need to outstay their twenty-year-or-so welcome come to be known as "townies," which is of course frowned upon. In the words of Marc Auge, Hillsdale might be considered a "non-place," that is, a location, similar to an airport or bus stop, in the sense that it serves solely as a place of transience. This aura of underlying impermanence in such a "space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude" (Auge 103). Thus the notion that Hillsdale serves as a vacuum seems more plausible. But while I can't help but describe my

hometown with an undertone of sarcasm and criticism, I actually feel neutrally towards Hillsdale, as do the majority of Hillsdalians. I believe that this apathy, so to speak, defines the inherent culture of Hillsdale, and consequently serves as the foundation for my belief system, or rather, my lack thereof.

I was a freshman in high school by the time I began to establish a sense of place in Hillsdale. That is, this was when it first registered with me that places existed outside Hillsdale, places where people had mechanics for daddies and drove thirty minutes to get to school, or on the other hand, places where you could make stops in local art galleries on your way to locally owned boutiques and coffee shops. For the first time, I saw Hillsdale's nail salons, fast food restaurants, franchised pharmacies, and Starbucks not as intrinsic parts of the hub of activities happening around me, but as institutions that defined the place I lived in. All of the sudden I felt emotionally crippled by what I considered to be the melting pot of Hillsdale's lack of character. In other words, I figured there was no culture to be passionate about in a place where the majority is composed of church-goers-out-of-habit and non-church-goers out of habit, left-of-center folks and right-of-center-folks, ditzy soccer-moms and intellectually sound soccer-moms, etc. Everyone was just a slightly off-center, twenty-year visitor to Hillsdale. That is only practical. However, Hillsdale is therefore a culture vacuum, as I've come to call it; that is, it is neither cultured nor cultureless. Nevertheless, what belief system should I, as well as other Hillsdalians, feel inclined to adopt in such a vacuum?

Of course, there is no blanket answer as to which belief system Hillsdale's 10,000-or-so citizens should adopt. Also, I should mention that I cannot deny that many middle-aged Hillsdalians are content with their culture-vacuum lifestyles and have

managed to successfully commit to belief systems of their preference. However, I know I can speak for myself and for the majority of my Hillsdalian peers when I say that Hillsdale truly has left us void of aspirations concerning a worldview. That's not to say we're unmotivated and ambitionless. If there is one thing that growing up in Hillsdale teaches you, is that academia comes before *everything*. However, in Hillsdale's defense, it isn't fair to exempt the factors of coming-of-age, postmodernism, and even the age of technology when it comes to young Hillsdalians' lack of concrete worldviews. In fact, Hillsdale's culture vacuum, especially in the younger generations, may have its origins in its citizens' coming-of-age battles as well as in postmodernism and the constant stream of social media.

When it comes down to the nitty gritty, however, all of these factors are epitomized and interact with one another in Hillsdale's education system, especially at Pascack Valley High School. I remember being welcomed at the entrance to my high school on the first day of my freshman year by a massive white banner marked with the chrome-colored Apple logo. Taking up some of the space of the almost overwhelmingly white banner was the large, formal-looking text which read, "Pascack Valley High School District: An Apple Distinguished School." At first I felt discomforted by the banner that, in hindsight, I saw as a sure sign of some sort of impending dystopia. However, little did I know that this banner represented the educational program that would provide me and my fellow students with the resources necessary not only to receive a more rounded education, but that would allow us to discover and learn more about places and cultures from all around the world. These resources were Macbook

laptops, which are provided to every Pascack Valley student for the course of each school year.

To be clear, however, the vast majority, if not all of Pascack Valley students, had access to the internet on home computers prior to receiving the Macbooks provided by our high school in 2008. It wasn't until we all had laptops and therefore access to the internet around our peers in an academic environment that we were motivated to explore all that the internet offered. The internet became our home away from home; another culture vacuum that led us to explore only the things we were interested in, with the occasional accidental exposure to something new, something intriguing. It was only having access to this resource, to the internet to explore the cyberworld with my peers, that allowed me to see clearly for the first time what Hillsdale had and did not have to offer for me.

However, while the internet served as some sort of macrocosm of Hillsdale in the sense that I could only experience and explore what my friends and local Hillsdalians suggested I explore, I did find plenty that intrigued me. The Macbook that the local government of Hillsdale provided me with ended up being the resource that presented me with a million and one places that I wished to be other than Hillsdale, with places to plan on going to once my eighteen-year stay in Hillsdale was complete. So, that Macbook lead my fourteen-year-old self to research Jack Kerouac during one of my English classes, which eventually lead me to want to explore the American outdoors, specifically in the west, which led me to stumble across Missoula on the internet. So here I am, fulfilling the Hillsdalian prophecy of initiating my post-secondary education in a place that is anywhere but in Hillsdale. Therefore I am a direct byproduct of Hillsdale's culture

vacuum, one that seemed repressive, but that ultimately provided me with the resources I needed to start my out-of-Hillsdale life. Now, I'm loving the art-gallery and coffee-shop-hopping life I live in Missoula, but I know I never would have made it here had it not been for my dear hometown of Hillsdale, New Jersey.

Works Cited

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