In Ann Patchett’s *The Patron Saint of Liars*, Rose Clinton’s narrative prompts us to consider “how the distance between California and Kentucky” plays a prominent role in identity formation and community membership (*Patron* 321). Rose migrates from Marina del Rey, California, to Habit, Kentucky, and her journey forces her to confront Sherrie Inness’ and Diana Royer’s question: “How essentially are we changed by movement among regions?” (6). Discovering that she is pregnant forces twenty-three-year-old Rose to admit she does not love her husband and motivates her to leave him and her unfulfilling domestic life. She takes a road trip across the country that leads her to Saint Elizabeth’s (a home for pregnant girls managed by nuns—this takes place during the 1950s) and away from her husband (Thomas), her mother, and California. Mostly in order to keep her daughter (nicknamed Sissy), Rose marries Son, the groundskeeper of Saint Elizabeth’s. Tensions caused by Rose’s competing Appalachian and Southwestern identities are highlighted through her relationships with Son and Sissy.

Like human identities, the identity of place is fluid, formed by intersecting social relations both within and outside of a particular locale, and not contained to a singular physical location. Similarly, communities take shape as a result of human interactions and relationships not necessarily tied to one physical location. These considerations are analyzed in light of one of Judith Butler’s main questions in *Giving an Account of Oneself*: What provokes the feeling of lack of fit? I also address what provokes the feeling of fit. I read one of Butler’s responses to the issue of belonging as disrupting the split between essentialist and constructed identity as recognized in and by community. Butler writes: “Although I have argued that no one can
recognize another simply by virtue of special psychological or critical skills and that norms condition the possibility of recognition, it still matters that we feel more properly recognized by some people than we do by others. And this difference cannot be explained solely through recourse to the notion that the norm operates variably” (33). Recognition affects how gender and region are portrayed and understood as categories of identity. An interesting angle to consider is why some individuals do not develop an identity attached to a non-native place and community, as we will see with Rose.

While living in Marina del Rey, Rose does not realize how she is affected by her surroundings. With hindsight and a change in geographic perspective, however, she does. Of her first date with Thomas she recalls:

It was a night that at nineteen, in southern California in May, was like every other night you had seen so far, but a night that when you remember it years later in a place without an ocean, is like a powerful dream. Everywhere you went you heard the water, the same way you had always heard your own breathing, and would later hear the highway, or trains, or women’s voices. But the sound was so much a part of everything that you couldn’t hear it at all then. This is what I took for granted: The sound of the water. (18)

For Rose the sound of the Pacific Ocean conjures the rhythm of breath, the throb and excitement of transportation, and the cadence of women’s speech. Being, moving, and speaking are gendered via the symbol of water in the specific place of southern California. Rose does not recognize these interconnections, however, until she is geographically and temporally removed from the site of their convergence. This memory encapsulates her nascent understanding of how
region and gender interconnect and how such processes and their effects can be conceptualized differently depending on the location from which they are considered. The “resulting dividedness of self” that can occur when “one takes leave of a localized identity” (Leed 44) is prompted for Rose by the recollection of California topography and her adolescence. A region’s identity is also established by its correlation to other regions, and Rose experiences California differently in Kentucky. She feels split—estranged from her California upbringing and skeptical of a Kentucky present.

Residents of both Habit and Saint Elizabeth’s consider Rose to be displaced and unusual. In this way, her conception of Kentucky as foreign is transposed onto her, and she often feels like a foreigner. Son identifies her as an outlander: “You’re not from around here” (65). She answers, “No, I’m from out west, California” (65). She thinks to herself: “How many times had I said that already? Kentucky wasn’t a place you could just be in, you had to be from there, or everything about you was strange” (65). He says: “I could tell from the way you talk” (65), refering to the content and delivery of Rose’s speech. Assuming an Appalachian woman will be demure, when he discovers that Rose is not, he explains the discrepancy in geographical terms.

Although Son does not refer to dialect in this instance, Marjorie Pryse’s point about the “extensive use of mountain dialect” in Mary Noialles Murfree’s fiction is pertinent. Pryse notes that the dialect “draws our attention to the way language functions as its own site of encounter” (206-7). Murfree’s use of dialect creates a contrast within language (thereby erecting an insider/outsider binary) but in doing so enables readers unaccustomed to the dialect the opportunity to become familiar with it and see it as a medium through which to approach differing perspectives (207). Similarly, Rose’s delivery and content constructs insider/outsider
positioning by creating a contrast (in Son’s view) between her and other Kentucky women. However, what Rose says simultaneously disassembles this construction by providing a means through which to acknowledge and ideally embrace difference.

At this point Son still approaches Rose’s positionality from a bifurcated perspective: he does not recognize her as a woman who could live in Appalachia. After a moment’s hesitation he continues: “Well, it’s not just the way you talk, it’s the way you move around too, look people right in the eyes, hold your head up. You don’t see too much of that around here” (Patron 65). Son identifies Rose as a non-Appalachian based on her confidence and assertive mannerisms. Because regional boundaries can be “both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded” (McDowell 4), Son deploys social norms to create spatial boundaries.

Pryse’s discussion of dialect can also be used to analyze essentialism and social construction. Rose challenges Son’s essentialist expectations of the deportment of women in Kentucky (i.e., to Son her actions do not correspond with place), and she challenges social construction because she does not assimilate to the regionally gendered behavior that Son expects. He first identifies Rose as an outsider, but through this position of difference the foundations on which he builds such binaries are ultimately fractured because he comes to understand Rose as a Kentucky woman from a more nuanced perspective. Playing with José Muñoz’s call to destabilize binaries of essentialism and social construction, Rose’s regionally gendered identity is more like a neither/nor.

Rose’s in-between position distinguishes her from Son and the others but also bridges difference by transforming others’ suspicion into appreciation. Son describes how the Saint Elizabeth’s community depends on her: “You’re not like the other girls, Rose….You’re half
running this place now. Everybody’s come to count on you, they’re getting attached to you” (Patron 106). To community members Rose’s presence in Kentucky as a woman from California is extraordinary, and in time they come to understand her in a positive light. Although her regionally gendered identity can be considered unintelligible in Butlerian terms—those in Habit continuously remark on how she is unlike them—nonetheless she is accepted into the community because of an appreciation of difference. While Rose’s position within the community of Saint Elizabeth’s stabilizes over time, if she ever sees herself as an actual member of that community and of Habit is dubious.

Communities often constitute themselves by telling stories of place, but Rose even avoids talking with Sissy about where she is from originally—another example of the extent to which Rose disassociates with California in order to be able to live in Kentucky. Sissy was in eighth grade “before [she] ever knew [her] mother wasn’t from Kentucky” (Patron 252). Sissy’s assumption that Rose is from Kentucky contrasts with Son’s immediate ability to point her out as a foreigner. Their differences in ability cannot be attributed to Rose’s assimilation into the Habit community or to her self-identification as a Kentucky woman because neither occurs. What Sissy’s incorrect assumption does suggest is Rose’s ability to pass as a woman from Kentucky. Interconnections between gender and region are especially emphasized via this concept. Using terms that usually apply to gender, perhaps Rose can “region-switch” or “region-bend.” If so, her ability to assume a regional identity that is recognized by some and not others reminds us of Butler’s argument that “no one can recognize another simply by virtue of special psychological or critical skills and that norms condition the possibility of recognition” (Giving an Account 33). Her determination to forget place motivates her reticence and contributes to her strained relationship with her daughter.
When Rose is faced with a visit that would force her to remember and confront Marina del Rey in Habit, she decides she can participate in neither her regional community of origin nor of relocation. After receiving a mysterious letter in the mail, Rose secretly flees Habit. The mystery is solved when Sissy’s biological father arrives at Saint Elizabeth’s to bring Rose the news that her mother has died. Sissy is intrigued by this man from her mother’s past and wonders “how the distance between California and Kentucky came into all of this” (Patron 321). She suspects that in that distance lie answers to questions she has about her mother, but she also realizes that it is partly that very distance which hides the answers.

Rose wants this distance to provide a barrier between her past and current identities as a woman. When the worlds of southern California and Appalachia collapse (or collide), she extricates herself from both the actual and imagined communities associated with each region. In order to escape her past, Rose twice abandons place and family. Sissy explains Rose’s decision to leave Habit: “If people do have more than one life in a lifetime, they should be careful to make sure the different versions of the past never overlap. My mother had tried to do that, and when she knew she couldn’t hold the two worlds apart anymore, she left” (328). Patchett does not depict Rose as a simple coward or selfish shrew. Instead, she portrays her as a complex character whose anxieties about what it means to be a woman, mother, and wife in two different regions prove to be overwhelming. She cannot live in the Southwest constricted by the roles of wife and mother, and she manages to live only temporarily in Appalachia in these roles.

Kentucky is not her “terminal arrival.” In The Mind of the Traveler, Eric Leed describes the connection between terminal arrival, home, and identity: “In terminal arrivals—the arrival home, or anywhere that creates the ties between person and place we call ‘home’—the traveler
forms what are in some sense permanent bonds, which presumably redefine the social and even the biological self and make the traveler a ‘native’” (111). Rose redefines a regional social self in terms of how the community re-considers gendered norms of deportment. However, she never sees herself as a “native”; she does not identify as a Kentucky woman or a California woman, and the in-between space proves inhospitable for her.