MidAmerica XXXIV

The Yearbook of the Society
for the Study of Midwestern Literature

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In Honor of
David Diamond

PREFACE

On May 10, 2007, members of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature gathered in East Lansing for the thirty-seventh annual meeting of the Society. Highlights included several special panels on creative nonfiction, the third annual SSML Festival of Films, and an open mike session where participants shared their creative writing.

At the awards banquet on Friday night, James Seaton received the Jill Barnum Midwestern Heritage Prize for Literary Criticism for his article, "William Dean Howells and Humanistic Criticism." The David Diamond Student Writing Prize went to Michael Merva for "An Illusion of Understanding: Listeners and Tellers in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*." Ellen Arl received the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize for her poem, "March Afternoon Tea." David Diamond received the MidAmerica Award and the Mark Twain Award went to Stuart Dybek.

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TREE OF HEAVEN

TODD DAVIS

In my dream the pond opens at the center
of the field, and the field itself overflows
with the white heads of Queen Anne's lace.
When night comes on the water dims,
and it's impossible to tell where the clouds
reflected in the pond conclude and where
the flowers of the field commence. I'm certain
if I walk near the edge of the pond
I'll be pulled in, dragged downward
into its fullness. It's clear there's a choice
to be made, but I'm not ready to make it.

Years ago when I lived in Illinois I was
called to serve on a jury at a coroner's inquest.
We were told it was our job to determine
whether the deaths were accidents or suicides.
For some, money was at stake; for others,
salvation. If the death was an accident,
the insurance company could pay
what the policy said the life was worth;
if it was planned, the priest said the soul
could not enter heaven. That day in the room
with seven others—farmers and housewives
and teachers—I saw photographs and slides,
learned the way in death the body slumps
in a tub, the places in the ceiling where
you'll find bits of skull embedded
if the angle of the gun is right.
We were advised of the make and model
of cars, informed if a hose was wrapped
around the muffler and strung
through the rear window. Who is to say
whether a mother put her head in the oven

out of sadness, or because she was cleaning it
and didn't realize the gas was on
or the pilot light out? Because I was a teacher
I knew some of the families whose hopes
hung like a noose around our decisions.
Days later when I returned to my classroom,
I didn't say where I'd been. I picked up
the lesson right where we left off—
Hemingway's story about fishing
in northern Michigan after the war.

We continue to dream some dreams for years.
From the second grade until high school graduation
I dreamt of Judy Garland running through fields
of poppies. When you live with a dream for that long,
certain things disappear, others are added. For instance,
the pond, even when the night is its blackest, doesn't tug
at me anymore. And now there's a field of poppies
where once it was Queen Anne's lace. As I walk
through the field sometimes I find a ruby slipper
or a tuft of hair. As much as I wish for Judy Garland,
she never appears. Now when I dream, at the top
of a distant hill there's a grove of ailanthus, better known
as tree of heaven. Brought over from China
more than a century ago, it spreads quickly,
nothing more than a trash tree whose roots break
apart drains, invading wells and springs. Every year
I cut and drag and burn it. Every year there's more.
I must admit, even though their flowers are wretched,
the fruit is a beautiful reddish-green, and the tree's arms
sprawl like the ones we don't know the names for
in *National Geographic.*

Sometimes I'm sorry for what I do, and for what others do
as well. Sometimes I wish it was all an accident, or a dream.
But when I think about the way these trees keep coming back,
the way they take over everything—topple old barns, consume
rusted tractors, wrecked plows and baling machines—I can't help
believing, like a tornado in Kansas, the wideness of heaven
might hold us all.

Pennsylvania State University at Altoona

AT THE FOOT OF MT. ETNA

MARIA FRANCES BRUNO

In the 1950s, we all lived as one big extended family in a large brick house in a Detroit Italian neighborhood. My grandmother, Nonna, a widow since she was thirty, lived in the downstairs flat, returning nightly from the small grocery store she owned in the inner city of Detroit. She managed to fill the house with cooking smells: tomato sauce, fried green peppers, and breaded zucchini sizzling in hot olive oil. There was always a pot of thick coffee brewing, or loaves of Italian bread split open on the table ready for dipping into a meat sauce or a bean soup she called "pasta fazoo." My Aunt Yolanda lived there too with her husband and three children. I'd see her ready for work every day, dressed for her government job as a social worker, a stack of books under her arms to be read on the bus trip to the core of the city. Once I saw, sandwiched between two books on Christian Science, a copy of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. I remember this clearly because I had trouble pronouncing the M word for months, trying to figure out what it meant.

And I remember my mother going off to work every day too, dressed in a white uniform and white wedged shoes for her job at Lucille's Beauty Emporium. I'd watch her as she walked briskly out the door towards the back alley, her large canvas purse tapping her hips as she moved.

On Saturdays the three of them stood in the big back yard hanging clothes, wooden pins in their mouths, hoisting wet muslin sheets onto the ropes. We'd play Davy Crockett at their feet, kicking up dirt and dead grass. I owned a coonskin cap and demanded to be called "The Queen of the Wild Frontier" while I fired off two cap pistols housed in two leather silver-studded holsters.

"There is no Queen of the Wild Frontier!" my cousin Jimmy argued. He was one year older than me and carried a Red Ryder B-B gun. "There are only kings," he'd say, and the other boys nodded as if they were part of some great conspiracy.

When they finished hanging the wash, my grandmother, always in a print dress, knee-high hose, and black leather shoes (with holes cut in the sides to let her corns breathe) would head into the kitchen to prepare for Sunday's meal. There was always something cooking. The kitchen was filled with silver pots, large wooden spoons, giant cans of olive oil with a foreign script I could not decipher, or homemade noodles drying on spindly racks.

Besides being a consummate cook, Nonna was uncanny when it came to female reproductive cycles. Some say she practiced magic. She could place her hand on a pregnant woman's belly and recite the gender, hair color, and general lifetime temperament of the baby. It would go something like this: "A boy. Redhead. Full of piss and vinegar, he'll be. But a good boy. A very good boy."

Often there were things she would not say, as if she were struggling with a knowledge that was unspeakable. Perhaps it was a case of spinal meningitis in the child's fifth year, or a suicidal bout with depression at the onset of puberty, or a bad love match that ended in divorce. Whatever it was, Nonna confined herself to the light questions more appropriate for party games and struggled on her own with the deeper knowledge of the future.

She had a gift, they used to say. Aunt Rose and Aunt Philomena said she was born with the caul on the Feast of St. Ann in Randazzo, Sicily. She could lift fevers from sick children, cure rickets, increase male sperm count with the cup of one hand, although this fact alone caused much consternation on my part just thinking about the logistics. My brother Tony and I were enormously healthy during our childhood, drinking Nonna's herbal tea as if it were holy water, sipping the red sauces from demitasse cups as if they were magical potions.

In my Sicilian family, when the women get older they start to shrink, wear black, and grow mustaches. Suddenly they're keeping plastic on the lampshades and couches and dressing like little gnomes, with black scarves and widows' dresses and orthopedic shoes. The women pace the house, stopping at the thermostat to ask, "Is it hot in here, or is it me?" They huddle at kitchen tables and whisper, dipping crusts of white bread into bowls of thick red sauce and sipping red wine from Catania. They take on an aura of mystery.

My mother always resisted this transformation. In my childhood, she was in love with everything modern. She purchased plastic Melamine dinnerware and turquoise fiberglass drapes decorated with

erratic black triangles that resembled miniature televisions leaping into space. She prepared us Kraft Macaroni and Cheese every Friday and stocked cans of Chef-Boy-Ar-Dee ("Who is this Chef-Boy-Ar Dee?" my grandmother used to ask me in halted English. "Is he French? What kind of a name is that? What business does he have making sauce?"). She served soft-processed Wonder Bread every night instead of making the daily trek to the Italian bakery. Once I caught my mother opening a large jar of Ragu into a spaghetti pot, a sin in our family, a major betrayal. She dropped a few basil leaves into the cold pot, sprinkled some dried oregano, and clamped the lid tight as if to hide a dark secret. She wiped her hands on a frayed towel and carefully wrapped the empty jar in newspaper before she put it in the wastebasket. "Not a word!" she said, as I stood frozen in the doorway. "Don't tell your father!"

My mother had gone to beauty school and worked at a local salon perfecting the finger perm and the Rita Hayworth eyebrow she had memorized from *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen*. The Hayworth arch was just two plucks away from an earlier version of Betty Boop's, and it was accompanied by a sweeping hairstyle that often hung over one seductive bedroom eye. My mother dyed her hair a bright mahogany, many shades lighter than anyone in our family, and carefully managed the roots so there was no hint that she was remotely Italian. Because she had red freckles, people often guessed she was Irish or Scottish, but never Italian, even though she had dark, almost black eyes. By the sixties, she had her hair washed and set stylishly every week into a "bubble," the kind of hairdo Jackie Kennedy wore under her Oscar de la Renta felt pillbox hat. Momma never wore black ("That's for old ladies and witches!"), settling mostly on greens and yellows that looked good with her auburn hair. And she wore high heels whenever she could, shunning anything remotely orthopedic. She favored open toed so she could paint her toes scarlet, even in late autumn.

"I don't believe in that La Strega stuff like my mother does," she often told me. "We're in America now."

And it often seemed she was embarrassed by my father's loud family, their sweeping hand gestures, their love of large plates of pasta consumed passionately as if they were competing in some contest at the Michigan State Fair. "They're Calabrian," she'd say, as if that summed all their boisterousness up in one bitter word. "They eat fast and talk with their hands!" she said, looking as if she were embar-

rassed. The Brunos loved everything Italian: Frank Sinatra, the Roman aqueducts, Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine, Joe DiMaggio.

After we had moved to the suburbs in 1956, my mother became the Queen of "Shush." She practiced the art of scrutiny, especially with her daughter, making sure I was not loud or expressive like the Calabrians. I took to sitting on my hands. She also watched carefully what I ate, portioning out the food as if she were a dietician in an obesity ward. Thirty years later, my therapist told me, "She had no capacity for joy."

The damage had been done. I had internalized her disdain for most things Italian. All through junior high school I changed my name to the Waspish "May Brown," a monosyllabic name that referenced, perhaps, a small town in the British countryside instead of southern Italy or worse yet, Sicily, home of the Cosa Nostra. I wanted to be silent and demure and Anglo-Saxon like Muffy and Boo, two very popular girls who established the feminine ideal for all of us. I straightened my hair daily with a Steam and Press iron, peroxided platinum two spit curls on either side of my face, and swore off pasta as an enemy of my expanding hips.

So there was often a tension between the old and the new. I had romanticized the old world, giving my grandmother almost goddess status, treating her elaborate meals and her homespun magic as religious rituals. And as much as I loved everything modern—The Beatles, my miniskirts and fringed go-go-boots, the new Smith-Corona my parents purchased so I could write the Great American Novel—I often resented my mother for turning her back on her heritage.

There was something so wonderful about those communal Sunday meals she often greeted with a sour expression, as if they took too much of her energy. On some Sundays, after we had a grand meal, and the men left to watch the Detroit Tigers, smoke cigars and yell at the TV screen, the women and the children would sit at the dining room table and talk. I enjoyed listening to the family stories. There were stories of my grandmother's arranged marriage and her work in the Pennsylvania textile mills as a child, bad men and lost opportunities, cousins who got rich, married well. There were stories of my mother: how she fed the iceman's horse—as I did—with the small leaves from the shrubbery of the house we both grew up in, how she first saw my father when she was sixteen and knew instantly

she was going to marry him. Nonna would never talk of magic or her disregard for organized religion at any family meals. Although she revered the Virgin Mary, she had pretty much abandoned the Catholic Church and relied more on the old ways taught to her by her mother and her aunts. So the conversations always headed toward the dishes to be done, the tomatoes to be canned for the winter, meat to be ground for sausage for the week, clothes to be ironed and mended. My mother would go upstairs to wash her uniform. I still remember her freshly polished shoes sitting like two tired birds on the Sunday paper by the back door.

My father's sisters thought it was a shame that my mother and her sister went to work every day. They would sigh and mumble every time the subject came up, as if it were a dark mark on my father's ability to provide for the family, even though he was an elementary school teacher with a master's degree. They spent most of their time in the kitchen grinding fresh pesto and shaping small potato gnocchi in one hand as if they were born to do it. Their Calabrian spaghetti sauce was thick and sweet, with sugar added at the last minute to calm the acidity. I lived for my Aunt Mary's "sauce of the seven fishes," as she called it, on Christmas Eve. I loved these women and their laughter and their devotion to their children. But mostly they just wanted me to eat and to find a husband, preferably a nice Italian boy who got a lifetime job at one of the auto factories.

But my mother and Aunt Yolanda wanted to venture out into the world. They did not romanticize domesticity and the traditions of the family. My mother loved to give permanent waves; the pungent solution stayed on her fingers for days and she didn't care. She felt she was changing lives by giving women just the right hairstyle and beauty regimen. I'd stop by Lucille's Beauty Emporium once in a while and watched her maneuver the silver scissors, tufts of hair flying everywhere, her hands furious like Michelangelo's carving out a new form, a new life for an aging woman whose husband left her for the fan dancer at The Motor City Strip Club. She'd pluck and arch another woman's brows with the concentration and tenacity of a brain surgeon, sometimes doing Rita Hayworth, other times a thirties Betty Boop, depending on her client's level of nostalgia. Women often emerged from her chair with hair sprayed tight like meringue, ratted high into tangerine crowns. They'd smile, leave a big tip, and step regally out the door.

It was clear my mother did not want to shrink, wear black, and adjust the plastic on her lampshades. She seemed embarrassed by these women who huddled on street corners in covens, holding their big black purses, whispering gossip and recipes into the warm summer air. She was not married to the kitchen and the large silver pots steaming with herbs and tomatoes. Sometimes I'd catch her dancing the tango alone in the dining room; all that was missing was a rose in her teeth as she dipped and soared and twirled around the large mahogany table.

So for a while in high school, I continued to sleep in giant-sized orange juice cans and Steam and Press my hair over the ironing board, sometimes accidentally frying my nose into a bulbous red, the nose of clowns and heavy drinkers. I began to pour cups of pure peroxide over my hair in hopes of a Marilyn Monroe platinum. I still held my hands together when I talked so as not to call attention to any familial traits that might embarrass me in front of Muffy and Boo, or that cute Rick Kirkby with the toothy smile who wore preppie madras shirts and khaki chinos. I did not want to end up dating boys like the legendary Dominic Cassella, who lit his farts with a butane torch under the Fifteen Mile viaduct. So I plucked my brows, whitened my teeth with baking soda, wore a dime store bullet bra that made my breasts pointy and that left circles on them like the rings of old trees. And I continued to diet and refuse pasta, even though my grandmother assured me it held medicinal properties. I had now changed my name to "Marie," a lighter, less burdensome name that was not grounded in a southern Italian identity. I went into hiding, so to speak, and became Queen of the Wasp Frontier, in a lonely terrain where showing even a bit of southern European passion could skew your high school career forever.

But one day during my senior year everything changed. I was in the cafeteria with a few of my friends. I wore one of those monogrammed circle pins on a starched white Peter Pan collar so tight I could barely breathe. I toyed with my Tater Tots, using my fork to separate them, and refused to eat the goulash that was served every Monday. My best friend Anne, who sat across the table, recited something long and turgid in Latin, a speech by Cicero, I think. I tuned out and turned to see sitting a few seats down from me the handsome Rick Kirkby, impeccably dressed in Kelly green, pointing his finger at someone. It was Maria Prisciendaro, a small black-haired Italian

girl with dark eyes and a long angular nose. She was in my gym class and she had a wonderful boisterous laugh for such a small person.

"Look, she has one long black eyebrow!" Rick said gingerly to his cohorts at the table. They all laughed at Maria as she passed by. She stared straight ahead, not knowing the cause of their scrutiny. "Do you think she braids her armpits?" Rick said loud enough for her to hear. This girl, who shared my first name, walked by slowly and looked at me to gauge my reaction. I showed her I did not think it was funny but I did nothing more.

That evening I came home after theater rehearsal to find Nonna in the kitchen. She was spinning meatballs in her open palm like they were planets in orbit. She dropped them into hot oil, poking them gently with a fork as they sizzled in the pan. I could smell the sauce, which seemed to take on a life of its own. It bubbled red and sent clouds of steam into the air like angels in flight.

She was also watching one of her favorite shows, *Bewitched,* on the small television in the kitchen. "Mary Frances. Come look. Samantha Stevens keeps a spotless kitchen *and* she can turn her husband into a rat terrier," she said, eyeing me carefully.

I sulked into the kitchen.

"You've had a bad day?" she asked, looking at my sullen face.

I nodded yes.

"We need a spell," she said, stirring briskly the bottom of a can of Contadina plum tomatoes with a metal whisk. She sprinkled the tomatoes with basil and oregano and placed the can near three glass candles, eliciting the aid of not only Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, but the Virgin of Fatima and the Black Madonna as well. Our small kitchen was awash with candles, tea lights and statues blessed by some cardinal with a big ring who once visited Our Lady of Perpetual Mercy on Six Mile and DeQuindre. "Now make a wish."

I could have wished for better hair, or smaller thighs, or a boyfriend who did not hang out at the viaduct, or maybe even winning an Oscar starring in a movie opposite Troy Donahue. But all I wished for was that everyone would leave Maria Prisciendaro alone, for I felt she was a kindred spirit and I had somehow let her down.

"Here," Nonna said, handing me a deep-fried zeppole shaped like angels' wings. "Eat. You'll feel better."

Forty years later, I had just returned with my second husband from Randazzo, the small mountain town in Sicily where Nonna spent her childhood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

She had lived in a two-story home made of volcanic rock taken from Mt. Etna, the snow-covered volcano that loomed in the distance like an angry goddess. Our family still owns the home, built in the 1600s, but the land, once an olive oil vineyard, has been sold and portioned off into commercial properties. Next door is a garage that services Fiats; across the street is a gas station. But Nonna's dusty black childhood home, which stands alone amid all the recent modernization, serves as a reminder of times past.

There was not much inside the house of interest, for most things valuable from the past had been removed. No one had lived in the house since the thirties. What caught my attention was the large hearth that stood in the far left corner. This must have been the heart of the household for centuries, a place to stay warm, a place for conversation, and a place to prepare sauces and homemade pasta cooked by generations of Sicilian women. Several black pots hung from hooks over the fire pit, which was filled with ashes and kindling made from olive tree branches. Long metal spoons clung to nails on the hearth's volcanic rock façade. I took a spoon and poked into the ashes, hoping to feel how my great-grandmother felt as she readied the fire. Eight children would have swirled at her feet; outside, her husband Antonio supervised the pressing of olives into oil. Nonna—then Frances Caruso—would have arrived at the hearth carrying a basket of ripe figs she had picked from the orchard of fruit trees nestled at the foot of Mt. Etna. She said she often knelt at the base of the volcano and made wishes. Sometimes the volcano would sputter and steam and release rivulets of hot red lava as if in response. She knew then her wishes would come true.

Something caught my eye; my spoon unearthed a small statue from the ashes, having been lost there for decades. It was a small ceramic replica of the Virgin Mary, dressed in blue, her arms outstretched and her eyes staring forward. This was not the usual passive eyes closed, hands folded into prayer Virgin Mary I remembered from my childhood that people often suctioned to their dashboards for some kind of holy protection against head-on collisions.

I was convinced this Randazzo Virgin Mary could turn anyone into a rat terrier.

One day I stood cooking in my kitchen. I shredded parmesan by hand the way Nonna had taught me and placed it into a bowl of soft ricotta from Roma's specialty store. I added two teaspoons of sugar and freshly chopped parsley and mixed it all together with a wooden

spoon. I was stuffing shells for my daughter's rehearsal dinner the night before she was to be married. I thought about my mother and her sisters and their tensions and struggles emerging from the repressive fifties. Perhaps the only way for them to reconcile their ambitions was to turn away from generations of female tradition. I had gotten my doctorate, become a professor and had even taught *The Feminine Mystique* in a graduate seminar, so it seemed I had transcended the purely domestic roles set up for me. I thought about Nonna and her traditions and rituals and realized it was wrong for me to turn into the perky, Anglo-Saxon May—then Marie—Brown in adolescence, seeking the empty power of beauty and gaining male attention. But I was a typical adolescent, and I eventually forgave myself for this transgression. For years after I yearned to be who I was, and I gradually made my way back there, for there is power in respecting and learning from both points of view.

Now I love to be in the kitchen following recipes I heard in whispers and hushes from gnome-women dressed in black as if they were secrets to be kept from non-Italians. I love the large pot of sauce steaming on the stove, the canisters of imported olive oil, the ferny green vegetables and herbs waiting to be chopped on a cutting board. I love the tall glass candles in the kitchen. I have one that burns constantly for protection against *malocchio.* It is the Virgin from Trapani, otherwise known in my family as the Virgin with the Staring Eyes.

Michigan State University

MURDER IN RUSTBELT CITY: A RETURN TO LORAIN, OHIO[1]

NICK KOWALCZYK

"...I return
Only in memory now, aloof, unhurried,
To dead Ohio, where I might lie buried,
Had I not run away before my time."

— James Wright,
"At the Executed Murderer's Grave"

Ohio prison inmate A51008, Shawn Patrick Kelley, a convicted murderer, played football with me at Lorain Catholic High School. He is now serving thirty-one years to life. In high school, he was a starting defensive tackle on our team of twenty-three. I remember him as large —6'2" and 275 pounds—but too oafish to be intimidating. Everyone knew he had repeated third grade in public school, a damning fact because we were private school kids in a poor town, middle to lower-middle class, and among us smart wasn't cool but neither was dumb. Shawn's dimwittedness, coupled with a receding hairline and an embarrassingly hairy body, earned him the nickname "Teen Wolf," which he rejected with unconvincing toughness: "Don't fuckin' call me that. My name is Shawn. I'll beat your asses."

I remember him yelling, us howling, then him asserting his authority. Once his voice cracked, and from then on we howled in falsetto.

Another time he claimed birds ate grass. That's why they peck the ground—not for grain, bugs, or worms, but for grass—and he never outlived this blunder. He never outlived it because he couldn't admit he was wrong. We'd argue and give him facts but Shawn would force his point like a petulant child, as if equating obstinacy with machismo, admission with vulnerability. His bluster was distinct:

"No, you're . . . you guys are stupid. You guys are dumb. BIRDS EAT GRASS. I know that for a fact. Period."

It's grim nostalgia to recall this now.

My Lorain life ended a decade ago, more or less, when I left for Ohio University four comfortable hours away, where I studied journalism because English seemed impractical. Like a blue-collar boy who adores muscle cars because they symbolize strength and escape, I hitched myself to newspapers, believing they could provide my getaway. Still though, I feared Lorain wanted to absorb me.

On my refrigerator I keep a reminder of home. It's a Christmas Day headline from *The (Lorain) Morning Journal* the year after I finished college and left Ohio, which declares, "'There is no joy in people's hearts.'" I'm sure it was the handiwork of a mischievous copy editor but to me it emblematizes the place I left behind.

Cloudy all year, Lorain is a Lake Erie harbor town of 67,000 people thirty miles west of Cleveland. From 1894 to 1970 the city boomed with shipbuilders, car manufacturers and, for a time, 13,000 steel workers. In the years since 1970, shipbuilding sank, Thew Shovel closed, and the mill slashed 10,000 jobs. When I was three almost a quarter of Lorain was out of work. Today it is a graveyard of smokestacks, abandoned plazas, and poor people stuck in service jobs, taking pay cuts, praying more factories won't close, living unemployed and uninsured, or scheming for government help because they're laid off, can't get good work and it's too damn expensive to move. Only twenty-four square miles, Lorain has ten check-cashing businesses, no bookstores, and liquor sold via drive-thru. Parents are depressed, children are disadvantaged, and property taxes for schools are falling. Welcome to the American Rustbelt.

On January 3, 2005, I called an old friend who was surprised to hear from "Schnooky," my nickname in high school, a butchered version of "Nicky." My friend was six months away from graduating from Lorain's community college and was applying for jobs as a financial advisor. For several months he had been off marijuana and cocaine—two drugs, along with booze, that had kept him in college for six years.

We had barely talked since I moved to Kansas City for a job reporting on its runaway wealthy suburbs and then became a corporate publicist. I considered myself a big shot: two companies in three years and a good salary. It didn't matter that I was scrambling or that my success came from telling myself, "Don't get stuck in a rut, Don't

stay in one place too long, Don't be another fucking loser from Lorain."

I congratulated my friend on his initiative.

"Well thanks, gay-boy," he said.

That's Lorain-speak for men who like reading, art, and school. At least he says it affectionately.

"You're not calling about the murder, are you?"

I didn't understand.

"Hang up and look at *The Morning Journal* or *The Chronicle-Telegram*. Then call me back."

"What the hell?"

"Do it."

The stories called it a "New Year's rampage" and "a bloody weekend incident." The murdered woman was from West Virginia and the other victims lived in Lorain. One newspaper showed Shawn in prison garb. He had a scruffy beard and a balding head. He'd ballooned to 350 pounds.

I dialed my friend back.

"Shawn Kelley?!?"

"Crazy, huh? I swear he's who I thought you were calling about. Everybody's talking about it. I was wondering who told you way out there."

I had never considered Kansas City very far.

"Will he have a trial?"

"I heard he's saying he's innocent."

"Innocent? Then who did it? Who was in the house?"

"Well, the stabbed guy is my girlfriend's cousin, or second cousin, or he dated one of her cousins—I dunno. But that guy was about to *die*. I guess his girlfriend was there, too. Then the dead girl. Then Shawn."

"How could he *not* have done it? Four people: one dead, one stabbed, one beaten, and Shawn."

"Yeah. Pretty crazy, eh? Teen Wolf."

Seventeen months later I returned home. By then I'd switched jobs and states again; now I was a graduate student in Iowa teaching college kids and finishing an MFA, a "gay-boy" degree to old friends who say they'll shun me if I write poems.

I had begun suspecting Shawn's crimes—drugs and murder—fit well into the fabric of our town. But that's not the only reason I drove ten hours and spent two weeks, six to eight hours daily, reporting on

somebody I hadn't given a damn about for ten years, if ever. Silly as it sounds, I felt pulled back, like I had to witness the ruin of my hometown and the ruin of an old teammate in order to understand more about myself and where I come from. Why did I get out but not Shawn? How did I become a college teacher and he become a murderer? I left Iowa thinking about these questions.

Once in town, I visited Lorain Catholic, which closed five years after I graduated. In its last year, LC's total enrollment dropped to 250 kids because Lorain's residents, though dominantly Catholic, could no longer afford tuition. Therefore, my alma mater was thirty-seven acres of abandoned buildings and grass so tall it poked through the stadium bleachers.

It had been Shawn's dream to become LC's head football coach. He had been an assistant coach when my younger brother played, although Ben hadn't respected "Coach Wolf."

"Oh, he was retarded," Ben told me. "We just laughed at him. He didn't know what he was doing."

"How's that?" I asked.

"He's just stupid. Didn't he say something once about birds eating grass?"

I took in Lorain's other sights: The grocery where I first worked was a discount store. The Ford plant that once manufactured Econoline vans was four million square feet of emptiness. Weeds pushed through the cracks in the pavement. But Ford already had axed so many jobs—2,700 in 1989; 6,400 in 1990; 200 to Kentucky in 1997—that the final indignity of 750 layoffs and a shutdown seemed fitting, like beat-up old Lorain had it coming.

But nowhere looked worse than the one-fifth of the city covered by the steel mill, which now pumped surprisingly little smoke. Employment at the mill hovered around 2,000 and I didn't see a single car on 28th Street that afternoon, perhaps because South Lorain turns lively after dark with bars the cops bust every night, and a neighborhood so violent it's had four murders in three years, the last one a teenage girl shot in the head when someone fired bullets into the wrong house.

The first day of Shawn's trial was an LC reunion of sorts. His family had hired the area's most famous criminal attorney, Jack Bradley, a well-tailored, soft-spoken man whose daughter Jaclyn had graduated with Shawn and now lives in Los Angeles working as the personal assistant to tabloid fixture Danny Bonaduce. No kidding.

Entering the small, full courtroom I sat near Bradley's wife, who looked as she did ten years ago. What a health preservative wealth can be. Mrs. Bradley smiled, widely, when I told her I was in graduate school. "There's so many Lorain Catholic kids doing good!" she exclaimed, apparently forgetting the occasion.

Shawn's other attorney was Wayne Nicol, who had played baseball with Shawn at LC but, like me, hadn't been pals with him either. Wayne used to tease Shawn but he was also savvy enough to let all the jocks copy his homework before school. In court, he and Shawn represented the dichotomy of post-Lorain Catholic life: Wayne in a suit, Shawn in a cheap polo shirt; Wayne physically fit and Shawn grossly obese; Wayne shrewd and serious, and Shawn dim and smiling self-assuredly, both of them sporting the same silly haircut: a "high and tight" along the back and sides with a sprout of hair on top, Marine-style, macho, one of Lorain's most popular looks. All three of us wore it as teenagers but those two still did.

I wondered how the trial would unfold. The little "inside information" I knew I'd learned from Wayne, whom I'd called before the trial began. In high school I'd kept my distance, as he struck me as less than genuine. In his office, he explained that he wanted Shawn's total exoneration, but absent that, to keep him off death row—which basically spanned the continuum of possibilities. He kept saying "God forbid" and looking earnest whenever he mentioned capital punishment. For kicks I asked what Shawn's case could do for him.

"There's no lawyer one year out of law school sitting second chair on a capital case," he told me, leaning back. "I'm looking forward to it: it'll be great experience for me." He added, "I also want to help Shawn."

As is customary, the prosecutor made his case first. He was a stocky, beady-eyed man named Mike Nolan, who had retired from Cleveland's D.A. office only to join Lorain's. Something about Nolan made me think he actually enjoyed prosecuting, convicting and humiliating anyone he even suspected was a criminal and that Shawn's case excited him.

He spent a week and a half detailing the events of one night.

On December 31, 2004, Shawn ended his Friday shift operating machines at Henkel, the duct tape company, and withdrew money from an ATM for cigarettes, an 18-pack of Coors Light, and $50.00 worth of cocaine. He was twenty-seven and living at home.

At his drug dealer's duplex, Shawn snorted his coke off a mirror and drank twelve beers and watched the ball drop on TV.

At midnight he called his ex-girlfriend—his *only* ex-girlfriend. Six months before, after two and a half years together, she'd blindsided him by saying, "You'll never be able to provide me a life that I'd want."

Their "Happy New Year" call didn't last long.

Around 2 a.m., a friend named Lee arrived who had just finished working at a drive-thru liquor store and wanted drugs, drinks, and some last-minute fun in the bars. Shawn said he was game and they left in Lee's pickup and stopped at Time-Out Tavern, where Lee's mom waitressed and they figured would still be serving. But Time-Out's bartender said no, and they decided to call it a night.

Lee's truck, however, wouldn't start, and it wouldn't start because he unknowingly was using the wrong keys. After parking, Lee had asked Shawn to hold his keys, and Shawn had returned his own keys to start Lee's pickup, and neither one detected this error. So when Lee re-entered the bar asking for help, well, that's how Shawn came to meet his victims.

Out of the bar Lee brought Barry, a scruffy auto mechanic in his forties; Alice, Barry's sometime-girlfriend, also around forty, who bore a disquieting resemblance to Tim Curry in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; and Lucy, a single mother of twenty-nine, who was the woman Shawn would strangle. All of them were drunk.

No mechanic can start a car with wrong keys and Barry was no exception, though he tried while Shawn talked to the women, mostly Lucy, about drugs and partying and where the night might take them.

Lucy wanted cocaine, and once Lee realized the key screw-up, he and Shawn brought her back to their dealer's place. But their dealer was half asleep and wouldn't sell. He said get the hell out, leaving Lucy with no drugs and no ride.

She convinced the guys to take her to Barry's house by letting them think it was a party.

Shawn followed separately in his car.

Nobody was at Barry's except Barry, who was near comatose after beginning 2005 with beer, Southern Comfort, Mudslides, and a Puerto Rican eggnog called coquito, and Alice, who had told Lucy how to find the house.

As soon as Shawn walked in, he smelled mildew.

He and Lee accepted the Orange Zimas that Barry was offering, and Barry also brought in a spare case of beer from his shed and defrosted shrimp for cocktail.

Lee and Shawn sat in the living room listening to Lucy complain of her man troubles. She had a teenage boy being raised by her father in North Carolina and a five-year-old daughter living with her in her mother's house in Lorain, and her boyfriend lived with them, too. He installed carpets, and they'd dated five months before he moved in.

Lucy called her boyfriend "Bobby Hill" after the mumbling hillbillies on *The King of the Hill* cartoon, and that night "Bobby Hill" had gone home early because he "didn't want to get caught by no law"driving drunk with a suspended license, and by 4:30 a.m. he was mad "his woman" still wasn't home.

Lucy received a text message— "maybe u have found a better life in the bars. I hope u are happy. And enjoy your new life in the bars" —but chose not to reply. Instead she, Lee and Shawn asked Barry for a plate so they could snort Shawn's leftover cocaine. The plate Barry gave them was dirty. So they used the surface of Barry's bathroom sink, although they had to clean the sink first.

After the coke, Shawn asked Lee which of the women he wanted. To Lee it was obvious Alice was Barry's, at least for the night, and Lucy clearly had a guy. Neither, Lee replied. This must've left Shawn feeling entitled to try for them both. With Alice, he started rubbing her ankle when this much-older woman had her feet on the couch. Alice responded by putting her feet on the floor.

After this, Lee abruptly left, leaping off the couch and getting a "where you going?" look from Shawn.

Alice went upstairs to bed around 7 a.m., and Barry followed her for drunken sex, leaving Shawn and Lucy alone for approximately two and a half hours.

The police found Lucy half naked lying against Barry's love seat with her legs open, her bra pushed up, her panties askew, and her neck arched backward 90 degrees. DNA experts found Shawn's semen on her panties and his spit on her neck and nipples, proving sex of some sort had occurred.

The defense called it "groping" and "rubbing." The prosecutor argued it was rape.

Either way, Nolan claimed that Shawn's hands squeezed Lucy's throat for five to seven minutes, which is how long the coroner said asphyxiation takes. Nolan speculated that after Lucy died, Shawn

reasoned his getaway required him to kill Barry and Alice, so Shawn donned a pair of Barry's mechanic's gloves and borrowed a steak knife from the kitchen.

Barry testified: "I woke up and somebody was on top of me stabbing me. Then he rolled me over, stabbed me some more, and slit my throat." He said Shawn had stabbed him near his spine and the base of his skull, cut through nerves in his arm, and punctured one of his lungs.

Next Shawn chased after Alice, who testified, "I woke up and I'm wondering what's going on. So I flipped over and I seen Shawn Kelley over the right side of the bed over Barry. I assumed at first he was hitting him . . . punching him. I sat up in the bed and said, 'What's going on, what's going on?' I said, 'Barry, what's going on,' and I pushed my hand at him and he didn't answer me right away. When I pushed and I said, 'What's going on?' I felt my hand slide in blood."

Alice, completely naked, had run downstairs and seen Lucy dead. She tried opening the locked front door but her hands were too bloody. She ran to the back door and knocked two garbage bags out of the way.

Shawn came up behind her and pulled her hair. Alice felt her scalp coming off.

She testified: "I couldn't breathe hardly, so I took my two hands and pried his two hands off my mouth and begged him not to kill me . . . then I seen the knife coming at me . . . I reached up and grabbed the blade and snapped it."

She hunched over to stab Shawn's legs as he beat her across the back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Barry, looking dazed, bloody, and dressed in blue jeans, and she said, "Barry, Barry please do something; he's trying to kill me!"

"What the hell are you doing?" Barry said to Shawn, who punched Barry, knocking him backward and making him notice his chest looked like a red sweater. Finding the hole in his neck, Barry shoved two fingers inside and grabbed a frying pan to hit Shawn over the head.

Alice thought the first blow was weak. "Harder! Hit him harder!" she yelled.

Barry did hit harder until the pan broke and he "looked at it, thought how cheap it was," and returned to beating Shawn while Alice stabbed at him, too. After subduing him, they ran and called 911 from different neighbors' houses.

It was 9:45 a.m., a Saturday.

"Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Oh God . . ." Alice had pleaded to the dispatcher.

Barry forgot 911's number, but once connected he said deliriously, "Fire, please help, a guy cut me . . . stabbed . . . ."

"Who stabbed you?" the dispatcher asked.

"Please help. Please help. Please help."

"Who stabbed you?"

"A big fat fucker!" Barry said.

When police arrived, Shawn was unconscious with his wrists cut on the couch opposite Lucy. The prosecutor said he'd tried suicide, which would mean Shawn failed at three consecutive murders and probably didn't intend to commit the first.

Some days I avoided the trial. On one such day I visited Gram on East 33rd in the neighborhood where my family's history spans three generations: Mom grew up with Gram on 33rd, and Dad grew up on 34th in the same house where I was born. My parents knew each other as kids and almost shared a backyard. And Gram grew up on this block, too. Her mother Victoria, my great-grandmother, owned a corner grocery above which she lived and raised Gram and Gram's seven siblings. That grocery building, long ago abandoned, burned down when I was a boy.

But when my brother and I were small, we spent every summer day and after school evening in Gram and Grandpa's white, three-bedroom bungalow, where they raised eight kids and sat on their porch to enjoy their afternoons. I don't think she's sat there since Grandpa died.

When I was a kid, the neighborhood already was poor. Grandpa and I used to walk around the block to Lopez Market to buy *The Journal* when it still was an afternoon paper, and on the way we'd pass a big white house I swear was covered with two hundred pigeons. Only later would I discover that my great-grandfather Lucas, Victoria's husband, was the man who built that house before it became so rundown.

Sitting at her kitchen table, Gram asked me if Iowa was boring.

An eighty-three-year-old woman large in size and generous in an elderly Polish way with food, conversation and curiosity, Gram has a henhouse chuckle and a motto that says, "Keep smilin'." I am ashamed to be grateful that her health—two bad knees, a bad back,

and diabetes—keeps her indoors, not even able to go to Mass, which she now watches on TV.

The less she sees of her city the better.

"Oh, Nicholas," she said. "What's new? Same old shit?"

I told her about teaching in college, my dating life and how excited I was to be in grad school.

"You really like those books, don't you," she smiled.

"Yes, Gram. I really like books."

As usual, we talked about Grandpa, a concrete mason with whom I had traded John Grisham novels before prostate cancer took him away.

"You know once he walked down Broadway from here to downtown taking pictures of every building," she said. "You know, history. I was thinking of that the other day and I said, 'Damn, that was a project.' Henry loved little things like that, community things."

She paused and asked, "Do you think you'll ever move back?"

Pulling into the driveway I'd seen the house next door for sale. Later I checked realty information. It has three bedrooms, was built in 1921, and is valued at only $58,000. The local newspaper recently ran a story saying residents are so poor they're arguing with the county assessor's office because they cannot pay their tax bills. According to one man, "The property value hasn't gone up around here at all. The streets, sidewalks, and neighborhoods have all gone downhill." He fought to get his house, which once was his parents' house, which once, I imagine, was the house where he spent his childhood, re-assessed from $61,000 to $50,500. According to his address in the newspaper, this man shares a zip code with Gram.

"I don't think so, Gram," I said, opening a jar of peanuts. She always has a jar of peanuts.

She offered a sad version of her laugh.

"What would you do anyway?" she said. "It's not like there's jobs. Not for you."

Unsure how to respond, I looked out her kitchen picture window, seeing what she sees every day. One of my uncles had installed a four-foot chain fence to keep intruders out. It was chain rather than wood so as not to spoil her view, which is of a neglected German shepherd her neighbor keeps chained outside, even in the cold, and the bleak façade of a shutdown dairy where my parents used to get ice cream.

From an old LC acquaintance who worked for the sheriff's department and to whom I had spoken when he was slobberingly

drunk at a bar, I learned that Shawn had been telling his jailers, "the truth would come out" at his trial, which of course left me anxious to hear his story. I wanted to believe he was innocent, that somehow he could be the victim of bizarre circumstances—a stupid and depressed person, sure, but not a killer.

Shawn began testifying by talking about his poor relationship with his father, whom I remember as an old, fat, mean man who owned concession stands at a youth baseball diamond, the sort of fellow who hit his teenage employees with his cane rather than say, "Pardon me."

Shawn was the youngest child of five, his mother's baby, and she died of cancer when he was in seventh grade. He testified that he neither recovered from her loss nor his father's betrayal of her memory months later when Mr. Kelley married Shawn's babysitter.

The marriage lasted half a year.

"It was too soon," Shawn said, still bitter fifteen years later. "I didn't take that well. Not at all."

Shawn talked about sports as if it were a religion, which is a popular faith in Lorain, where twenty percent of the residents don't have a high school diploma and only a tenth have bachelor's degrees, but every boy dreams he could be a hero, somebody who matters, with a rubber ball and hard-earned athleticism.

I understand those fantasies, because how else could I make sense of Lorain having a volunteer-run, tax-exempt sports hall of fame that canonizes any jock, however insignificant, who has become known outside of Lorain—all while the house at 2245 Elyria Avenue, the birthplace of Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, Lorain's native daughter who depicted our city in *The Bluest Eye*, is not a museum or learning center but just another dilapidated rental with chipped white paint and rusted auto parts in the yard?

My home community is indifferent to education and art. So in that sense I was an outsider in Lorain and high school taught me that I always would be.

Shawn, however, fit right in.

After LC, he went to Walsh University to play football and flunked out before making it into a game. He testified his "body broke down," but really he was of questionable talent and academically ineligible. Later he tried Bowling Green State University, intending to focus solely on school but dropped out after a semester. He testified, "It took me two days to find all my classes." Back at

home Shawn worked in a gas station. For two years he was a baggage handler for Delta Airlines, but he quit because the Cleveland airport was too far away.

On the side, he coached Little League baseball and LC football, junior high. He said it didn't matter LC paid him only $300 a year.

"I loved it," he testified. "There was always somebody there for me . . . and I wasn't doing it for the paycheck—I was doing it because I loved to coach."

He later coached LC's defensive and offensive linemen on the high school varsity team and I saw him, once, when I attended one of my brother's games. Shawn looked so proud running onto the field, and from the grandstands I scoffed at his pathetic attempt to rekindle past glory. But it wasn't pathetic to Shawn. He coached LC football at a time when anybody who wasn't either a believer in miracles or tragically self-deluded knew the school would close.

When the position of head coach became open, he applied because he had convinced himself that his love for LC guaranteed him the job.

He was passed over in favor of LC's only other applicant. The school closed the following year. That same summer Shawn's girlfriend dumped him and he discovered cocaine.

"Why cocaine?" Shawn's lawyer asked.

"It was there," Shawn shrugged.

"When you use it you feel good; you're always up and ready to do something," he continued.

Bradley asked if Shawn had been depressed.

"Not horribly depressed."

But over what, Bradley asked.

"The breakup," Shawn said. "And life in general, I guess."

In a tape-recorded interview the morning of his arrest, Shawn told a detective he hadn't harmed Lucy and didn't know she was dead until police told him. "Sir, I did not do anything to that girl. I know I did not do anything to that girl," he pleaded. But he also stressed that nobody else was inside the house except Barry, Alice, and Lucy, and he assured the detective that had someone broken in—and had someone killed Lucy while he was nearby—the noise would've certainly awakened him. The detective responded, "So had Lucy strangled herself?"

The stupidity of Shawn's defense was matched only by the police's impotence to make a seemingly airtight case airtight. They

were unable to retrieve fingerprints from Lucy's neck and they never investigated other potential suspects, namely the angry boyfriend, "Bobby Hill," who in turn became "The Mystery Man" Shawn's lawyers tried to pin Lucy's murder on.

The defense's theory went like this: Shawn woke up and went upstairs to ask Barry if Alice (who was sleeping with Barry) or Lucy (who was sleeping downstairs) needed a ride home. Barry mistook Shawn for a burglar and lunged at him with a steak knife. Meanwhile, "The Mystery Man" broke into Barry's house, strangled Lucy, and locked the deadbolt door behind him (meaning "The Mystery Man" had a key).

It was birds eat grass all over again.

Shawn testified: "I didn't really knock . . . . I said, 'What's going on? Am I taking somebody home?" And Barry was on the other side of the bed and he looked up and he had this, 'Who are you?' kind of a look and I said, 'Well, I wanna know who I'm taking home.' That's when he jumped up and was coming around the bed."

Shawn's lawyer asked, "Did you see anything in his right hand?"

"I could not see his right hand at that time."

"And what happened?"

"When he got around the corner is when I saw the knife blade for the first time."

"Tell us what happened," Bradley said.

"He came after me. He swung at me."

"And what happened after that?"

"Um . . . I know I got hit sometime right then but I don't know exactly where. But I was able to overpower him . . . I was able to take [Barry] onto the bed and he went, we went, I went with him onto the waterbed. And we struggled. He had the knife in his hand and he had it in his right hand and I kept grabbing hold of it and just pushing down. And the motion of the bed—he just, he was getting stabbed. But [Barry] never stopped. He continued to struggle with me, and the last time [Barry] struggled was because he was getting hit and he actually turned the blade away so it wouldn't hit him. But at that same time I pushed, he turned his head, and that's the one that went across his throat. And at that point, [Barry] went limp. He just laid there."

The problem with Shawn's story, beyond, of course, the absurdity that the oceanic motion of a waterbed could cause Barry to slash his own throat, was the forensic evidence Shawn left behind.

The prosecutor grilled Shawn on this point.

"I will show you the contents of that which has been marked as State's Exhibit 337," Nolan said. "Do you recognize these two gloves?"

"From what I have seen here in court," Shawn replied.

"Do you recognize these two gloves?"

"Yes."

"You know from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation testimony that your DNA appears on the outside and the inside of these gloves. You know that? You heard that testimony, did you not?"

"I heard there was multiple DNA on the inside."

"No question about that. To include yours, Mr. Kelley!"

"And not to exclude it either," Shawn said conclusively.

This was the only time I saw Nolan look flummoxed.

"To include yours, Mr. Kelley," Nolan repeated. "'Does not exclude' means 'include.' We had that discussion. You heard that discussion, did you not?"

"Yes."

"So did the devil or somebody put your DNA outside and inside these gloves?"

"I don't know how my DNA got on the gloves. I never had them on."

"As you recollect."

"As I know."

"As you recollect."

"As I know."

"Your memory has been *extremely explicit* up to the point you enter that bedroom!"

"Yes," Shawn said. "I remember the night, yes."

Nolan diagnosed Shawn directly: "Let me suggest to you, Mr. Kelley, that you knew what you did to Lucy, you knew that you purposefully killed her and it took her a long time [to die] and then you got guilt feelings. You had been rejected by two women that night. You had been high or low on cocaine, high or low on beer. Your career was in shambles. You knew what you did to Lucy! You tried to take your life and now your memory is failing because you really don't want to say that to your family or your friends!"

Shawn dipped his face to his microphone, declaring only, "That's incorrect."

Throughout the trial, my dad asked if he could come along. He was curious to know what had happened to Shawn that had not hap-

pened to me or Ben. In the five years since I moved away and Ben left for San Diego State University, Dad has been lonely without us. He knows we'll never move back and although he mourns our decisions, he doesn't blame us. Just recently over the telephone he told me about a one-legged man on a scooter who was robbed of money, his wooden leg, and his scooter and left beaten on Oberlin Avenue.

"This place is going down the fucking toilet," he has said more than once.

Dad came with me the last day I attended the trial.

In the car he asked if Shawn had noticed me.

"Yeah. Yesterday after he sat down after testifying, he turned around, saw me, and thanked me for coming."

"Really?" Dad said. "Creepy."

"I flashed him a peace sign," I said. "I didn't know what the hell else to do."

Dad laughed.

Before we entered the courthouse, I reminded Dad he had to take out his pocket knife, and once inside he looked at me with delight. I think this was partly because an aggravated murder trial certainly holds the power to make anyone (even a prodigal son) look good but also because Dad loves that I became a journalist.

One summer I interned for *The Plain Dealer's* business desk and wrote a front-page story about gas prices. It was an utterly mundane, news-you-can-use piece requiring little creativity or initiative, but Dad bought extra copies and showed them to everybody he worked with. That was the last summer he worked, too.

One day my editor gave me a press release from Ferro Corporation that read, "In the second quarter of 2001, the Company implemented an employment cost reduction program as an element of an overall cost reduction program," and I handed it back immediately. "I can't write this up," I replied. "My father worked at that factory twenty-five years to put me through college and he is part of that 'employment cost reduction program.'" But if you want, I can write a story about human weasels who speak in euphemisms.

That day I remember resenting more than just Ferro. I resented the whole Northeast Ohio factory economy, every city from Cleveland to Lorain, and the ability of companies to chew up and "reduce" workers, betray cities, and leave only depressed people behind, including my Dad, a blue-collar man stuck without work, who saved money for me to receive the BA he never received, and

whose proud gaze during the trial left me feeling guilty and grateful for the sacrifices he made. If any one person got me out of Lorain, it was him.

But the problems I am talking about, the problems that enrage me, problems far too large and systemic and embedded in the belly of this money-hungry creature called America—these problems are too pervasive for me to address thoughtfully, though with some humility I offer this inarguable truth: these problems exist across America, not just Lorain.

The jury took only eleven hours to find Shawn guilty of thirteen of nineteen counts, sparing him the death penalty because they believed he killed Lucy "in the heat of the moment."

I wasn't in court the day the verdict was announced nor when Shawn was sentenced to thirty-one years to life. I was in France on a program partially paid for by my graduate program. Talk about two tragically divergent lives—one privileged and the other imprisoned. I learned of Shawn's fate from the Internet, e-mails and news clippings.

One story said Shawn's father, with oxygen tubes in his nose and using a wheelchair because he was so obese, had slammed his hand on a table and yelled, "Goddamn drugs!" after the verdict, as if Mr. Kelley refused to believe Shawn's life could've been shit even before cocaine.

Every story said Shawn never apologized to Lucy's weeping family and that after his conviction, a sheriff's deputy overheard him call the jury "chicken shit" for not sentencing him to die. One newspaper filmed a video during the sentencing, and while watching it I realized how lost Shawn had become. Aside from his red eyes, he looked downright stoic in prison garb, like any other young bum who'd lived caged and desperate in Lorain, scowling at the world while being moved from one prison into another.

University of Iowa

NOTE

[1]Certain names have been changed in the interest of protecting the privacy of the victims.

NATIVE ON NATIVE: PLACE IN THE LETTERS OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO & JAMES WRIGHT

CHRISTIAN P. KNOELLER

written in the landscape
mapping
inhabiting
with warm Chinook winds
the home country
of every telling.

—Kimberly Blaeser

It is the story
of rising and falling,

tides in a single
man or woman's sojourn

—David Radavich

When we think of regional writers typically associated with the Midwest, James Wright would have to be one of the first poets to come to mind. There are a number of reasons his work is viewed in this way, of course—he grew up in Ohio, after all. In fact, the canon of Wright's most widely anthologized writing includes many poems that are explicitly set there, often naming actual places such as "Lying in a Hammock on William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." "A Blessing" begins "Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota." Tragic characters portrayed in many of the early poems inhabit the margins of Midwestern cities in what has popularly come to be known as the Rust Belt. Wright's early work also reflects his belief in the redemptive qualities of the natural world. Moreover, Wright's close association with another writer closely linked to the Midwest,

Robert Bly, the Arch Druid of Minnesota, further cements his relationship with the region.

Yet Wright lived and taught in New York City for many years, arguably the most prolific period in his life. During this time, he repeatedly made what amounted to pilgrimages to Europe in search of high culture, history, and inspiration. In an interview originally published in 1980, Wright explained, "I have some places I feel especially devoted to. In a way some of them are in Europe, some in the United States. I have a peculiar kind of devotion to Martins Ferry, although I haven't gone back there in at least twenty-five years . . . I have tried sometimes to write about what I knew" (Smith 5). It is tempting to wonder if the old saw applies: you can take a Midwesterner out of the Midwest, but not vice versa. As David Radavich has established in his work on Midwestern drama, a number of major playwrights reared in the region went on to careers in the theatre in places like New York yet often set their plays in the Midwest. Moreover, they created characters like themselves—and like Wright—who, having hailed from one place, must adjust to the culture of another.

Discussing Mark Twain and William Dean Howells in relation to the origin of Midwestern drama, Radavich observes that while they were "born two years apart in Missouri and Ohio," once they had "left their home region to achieve recognition and opportunity in the Northeast, their enterprise represented a reverse colonization of ideas and precepts nurtured in the Midwest" (26). Perhaps the trajectory of Wright's writing life can be seen in a similar light: a poet with sensibilities instilled in the Midwest teaching at Hunter College in New York City. As critic Peter Stitt has suggested, Wright's sensitivity to place is directly reflected in his writing: "the poet's quest has taken him from man to nature, from city to farm . . . James Wright has mostly retreated from nature in his poetry (his own life has taken him from Minneapolis to New York intensifying his experience of the city) except in some of [the late] poems based on the Italian and French landscapes" (Smith 76). Indeed, as Andrew Elkins concludes, the trick is to reconcile the influence of multiple landscapes: "the body of poetry is like a novel whose protagonist is James Wright, the boy from Martins Ferry, Ohio, struggling to deny his heritage, intent on being 'European,' but finally realizing that, amazingly, one can be an Ohioan *and* an artist" (3). Suffice it to say, there is more to "place" in literature than initially meets the eye.

A volume of posthumously published letters between Wright and Laguna Pueblo novelist Leslie Marmon Silko provides a window on how these two writers regarded their relationship to place. As a contemporary Native American, Silko is keenly aware of her own mixed-race ancestry. She relates in the essay, "Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit," that even as a young child she recognized "something about [her] appearance was not acceptable to some people, white and Indian . . . I knew the tourists didn't want me in their snapshot because I looked different, because I was part white" (61, 63). Silko confides in a letter to Wright, "My great-grandpa was from Ohio, and somewhere in the back of my mind I associate you and him and Ohio, although Grandpa Marmon never went back" (36, letter dated 1/24/79). Silko may view place through the lens of an indigenous culture with deep and ancient ties to the landscape of the Southwest, yet while writing to Wright, she travels from coast to coast to teach.

Since a sustained correspondence between Silko and Wright might seem improbable, it is worth considering briefly how it came about. In 1975, Wright first met Silko at a writer's conference in Michigan. Anne Wright—who edited these letters for publication—relates how her husband first contacted Silko from Rhode Island three years later after reading *Ceremony* in 1978: despite "the formality of their first few letters . . . soon they were exchanging work, discussing the difficulty of writing" (1985, introduction). Yet their letters quickly grew in length, depth, and intensity right up until the day of Wright's untimely death. As remarkable as it might seem, the two appeared to find in each other not only a sounding board but a kindred spirit.

Once the connection was made, their correspondence blossomed: forty-seven letters in just over a year and a half (August 28, 1978—March 24, 1980). Both were frequently on the move. Silko taught at the University of Washington in Seattle and at Vassar College in New York. Wright traveled throughout Europe with his wife, Anne, during a year's leave of absence that included extended stays in Italy and France. And while the last letters were sent between their respective homes in Tuscon, Arizona, and New York City, their journeys not surprisingly gave rise to contemplating place in their writing. The premise of this essay is that the letters collected in *With the Delicacy and Strength of Lace* reveal the multiple senses in which these writers perceive "place."

Consider how literary critics have typically portrayed Wright's relationship to the Midwest—and how Wright himself characterized it. According to Stitt, Wright's return to the country and reflection on the redemptive qualities of nature coincided with his initial acquaintance with Robert Bly: "Wright at this time was teaching at the University of Minnesota and living in Minneapolis, and Bly was living on his farm near Madison, in western Minnesota. What Wright said he eventually found there was a twofold resurrection. *The Branch Will Not Break*, as Wright has told the story, grew out of his frequent visits to the Bly farm" (Smith 67).

Critics such as Andrew Elkins see Wright's return to the natural world as central to *Branch.* The book's "rhetorical goal," writes Elkins, "is convincing us and himself that he truly has arrived 'in the country again.' This archetypal wanderer is straining through the desert—occasionally snow-covered—for his promised land where thorns and slag heaps have been banished and where horses, Chippewas, Norwegians, and poets can rise above 'the Beautiful white ruins / Of America'" (106). Similarly, David Dougherty examines how "Stages on a Journey Westward" is organized by "the need to define one's self in relation to geography and cultural traditions implicit in locations . . . explained by the relation between actual space and the dreams associated with each place" (62).

Traditions of dreams associated with place are arguably nowhere more profound than among America's indigenous cultures. In the case of the upper Midwest, the Ojibwe of Northern Minnesota traditionally followed seasonal "migrations" to camps to harvest rice and other wild edibles. Ojibwe poet Kimberly Blaeser of the White Earth reservation contrasts patterns of "literal" migration—seasonal habitation, traditional subsistence, tribal relocation, from reservation to city (and vice versa)—with what she terms "symbolic," "imaginative," "spiritual," "literary," and "identity" migrations (McGlennen 10). Similarly, the letters between Silko and Wright reveal many ways that "place" can be invoked. In the course of their correspondence, "place" can be seen to operate variously as 1) point of origin and identity (individual or collective), 2) spiritual or ethical relationship, 3) journey or destination, and 4) memory or story. As writers, both are also naturally interested in the way place enters into language and literature.

How exactly is place linked to our sense of identity, both individually and collectively? In her correspondence with Wright, Silko

naturally addresses such topics from a Pueblo perspective, alluding to oral tradition that ties tribal origin to place: "The stories grow out of this land as much as we see ourselves as having emerged from the land there" (24, letter dated 10/17/78). Elsewhere, Silko postulates a relationship between interior and exterior "landscapes." Barry Lopez suggests that story plays a role in bridging the two: "A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape" (qtd. in Blaeser 27). For his part, Wright confides that his own ancestry is likewise associated with place: "It makes me feel slightly formal to tell you that I am from Ohio. My family goes very far and very deep back into Ohio and West Virginia" (22, letter dated 10/12/78). Here, place takes on overtones of both kinship and history.

Biographer David Dougherty describes Wright's birthplace this way: "The valley in which the Wrights lived provided a provocative setting for the boy who would mature as a poet torn between love and contempt for his native place. Then, as now, it was a study in contrasts. Natural beauty is everywhere . . . [yet] the land bears brutal scars of human rapacity. Strip mines . . . have not yet been reclaimed and leave angry gashes in the hillsides" (4).

Silko describes how, from a Pueblo perspective, such environmental destruction amounts to a desecration of the sacred:

> When the Army Corps of Engineers flooded the sacred shrines and land near Cochiti Pueblo . . . . the strong feelings, the love, the regard which the Cochiti people had for those places that were flooded, those feelings and the importance of those feelings, memories and beliefs are much more important than the physical locations . . . . The idea or memory or feeling—whatever you want to call it—is more powerful and important than any damage or destruction humans may commit. (28, letter dated 11/1/78)

Silko recognizes that Wright's Midwestern roots—replete with the clash of the industrial and the pastoral—are central to much of his writing. She tells him, "That is what I love most in your writing, Jim, the gully and railroad track, the sumac and coal smoke—all could only be from the place you give us or that gives you to us, that Ohio country. That Ohio country gives us your voice" (82, letter dated 9/12/79).

Early in their correspondence, spiritual and ethical relationships to place emerge. Silko enclosed a packet of poems in early October,

1978, and provided background for one entitled "Deer Dance," describing the rituals of traditional tribal hunters:

> In the fall the Laguna hunters go to the hills and mountains around Laguna Pueblo to bring back the deer . . . . Late in the winter the Deer Dance is performed to honor and pay thanks to the deer spirits who've come home with the hunters that year. Only when this has been properly done will the spirits be able to return to the mountain and be reborn into more deer who will, remembering the reverence and appreciation of the people, once more come home with the hunters. (9-10)

Wright, in turn, observed that Silko's writing often involves an equally spiritual evocation of place: "One of the great strengths to be felt in *Ceremony,* for example, is your ability to describe beyond description, so to speak—your way of dealing with landscape there is not just a point up of details, but the evocation (I can't think of a better word) of something—a spirit perhaps? Anyway, the effect is, for me, that of almost hearing the landscape itself tell the story" (26, letter dated 10/28/78).

Silko concurred that the idea of the land itself speaking through us is intrinsic to her culture—a view that is indeed reflected in her own writing: "You pointed out a very important dimension of the land and the Pueblo people's relation to the land when you said it was as if the land was telling the stories in the novel. That is it exactly, but it is so difficult to convey this relationship" (27, letter dated 11/1/78). Such relationships represent the very fabric of subsistence cultures. "Subsistence gathering of animals and plants—not to mention the intrinsically related practices of collaboration, sharing, sewing, dance, and song—is cultural glue. It binds together generations of people, [indigenous] and white, who are not merely using this land but who are, in a way, created by it" (O'Neill 30).

How is it that landscape interacts with story? Silko tells Wright that it involves shared knowledge: "Translations of Laguna stories seem terribly bleak on the printed page . . . if you do not know the places which the storyteller calls up in the telling . . . Laguna narratives are very lean because so much of the stories are shared knowledge" (24, 10/17/78). Wright replies: "Stories [depend] in part . . . on shared knowledge, so that, in the telling alone, the proper audience can grasp the references and fill in the landscapes" (26, letter dated 10/28/78). That is, the "proper audience" is intimately

acquainted with a shared landscape as well as narratives associated with place.

Wright's poetry often stemmed from his travels, of course, suggesting another sense of "place": journeys and destinations as well as the transformative potential of travel itself. It seems appropriate that Wright's correspondence with Silko is set against a backdrop of travelogue. As soon as their correspondence began in autumn 1978, Wright outlined an ambitious itinerary for the coming year: "I am here at Delaware as a visiting professor for the Fall semester. Annie and I hope to be in Paris before Christmas, and we want to spend that holiday in Chartres. Then we will be in Europe for eight months, much of the time in beloved Italy" (22, letter dated 10/12/78). Wright realized that while such travel might curtail communication at times, he hoped to tell her about the places he would visit: "Partly because of our sometimes intricate journeys, I will be writing to you more or less substantially once in a while, and more often sending you post cards . . . . a way of sharing something, some place" (32, letter dated 11/16/78, still in US). After arriving in Europe, his itinerary did indeed prove to be an "intricate" one: "We arrived in Paris on the morning of December 22nd and right now I am writing you from the city of Nice, on the Mediterranean. Sketching our plans earlier, we had thought of traveling to the town of Hosum in Schleswig-Holstein, in northwest Germany. There's a kind of pilgrimage I still want to make there" (33, letter dated 1/9/79 from Nice, France).

Wright became a moving target. Receiving one of Silko's letters in Toulouse, he replied from Albi, providing addresses for the coming weeks in Paris and Amsterdam. Later he reported receiving a letter forwarded to Amsterdam that Silko had addressed to Delaware. Forever on the move, in early March he wrote "Very early Sunday morning we will take the long train from Paris all the way to Verona, Italy . . . We've revised our itinerary" to include five destinations in the country including Naples, Taranto, Bari, Sirmione, and ultimately Venice (43, letter dated 3/9/79). Then, in July, he reported that they had "[j]ust returned from Tuscany and Umbria to Venice and preparing to go to Paris where we will spend the month of August before returning to America" (63, letter dated 7/18/79).

In the end we sense his weariness: "This European journey has been a long one and, in spite of the beauty of Paris, I am ready to come home" (79, letter dated 8/23/79). Given the extent of Wright's travels in Europe that year, it is little wonder that journey and destination were such recurrent motifs.

Perhaps it was inevitable that by virtue of being writers, Silko and Wright would be intrigued by how place operates in language and literature. For his part, Wright recognizes the importance of landscape in both Silko's writing and his own: "Your descriptions of landscape in your fiction . . . . in the novel, and the stories, do so much to create the stories that you are telling there" (26, letter dated 10/8/78). Moreover, "I can see, looking through the work that I have done [during the past year] that our discussions of the relation between people and landscapes is very much at the heart of it" (32, letter dated 11/16/78).

Silko describes her experience when reading literature of mapping the narrative onto a landscape she knows: "I love Camus so much. I read and reread *The Plague* . . . . He perhaps needed to know the blue coast was there, was possible, in order to go so deeply into that windy chill winter of the Algerian plague city—somehow I understood that 'place' so well. In New Mexico there are a few days each winter that are dark, and a bitterly cold wind blows dust with bits of snow" (35-6, letter dated 1/23/79).

Struck by the beauty of Europe's old cities, Wright's letters became richly descriptive:

> The mist rose a little after we were settled at the hotel in the town square. And so I found Bruges, a revelation. Among the low houses, with the delicacy of their roofs and gables, there are an astonishing number of towers, some of churches, others of municipal buildings. And everywhere there are bells, from the deep-throated bell of the church of St. Salvator to the carillons of the great tower of the city hall. You must imagine what it would sound like, the one hundred and thirty-five small bells of the great carillon all ringing out together, the musicians inside providing intricate patterns like those of a fine organist improvising, and the notes filling the air of the entire town. (45, letter dated 3/14/79).

Visiting Sirmione, he glimpses the broad sweep of literary history and even invokes classical authors such as Catullus and Virgil—whom he remembers having first read as a child in the Midwest:

> It's interesting that you should have found *Moments of the Italian Summer* in Tucson. Much of that little book was written right here where I am sitting and writing you now. Yesterday or so I sent you

> a post card with a photograph by air of Sirmione. Beautiful Catullus, who used to come here and visit friends during the summer so many centuries ago, called it almost an island, and, in a curious old phrase, "the eye of all islands." I've always thought this must have been a healing place for him. His poems about the people of Rome are brilliant beyond measure (55, letter dated 5/28/79).

And of Virgil: "Referring obliquely to the beautiful works of art that perished when Romans destroyed ancient Carthage, Virgil wrote, *sunt lacrimae rerum*— 'These are the tears of things.' The phrase has stayed in my mind since I was a boy, likely a troubled boy, long ago, in Ohio" (73, letter dated 8/8/79).

Meanwhile, teaching at Vassar, Silko marveled at the linguistic diversity reflected in American English: "I literally have students who come, or whose families come, from everywhere: Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad, Russia, Poland, Israel, Egypt, Palestine (yes, indeed) and all over the United States. For a while, this was confusing, as it had to be. Now, I am discovering, again and again, wonderful intelligences expressed through an incredibly rich rhythm of language" (84-5, letter dated 9/18/79).

Yet she credits Wright's poetry with helping her to recognize how our language has been enriched by cultural difference as well as the grandeur of North America: "With your poems behind me I can speak confidently now about a beauty which is purely from the American heart. When I say 'American' language I mean it in the widest sense—with the expansiveness of spirit which this great land and many peoples allow" (81, letter dated 9/7/79).

On December 18, 1979, Wright wrote a pained letter to Silko disclosing that he had just been diagnosed with cancer. That letter proved to be his last. Yet it reveals the depth that their friendship had reached:

> In determining who to tell, I have considered that I want to share the worst of this news with a very few people whom I admire and value the most, and it is interesting to me that you stand very high in my mind among those—the people, I mean, who strike me as embodying in their own lives and work something—some value, some spirit—that I absolutely care about and believe in. (96-7)

The very day before Wright died, Silko wrote to him for the last time. She captures the brief trajectory of their friendship—from meeting

in Michigan to the final visit in New York City—in a letter Wright would not live to read:

> In one present time, you and I can count the times we've met and the minutes we've actually spent together. I think I was very shy in Michigan when we were introduced, and think I just told you how much I liked your reading . . . . And then in New York this February with you in the hospital, I sat and talked and could already feel that there is another present time where you and I have been together for a long time and here we continue together. I cannot explain this. Maybe it is the continuing or on-going of the telling, the telling in poetry and stories. (104-5, letter dated 3/24/80)

In the course of their correspondence, as we have seen, Silko and Wright were both deeply interested in exploring place: whether place as origin and source of identity, place in the sense of destination, or indeed place as the journey itself. By writing repeatedly while traveling far from home, their esteem for one another clearly grew—so, too, their appreciation for the many ways that place shaped their experience and emerged in their writing. Finally, as Silko's last letter attests, it is not only our poetry and stories—but our very lives as writers—that are written in the landscape.

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THE MIDWESTERNER AS OUT-OF-TOWNER

GUY SZUBERLA

"I'm one of the nice, quiet, Midwestern guys that no one expects to snap, but, when we do, watch it baby."
—Steve Martin as Henry Clark, *The Out-of-Towners*, 1999

The country bumpkin in the city, the innocent abroad, the ugly American, the traveling salesman—these and dozens like them are, at bottom, variations on a single character type, familiar and sometimes funny. From the moment Renaissance dramatists first toyed with the "affected traveler," this character type, and similar out-of-place characters, have held a recognizable role in comedy, high and low.[1] Ignorant of the customs of a strange country, supremely confident of his own manners and mores, the stranger wandering in a strange land is bound to make mistakes and misjudgments and then look foolish justifying them.

The Out-of-Towners, the fictional Midwesterners drawn into this discussion, are somewhat similar comic figures, deliberately distorted and precisely exaggerated. Midwestern humorists, from Ring Lardner and James Thurber to Garrison Keillor, use the Out-of-Towner to represent a certain self-conscious sense of Midwestern identity and, at the same time, to caricature a set of ideas about regional difference. Needless to say, they also use Out-of-Towners and their comic adventures for laughs. Like Steve Martin's character Henry Clark (quoted above), the Midwesterners they create are given to fearing and protesting what others, outside the Midwest, expect of them. Lardner's Tom Finch protests, much too loudly, that he will not be taken for one of the "small-time hicks" (*Big Town* 481). And Garrison Keillor's comic hero, Larry Wyler, on arriving in New York, "half-expected" that New Yorkers would see him as a freak (*Love Me* 69).[2] Their Out-of-Towners exist as naïve Midwesterners and as parodies of the comically conventional Midwesterner.

For the most part, this character type belongs to the twentieth century, and, as this might suggest, Out-of-Towners are usually transients, urban and uprooted. Behind them, or rather before them, came humor characters bound to the mythos of a rural Midwest. In the 1890s and early 1900s, James Whitcomb Riley, George Ade, John T. McCutcheon, Frank "Kin" Hubbard, and other Midwestern humorists had cultivated a character type dubbed the "rustic sage." As Norris Yates says in his study of American humor, the rustic sage was presented as a solid citizen short on "book l'arnin but long on common sense and mother wit" (Yates 20-22). He was "just folks." He represented an amalgam of proverbial wisdom, corny jokes, Midwestern democratic virtues, and what James Shortridge memorably termed "rural self-righteousness." That "self-righteous" attitude, according to Shortridge, grew out of the Midwest's response to "Eastern laughter" at its small-town values and its "traditional pastoral view of [itself]" (*The Middle West* 49).

For many of the Midwestern humorists writing in the 1920s and after, the old jokes that the rustic sage liked to tell had gone flat, and his folk wisdom and sayings had turned sour. Nostalgia for a mythic Midwest had itself become a soft target for their humor and stories. Ring Lardner, among others, cracked jokes at the expense of the village philosopher in "Haircut" (1925); Don Marquis, in the "Old Soak" tales told by Clem Hawley, parodied the rustic sage's commonsensical style and upended the local color conventions that represented the Midwest small-town mythos (*The Old Soak* 1921).
What Raymond Williams calls *"residual* and *emergent* forms of culture" play a part in framing their comic actions and contradictory sentiments.[3] If transplanted characters in Lardner, Ruth McKinney, and others ridicule the "burgs" back home in Michigan and Indiana and seem to embrace an emergent urban and cosmopolitan culture, they also, in exaggerated and comic confusion, hold on to the residual culture of small towns and a rural past. The newer Midwestern humorists, in short, created a regional consciousness that sometimes traded on self-mocking parodies, inflating imagined and assumed regional differences into comic conflicts.

McCutcheon, Hubbard, and others had deployed the plainspoken "hoss sense" of country folk to expose the corruption in big-city politics and to ridicule the ills and pretensions of modern living. Lardner's Tom and Ella Finch (*The Big Town*, 1921), the sisters Ruth and Eileen in McKenney's *My Sister Eileen* (1938), and Larry Wyler

in Keillor's *Love Me* (2003) can seem as resistant to changing morals and as puzzled by the ways of the world outside the Midwest as any of McCutcheon's small-town folks or Kin Hubbard's Brown County characters. But there's a barely concealed ambivalence in their humor. Lardner ridicules both the boredom of South Bend and the spectacle of New York's loose morality. Ruth McKenney's sisters, Ruth and Eileen, are drawn to the glamour of New York, after chafing against the provincial constraints of suburban Cleveland. Once settled in Greenwich Village, they wonder—in the musical version—"Why, oh why, oh why, oh—Why did I ever leave Ohio?" *(Wonderful Town* 107). These Out-of-Towners answer "Eastern laughter" at the Midwest with their own jokes about small-town ways and the "righteousness" inflating big-city social pretensions. They turn out to be laughably at odds with both the Midwest and the world outside it.

The rhetoric of their fictions—the comic setups and the recurring pieces of a master plot—sometimes reflects the discontents and satiric impulses associated with the so-called Revolt from the Village, which is not to say these humorists closely patterned their jokes and comic characters after anything that could be found in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.* The Out-of-Towners they put on display are, though, in flight from something back home in a Midwestern village or suburban town. If they cannot always name it precisely, they can joke about a "cooped up" feeling (Lardner 483). And they can, in the same punch lines, laugh at those outside the Midwest who laugh at such discontents.

"WHY, OH WHY, OH WHY, OH—WHY DID I EVER LEAVE OHIO?"

James Thurber's comic memoir, *My Life and Hard Times* (1933), might seem an odd and unpromising place to begin a discussion of the Midwestern comic opposition to a world outside. For nine of its nine full chapters, Thurber's main characters are firmly planted in Columbus, Ohio, and, except for a loony moment or two, express no desire to leave town for places outside Columbus or anywhere outside the Midwest. Somewhat surprisingly, "A Note at the End," the four paragraphs that close the book, takes the narrator to the Caribbean. Here, Thurber projects himself as a "wanderer," a highly fanciful version of his own prosaic and Midwestern identity.[4]

The "wanderer" that he imagines is bathed in literary lights and mock-heroic rhetoric. It's easy to see in him the emerging outlines of a Walter Mitty. In his musings, Thurber's comic persona conflates pieces of Conrad's *Lord Jim* with the story of Tondelayo in *White Cargo* (a forgotten 1930 film). For all that, he cannot change or disguise his identity as a Midwesterner. Consider this extract from the two middle paragraphs:

> The mistaken exits and entrances of my thirties have moved me several times to some thought of spending the rest of my days wandering aimlessly around the South Seas, like a character out of Conrad, silent and inscrutable. But the necessity of frequent visits to my oculist and dentist have prevented this. .... Furthermore, my horn-rimmed glasses and Ohio accent betray me, even when I sit on the terraces of little tropical cafes, wearing a pith helmet, staring straight ahead, and twitching a muscle in my jaw. I found this out when I tried wandering around the West Indies one summer. Instead of being followed by the whispers of men and the glances of women, I was followed by bead salesmen and native women with postcards. Nor did any dark girl, looking at all like Tondelayo in "White Cargo," come forward and offer to go to pieces with me. They tried to sell me baskets.
>
> Under these circumstances it is impossible to be inscrutable and a wanderer who isn't inscrutable might just as well be back at Broad and High Streets in Columbus sitting in the Baltimore Dairy Lunch. Nobody from Columbus has ever made a first rate wanderer in the Conradean tradition. (177)

Afloat on Conrad's South Seas and the even wider seas of his imagination, Thurber's persona still feels the tug and pull of Columbus, the Baltimore Dairy, Broad and High, and the local memories that define him and anchor him in place.

In short, Thurber's narrator, like others from Columbus, will never make a "first rate wanderer." What he becomes, when outside Ohio, is an Out-of-Towner: transient, disoriented, and all too comically out of place. Like other Midwesterners who fit into this character type, he can be spotted easily, marked as he is by a telltale appearance and his distinctive speech. His "Ohio accent" and "horn-rimmed glasses betray" his identity. It does not follow, though, that another change of clothing or a tightened mask of world-weariness will ever disguise his Midwestern origins. A pith helmet and gestures

borrowed from silent movie stars cannot cover up his essential character or erase the indelible markings of his Ohio beginnings. Because he is readily recognized, he becomes a mark, a prey for basket and bead sellers, and for the thief who, at the end of this adventure, steals "the pants to [his] dinner jacket" (178). Against the exotic and tropical background that he's imagined, his plain ordinary Midwestern character stands out.

Lardner's *The Big Town* (1921) takes up the same paradox of Midwestern normalcy. He sets Tom Finch and his wife Ella—a middle class couple from South Bend, Indiana—against the backdrop of New York and its high society. Tom and Ella Finch are there to "give New York a try." For more than a year, they trade their comfortable, ordinary, and boring life in the Midwest for New York's "gay White Way." In the end, wiser and worn down from their time as Out-of-Towners, they return home to the simple life in South Bend, Indiana (545). Lardner's prefatory note summed up the plot in a single sentence: "[T]he book deals with the adventures of a man and his wife and his sister-in-law who move to New York from a small middle western city" (471). Their story, in fact, turns out to be packed with incidents and reads at times like a guide to New York for small-town Midwesterners.

Because it's told in Tom's wisecracks and plain-speak dialect, his narration never matches Thurber's imaginary flights or literary allusiveness. In short, Tom never tries to disguise his Midwestern identity—he declares himself a Hoosier and, in a dozen ways, asserts and belabors regional differences. His deflationary humor and his nearly unbending skepticism of big-city ways make him sound, at times, like an old-fashioned rustic sage. Unlike the farmers and small town folks in Kin Hubbard's and McCutcheon's tales, though, the Finches are generally more motivated by conspicuous consumption than by traditional rural values, common sense, or nostalgia for the good old days. Ella is not to be believed when she says the trip's "no big splurge" (477).

Ella has grown tired "after being cooped up in a small town" (483). Having inherited a large fortune, she wants to go to New York "where they's Life and fun; where we can meet real live people"(477). She also hopes to find her sister Kate a suitable mate, one with money. From the start, Tom Finch resists the idea of going to New York. But his wife prevails, as she does in most all their contests of wills. Tom reluctantly gives in to her arguments and tears,

confiding that "she hadn't never been there, and all that she knew about it she'd learned in books and magazines" (478). Though he's closed-mouth about his own experiences in the Big Town, he does admit that he has spent "a few hours" there. He knows things about New York that his wife will never learn reading her pile of glossy magazines. She has fed on romantic stories of high society and expects that in New York a handsome, moneyed suitor will fall for her sister Kate (492).

Whatever Tom's experiences of New York have been, he makes it clear that he has been primed to expect snubs and slights. We first sense this on the train bound for the Big Town when his wife strikes up an acquaintance with Francis Griffin, a New York stockbroker:

> Griffin looked at me like I was a side dish he hadn't ordered. Well, I don't mind snubs except when I get them, so I ast him if he wasn't from Sioux City—you could tell he was from New York by the blue collar.
>
> "From Sioux City!" he says. "I should hope not!"
>
> "I beg your pardon," I said. "You look just like a photographer I used to know out there."
>
> "I'm a New Yorker," he said, "and I can't get home too soon." (480)

Griffin, as it turns out, is a chiseler and a philanderer. Tom cannot know this just yet, but he's on guard from the moment that his wife introduces them. Quick with an insult and attuned to slights and insults that others dish out, he knows just where to prick Griffin's inflated pride by pretending to mistake the fashionably dressed up Griffin for a photographer from Sioux City, Iowa. Griffin repays the insult in kind, insinuating that Tom's one of the "small-time hicks" that voted in prohibition (481). This is a charge that Tom happily refutes. Over a bottle of bourbon that he's carried from South Bend, the two share drinks in the train's washroom. Before the bottle's finished, they have built up enough good will "to forget national boundaries" (482).

During the months spent in New York, Tom's fear of being taken for a "small-time hick" and his susceptibility to slights and snubs never completely fade away. At the Baldwin Hotel, where he, his wife, and Kate first take up residence, he senses an insult in the "oil-

haired" desk clerk's slow and indifferent service: "a regular Big Town welcome" (484). When, several months later, they move to a summer hotel on Long Island, he says, in studied understatement, that after dinner "Ella and Sis . . . was usually in a hurry to romp out to the summer parlor and enjoy a few snubs" (524). Among the Long Island crowd, hob-nobbing with a Lady Perkins and her entourage, his wife first says that she is satisfied to be with "just the kind of people we want to know" (517). After a week or so at the Decker Hotel, she concludes angrily that some of these society people have all the while been treating them "like garbage" (523).

Though there are lapses in Tom's comically exaggerated opposition to New York and the ways of New Yorkers, almost without fail he measures prices, styles, and morality against a Midwestern standard. He's regularly outraged by what he finds in "the Big Town." When he discovers that Griffin's made a pass at his wife, he goes to his Wall Street office, knocks the offender down, and kicks him "for eight goals from the field." That beating's alluded to in a headline twice quoted in the book's opening chapter: "HOOSIER CLEANS UP IN WALL STREET" (490, 473). Tom's also outraged by the fortunes that his wife and Kate spend on clothes and by the scantiness of the evening gowns they've paid for so dearly:

> [T]he gals finally got what they called dressed, and I wished Niles, Michigan, or South Bend could of seen them. If boxers wore bathing skirts I'd of thought I was in the ring with a couple of bantams . . . .
>
> "Well," I says, "don't you know that you could of went to any cut-rate drug store and wrapped yourself up just as warm in thirty-two cents worth of adhesive tape. Listen! I said, what's the use of my paying a burglar for tickets to a show like Ups and Downs when I could set around here and look at you for nothing?" (487)

His wife's been telling him, with equal sharpness, that his old clothes make him look "like a South Bend embalmer" (485, 490). For nights on the town, he does reluctantly oblige her, putting on "a monkey suit" (519). In the nightclub scenes, the *Saturday Evening Post* illustrations show him in top hat and tails, dressed exactly like the New Yorkers around him.[5]

Tom may resist some of the Big Town's loose moral standards, but he finds that he can ease comfortably into drinking bouts at its speakeasies, nightclubs, and pool halls. Together with Kate, he and

Ella attend follies and vaudeville shows like *Ups and Downs.* Though he criticizes the performers' scanty costumes and grouses about the price of tickets, he goes to the shows and enjoys them all the same. In the end, Kate marries Jim Ralston, a Follies comic; Ella grows tired of New York and "the Gay White Way." If she had once felt "cooped up" in South Bend, and pined for "life and fun" in The Big Town, now South Bend suits her. Back home in Indiana, Tom and Ella vow "never to razz the old burg again" (545).

For a variety of reasons, including the hard times of the Depression years, Ruth McKenney tells a different story of the Midwesterner away from home. Ruth and Eileen, the two sisters in her semi-autobiographical *My Sister Eileen* (1938), leave the suburbs of Cleveland for New York. Ruth intends to become a writer; Eileen, with her gorgeous looks, aims to be an actress. Their story—built on some conventional fictions about newcomers in the big city and wonderfully deft comic flourishes—uncovers a New York and New Yorkers that the Finches had ignored in Ella's hunt for the "right kind" of people (Lardner 492). Ruth and Eileen, within days of arriving, meet avant-garde artists, WPA poets, and an assortment of other Greenwich Village characters. They are innocently open to this world and every bit as vulnerable to its con men and sharpers as the Finches.

The chapters of the book detailing their upbringing in Ohio underline and define that innocence. Though they would never express it in the same words, Ruth and Eileen had, like Ella, also felt "cooped up" in the Cleveland suburbs (changed to Columbus in the succeeding play, films, and musical adaptation). As Ruth puts it, "my sister and I had a lot of trouble in our youth trying to get cultured" (62). The running joke through the chapters recounting their preteen and early adolescent years is that the two longed for sophistication and urbanity without having the slightest idea of what they were longing for. At the Ohio Theater in downtown Cleveland, they stumble into *The Vortex,* a Noel Coward play. They puzzle over its Oedipal themes and veiled references to a character's homosexual past and "ruined life." Still, they find the play and Coward's rip-roaring acting deeply "satisfying" (72). They will be just as confused by the darkly obscure sexual misdeeds that they find in Michael Arlen's novel, *The Green Hat* (68, 74-5).

Like Thurber's *My Life and Hard Times*, the foundations for McKenney's book are set on firm, flat Ohio ground. Through most

of the first dozen chapters, she dramatizes the happily eccentric and innocent ways of the two sisters, their family, and the East Cleveland characters in their suburban neighborhood. And yet, every one of the four adaptations of *My Sister Eileen* begins at precisely the point where McKenney's narrative turns toward its conclusion: the moment when the sisters arrive in New York's Greenwich Village. The 1941 play titled *My Sister Eileen*, the two films (same title, 1942 and 1955), and the Leonard Bernstein musical, *Wonderful Town* (1953), all frame the same beginning scene. Ruth and Eileen, hot and tired after traveling to New York, bargain with Mr. Appopolous (originally Mr. Spitzer), a Greenwich Village landlord, avant-garde artist, third-rate poet, and first-class bully. They are conned into renting a moldy, noisy basement apartment and pay a high price for the doubtful privilege.

The adaptations, then, erase and elide the substance of the Ohio chapters. For the most part, references to the sisters' Ohio past are compressed into catch phrases or simplifying formulae. Betty Comden and Adolph Green's lyrics for the song "Ohio" in *Wonderful Town* run these off as a litany of rhymed complaints.[6] Ruth and Eileen, after some early disappointments in New York, wonder if they had "better go home" to Ohio. The two then sing and, in singing, remember "why" they left: "Ohio was stifling." They were plagued by "gossipy neighbors," family and friends who were "Babbity," "stuffy," and "provincial." In the 1955 film musical, the Ruth Sherwood character makes her first appearance wearing a small straw hat and a red-checked gingham blouse, cliché reminders of her innocence and her supposed rustic Ohio background. Ruth (played by Betty Garrett opposite Janet Leigh's Eileen) will, as the film unfolds, wear stylish business suits and fashionable evening clothes. But for the film's final minutes, when a return to Columbus seems an unwelcome certainty, she packs her bags and again puts on the gingham and the faux farmer hat. She's obviously preparing herself to return to the rural hinterlands.

The conventions of musical comedy permit Eileen and Ruth to make a quick change from figures bent down by despair into gracefully choreographed dancers, dancing arm in arm over the city streets and sidewalks. From comically clumsy Midwestern innocents, they are magically transformed into performers on the city's crowded stage. Bob Fosse's choreography for the film musical *My Sister Eileen* (1955) dramatizes their metamorphoses. One moment the two

sisters are battered and tossed against their dreary surroundings; the next, without any sense of a break, we watch them gliding over subway stairs, leading a conga line through apartments and back alleys. They waltz into crowds as if they knew every street and broken curb in the city.

"SOLIDLY MIDWESTERN"

The conventions that control the comedy in Neil Simon's screenplay for *The Out-of-Towners* (1983 and 1999) do not permit such graceful, fairy tale transformations. The promotional blurbs for the two films (printed on the DVD boxes) suggest that the Midwesterners, the Out-of-Towners of the two films, must stay locked in narrowly pre-scripted character types. The blurb for the 1983 version offers this summary of plot and character:

> Jack Lemmon and Sandy Dennis are perfectly matched as the hapless Kellermans of Twin Oaks, Ohio, in Neil Simon's tumultuous comedy hit .... George *(Lemmon)* accompanied by his wife Gwen *(Dennis)* [take a] dream trip to the big city [that] turns into a nightmare of diverted flights, forfeited reservations, missed trains, sinister strangers, paralyzing strikes, lost luggage . . . uproarious laughs ....

The 1999 version of *The Out-of-Towners* retains the same main story line, squeezing in a subplot about the failing sexual lives of the two main characters. The blurb teases the would-be viewer with this description:

> Farewell, Ohio. Hello, hilarity! Steve Martin and Goldie Hawn reunite for this exhilarating comedy based on the Neil Simon screenplay. They play Henry and Nancy Clark, a married couple whose passion cooled long ago. But now their last child has left the nest, and the solidly Midwestern Clarks have a chance to relocate to New York City. Anything can happen. And for the next 24 hours, everything does. Luggage is lost . . . A rude hotel manager ....

What does happen, even with the shuffling of episodes and the invention of additional humiliating incidents, makes for repetition of jokes and cartoon characterizations that ran through the first film. The two principal characters, like the Kellermans in the 1983 film, show themselves to be "solidly Midwestern," which is to say figures of fun, easily confused, easily fooled and fleeced.

That, anyway, seems to be what's expected of "solidly Midwestern" characters. At one point in the 1999 film, Henry Clark (Steve Martin) boils down those expectations to a few angry words: "I'm one of the nice quiet Midwestern guys that no one expects to snap, but, when we do, watch it baby." He says this near the end of *The Out-of-Towners*, having spent a harrowing night sleeping in Central Park and the early morning in jail. He stands in a New York ad agency, his marriage in shambles, his job prospects lost, and his self-respect crumbling away. The receptionist that he faces prattles on the phone, bent on dismissing him from her sight. What she expects of him, what the conventions of screen comedy require, is his unnatural forbearance, a politeness so forced it becomes funny. No wonder that Steve Martin delivers his lines through half-clenched teeth and a maniacal smile. He's held tightly in the grip of the situation and an equally constricting typology of character. He is and seems destined to remain "one of the nice quiet Midwestern guys." His angry outburst may contradict his words. But this comic reversal can be effectively comic only if we sense the emotional energy exerted in breaking through the confines of being "solidly Midwestern." In the end, following an even more binding plot convention, he wins the job and, with a giddy Goldie Hawn, celebrates becoming a New Yorker. His story moves down the wide narrative lanes marked off by the several versions of *My Sister Eileen*, the earlier Jack Lemmon production of *The Out-of-Towners*, and perhaps dozens of other like-minded comic tales.

"SPACIOUS SKIES"

If any Midwestern writer writes with a nagging consciousness of the caricatures and conventions defining the Midwest, it is Garrison Keillor in the novel, *Love Me* (2003). Though he never quotes Neil Simon's *The Out-of-Towners* and makes no overt reference to several versions of the sisters Ruth and Eileen, the presence of such characters and the reverberations of their Midwestern stories can be felt all the same. The comic hero of Keillor's novel, Larry Wyler, mimics their adventures and parodies their sentiments. Wyler is a writer from St. Paul, a lonely hearts columnist, English major, and graduate of the University of Minnesota. When he writes the blockbuster novel *Spacious Skies,* he collects an enormous advance for a sequel, moves to New York, and joins the staff of *The New Yorker.* He moves to New

York against the common sense advice of his wife Iris. In the novel's loose-jointed scheme of things, she stands for the Midwest, for plain-speaking, intensely egalitarian values, and the simple life. Wyler, who narrates his own story, thickens the pages with literary effects, parodying O.E. Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927) and frequently paying homage to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Like a retro Fitzgerald hero, he seems inexorably drawn to "glittering things"; he wants to be in a world opposed to what he calls the Midwest's "smugness" (68).[7]

Wyler's unhappiness with St. Paul and the Midwest is spelled out in dozens of ways, but he gives a powerful emotional turn when he's thinking about leaving his city and neighborhood for New York. Suitcase in hand, he surveys his part of St. Paul:

> Sturgis Avenue seemed junkier, meaner than ever, as if years of hard winters had knocked everything loose. Homes atilt, walks bowed, sidewalks cracked, trees bent, and depressing clutter and mish-mash—as if everyone were too busy managing their alcoholism to ever pick up a shovel or rake—Damn this is ugly, I thought. (48)

Several days later, having failed to persuade Iris to move with him, he leaves for New York. When he arrives in the city, he passes Central Park's Sheep Meadow where, he says, he sees "a thousand courtly loafers in the Monet sunshine." Invoking and quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald, "my countryman," he beholds "the great wall of hotels and apartment edifices [shining] along Central Park South" (68-9).[8] The implied contrast to St. Paul could not be drawn much more directly. His ecstasy and the poeticized diction expressing it may be overdone, but Wyler's feeling that he's left the smug dreariness of the Midwest behind him seems sincere enough.

In the next moment, his mood suddenly changes. As his taxi carries him to the Bel Noir, the million-dollar apartment he's purchased, he's jolted by a fugitive thought:

> It was 76 degrees in the park at 3:08 p.m. said the sign at Columbus Circle. I half-expected some New Yorker to yell, "Hey, You with the hair! You're from Minnesota!" as if I were Blimpy the Human Pin-Cushion or Koko the Dog-Faced Boy," but nobody did. (69)

The comic fears and the cold shudder come from nowhere, a lightning bolt out of the bright blue Monet skies. The source for the fear lies in Wyler's strained psyche. But the literary conventions that run from Thurber's exposed masquerade through Lardner's *The Big*

Town and McKenney's *My Sister Eileen* into Neil Simon's screenplay also lead to this passage. They frame Wyler's fearful expectations.

CONCLUSION

Comedy, it's often said, frees characters from the ordinary rules of reality and the routines of social constraint. A comic hero can, without the usual penalties or consequences, slap his boss, drive a car through a storefront, break into a silly song and dance, or dangle from a clock face hundreds of feet above the city streets. Such examples need not be multiplied to underline the general point. But one additional example, grounded in the Midwest, may be useful here. Dave Stohler, the young hero of Steve Tesich's film *Breaking Away* (1979), was born and raised in Bloomington, Indiana. For long stretches of time, though, he can convince himself—and a few coeds on the Indiana campus—that he's an Italian exchange student. His daydreams of "breaking away" from the Midwest create a ruse bordering on the ridiculous. His impulses and his trumped-up Italian identity lead him in the direction that Thurber had followed in plotting his course as a Conradian wanderer. Like Keillor's Larry Wyler, like so many other Midwestern would-be wanderers, he cannot erase his Middle American identity or finally leave his hometown.

By now, it should be obvious that such expressions of regional identity and difference all build on comic exaggeration, if not on pure burlesque and farce. Tom Finch's wisecracks, no less than Larry Wyler's borrowed poetry, give them expressive form. Midwesterners like McKenney's Eileen and Ruth stand out when they appear in strange new places, especially those that they long ago invented and imagined. Strange to say, even when their descriptions of the Midwest are read as a collection of self-conscious fictions, warmed-over jokes, and overblown parodies, they seem to display a perdurable set of truths about a sense of place. The pastoral Midwest—and the simple, unsophisticated characters supposedly attached to it—may be as imaginary as Thurber's idea of the South Seas or Neil Simon's construction of Twin Oaks, Ohio. Most every writer and jokesmith knows that Midwesterners are no more at odds with the complexities of the modern and urban world than their bicoastal counterparts. But old jokes never die. They don't fade away. They live to be repeated and retold in new ways, redone with the

same old nineteenth-century rustic characters, now distorted and disguised.

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NOTES

[1]The comic type of the "affected traveler" was already well established by the early seventeenth century. In "Sir Thomas Overbury's Characters" (1607), "An Affected Traveler" is described in these satiric terms: "his attire speaks French or Italian, and his gait cries, Behold me. He censures all things by countenances and shrugs . . . ; he would choke rather than confess beer good drink." For Overbury's complete text, see *Character Writings of the Seventeenth Century by Various* on the web at books.google.com.

Sir Politic, a supporting character in Ben Jonson's play *Volpone* (1607), also illustrates the type. According to John W. Creaser, Sir Politic—an English tourist and "affected traveler" in Venice—is "inordinately on his guard among the Venetians (IV. i. 33ff), and inordinately punctilious over social trivia (IV. i. 27ff)." He combines "a vain pretension to expertise" and an "unspoilt innocence." See Creaser's Introduction to the *Volpone* (London: Hodder, 1978), especially pp. 47 and 53.

[2]All citations to Ring Lardner, *The Big Town* refer to the text published in *Ring Lardner's Best Stories* (Garden City: Garden City Publishing, 1938). References to Keillor's *Love Me* (2003) will also be given parenthetically in the text.

[3] In defining "residual" culture, Williams says that "some experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social formation." His discussion of "Residual and Emergent Cultures" appears in the essay "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," collected in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: NLB, 1980): 40-41.

[4] Charles S. Holmes, in *The Clocks of Columbus* (NY: Atheneum, 1972), points out that it was E.B. White who first described Thurber "as both Conradian romantic wanderer and anxiety-ridden man." Thurber adapted the ready-made persona, "enlarged upon it, and used it . . . over the years as both a literary device and as a convenient mask for interviews . . . (Holmes 157). E.B. White's burlesque characterization was given in his "Introduction" to Thurber's *The Owl in the Attic* (NY: Grossett, 1931): xi-xvi.

[5]See the first two illustrations for the installment of *The Big Town* titled "Quick Returns." These originally appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 192 (27 March 1920): 3, 4. The second of these illustrations—showing Tom in top-hat and tails—was reprinted in the book, *The Big Town: How I and the Mrs. Go to New York to See Life and Get Katie a Husband* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1921). Its new caption reads: "Listen!" I said. "What did them two girdles cost?"

[6]The full text of the song "Ohio" can be found in the libretto for *Wonderful Town*. See Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *The New York Musicals of Comden and Green* (1997): 107-09.

[7]The phrase "glittering things" has been borrowed from F. Scott Fitzgerald's much-anthologized short story, "Winter Dreams." It appears in the first paragraph of section II. Fitzgerald tells the reader that the story's hero, Dexter Green, "wanted not association with glittering things and glittering people—he wanted the glittering things themselves." See *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (NY: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1989): 220-21.

[8]Here, Keillor quotes and restates descriptions of New York that he has taken from Fitzgerald's essay, "My Lost City." For the most pertinent sections, see *The Crack-Up*, edited by Edmund Wilson (NY: New Directions, 1956): 32-33.

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DRAMATIZING THE MIDWEST

DAVID RADAVICH

Among major regions of the United States, the Midwest is the least understood and has only recently received the kind of analysis and assessment other areas have long since enjoyed. "To some the Middle West is a place of idealism and democratic temperament, but to others it is bland, materialistic, and conservative" (Shortridge 1). John T. Flanagan, writing in 1961, called the Midwestern states "probably the most heterogeneous group in terms of population in the entire Union" (qtd. in Stryk vii). James R. Shortridge points out that in popular national perception, the Great Plains are often conflated with the Old Northwest states of the upper Mississippi River basin (85). The consensus among most scholars has settled on a Midwest comprised of twelve states, from west of the Allegheny Mountains in western Pennsylvania—Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri—to the eastern portions of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, to the west of which begin the Great Plains and wide-open spaces. The northern regional limit is Canada, while the southern border runs along the Ohio River and the southern edge of Missouri and Kansas.

It is important to delineate such borders because a number of America's best plays and playwrights have arisen from an intersection of regions. William Inge, one of the leading Midwestern dramatists, hovers in *Bus Stop* and *Picnic* near the Kansas border of the West. Marsha Norman, born and raised in Louisville on the Ohio River, foregrounds a border sensibility in *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother* that combines Midwestern and Southern features in a way that Beth Henley's plays, for instance, do not. Both George S. Kaufman and August Wilson arose out of Pittsburgh. Kaufman spent most of his later life in the New York orbit, but he continued to collaborate with Midwestern authors, among them Edna Ferber and Ring Lardner. Wilson has set a series of plays in Pittsburgh and lived and worked productively for years in Minneapolis-St. Paul while

achieving his remarkable run of successes at the Yale Repertory Theatre.

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut has argued that the Midwest is distinguished not only by the "nasal accent" of its native speakers but, more importantly, by the "tremendous bodies of pure water like our Great Lakes . . . incredible quantities of fresh water all around us, in lakes and streams and rivers and raindrops and snowdrifts, and no undrinkable water anywhere!" Vonnegut also celebrates the "millions and millions of acres of topsoil . . . as flat as pool tables and as rich as chocolate cake" ("To Be a Native Middle Westerner"). The Midwest is carved, indeed, by the vast northern tributaries of the Mississippi River, from western Pennsylvania all the way to the doorstep of the Great Plains, between whose boundaries prehistoric glaciers deposited unimaginably rich topsoil that even today serves as the nation's breadbasket.

Diane Quantic, focusing more on the Great Plains than on the states in the Great Lakes collar, has pointed out their shared pattern of extreme weather patterns and dramatic thunderstorms punctuating a seemingly uneventful landscape. This meteorological dialectic is a representation of a broader Midwestern psychological opposition between surface placidity and sudden eruption that appears frequently in drama from the region, most iconically perhaps in the plays of William Inge. While it may be true that "in Midwestern history, like Midwestern fiction, not much seems to happen," a dramatic shift in register between quotidian ritual and cataclysmic interruption has often disconcerted critics of theatrical writing from the Midwest (Cayton 141).

Historians have made particular progress in anatomizing the sociological contours of America's heartland. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf's *The Midwest and the Nation* sees "the triumph of bourgeois culture" in "the states carved out of the Old Northwest Territory . . . best exemplified in the democratic, egalitarian relationships of enterprising Midwesterners" (xvii-xviii). Pointing out the importance of rivers and railroads in the region's development, Cayton and Onuf argue that "the Midwest embodied . . . the truest and fullest expression of a liberal, capitalistic society. The apotheoses of middle-class values and the Midwest were one and inseparable" (84-85). As we shall see later, these regional dispositions make themselves manifest in the subjects and characters represented in Midwestern drama.

Shortridge has provided a helpful analysis of the enduring association of the Midwest with the national myth of pastoralism: "The region has come to stand as a symbol for this important aspect of American culture and thereby has derived a measure of prestige" (1). His research suggests that the notion of "the Middle West as a mature paradise filled with wholesome, progressive people was virtually unchallenged between 1898 and 1915" (36). But this analogy became increasingly fraught as cities in the Midwest began emerging as technological centers: "Detroit's urban-industrial success was not incorporated into this regional model, presumably because its urban imagery was so strong that it would have threatened pastoral themes" (Shortridge 10). The continuing evolution of the heartland has "produced a host of contradictions, distortions, and misunderstandings" (1).

Another helpful paradigm detailed by Shortridge is the life cycle analogy. Whereas the East is often perceived as mature, or even in decline, the West has commonly been regarded as dynamic and youthful. The Midwest, by contrast, is characterized as "simultaneously youthful and mature" (32). The nation's midsection is associated with the entire span of the human life cycle— "youth, maturity, old age" (Shortridge 31). Imbedded in this life cycle analogy is also the perception of the Midwest as a balanced and balancing, or mediating, region of the country, grounding the more extreme aspects of the two seacoasts.

For all these reasons—egalitarian social structures, pastoralism, and balanced cycle of life— "the Middle West came to symbolize the nation and to be seen as the most American part of America" (Shortridge 33). Historically, "the year 1920 marks a clear apogee for the Middle West," as the confident blend of pastoralism and technological progress signified by the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904 and other Midwestern celebrations ran headlong into challenging and disorienting realities (Shortridge 38). To a significant degree, the heartland became, in subsequent decades, the battleground between the national myth of pastoralism and the developing industrial technology that contradicted and undermined it.

If the Midwest does represent "the most American part of America," such status often comes at the cost of masking conflictive realities that do not fit into the nostalgic pastoral vision imposed from outside. Ethnically speaking, the heartland is far more racially diverse than the "whitebread" myth would suggest, incorporating

Native Americans, blacks, Asians, and a wide range of Europeans, along with increasing numbers of Latino immigrants. This intersection of cultures is not always easy or comfortable; as Quantic points out, "the myth of the melting pot brings a mixture of hope and denial" (93). The region has long since become significantly urbanized, yet "the welfare of the small farm and global corporate growth seem to be mutually incompatible" (Herr 141). The pastoral myth leaves no room to imagine the widespread bankruptcy of family farms, takeover by globally oriented agri-business, or disintegration of small towns with few economic prospects.

Despite certain resonances between Midwestern culture and national mythology, successes of the region have not always been understood by outsiders. James Hurt argues in *Writing Illinois: The Prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago* that Chicago "was by the end of the [nineteenth] century first among modern cities: a new phenomenon that also could not be read in traditional languages" (4). For Hurt, the supposed "nothingness" of the Midwest is simply "the new," the prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago all representing "versions of the American other" that outsiders were unprepared to encounter (3-4). Midwestern writers who became successful nationally, like William Dean Howells, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, and Rachel Crothers, have been interrogated for their deceptively plain style and moral tone, two major features of the Midwestern aesthetic that have not always translated well to a critical establishment based largely in the Northeast.

No currently existing critical theory seems ideally suited for analyzing Midwestern drama, though many approaches offer general guidance for understanding the broader culture of the region. Conventional dramatic theory, from Aristotle to Bertolt Brecht and beyond, is, of course, essential to interpreting and understanding the structure and performance of Midwestern plays. However, such theory does not take us far in delineating the Midwesterness of drama written about or in the central US as distinct from that originating elsewhere. Any detailed study of theatre from the heartland needs to consider standard generic features and structures in light of manifestations of regional geography and cultural disposition.

Leonard Lutwack's investigation of the "rhetoric of place" has direct relevance to drama. His classic study, *The Role of Place in Literature*, argues that "all places serve figurative ends . . . . " both "as attitudes about places that the writer picks up from his social and

intellectual milieu . . . and as materials for the forms he uses to render events, characters, and themes" (32, 12). Lutwack distinguishes between scene, setting, and landscape, analyzing such features as centrality, horizontality, and concepts of time, motion, objects, and activity enacted on or within particular spaces. By mapping out linkages between, for instance, the forest and sexuality or particular buildings and the body, we can better understand the "moral geography" of how humans adapt to and interact with their environments (32).

Another field of inquiry that offers great potential for future exploration is performance theory. This cultural approach expands beyond conventional analysis of playscripts and acting before an audience to a much broader consideration of identity formation and "patterned behavior" in society (Carlson 3). In 1973, Richard Schechner, in a seminal introduction in *The Drama Review,* advocated a broader study of "performance in everyday life," including ritual, sports, public behavior, patterns of communication, and other features of community life (Carlson 11). Performance theory, when combined with insights from the geography and culture of the region, can help articulate the ways the Midwest has been performed: how Midwesterners "perform" their native region for themselves and others; how the heartland has been "staged" for and received by a national and international audience.

Effective analysis of Midwestern drama requires an eclectic approach, borrowing methods and insights from cultural studies, performance theory, critical regionalism, and related disciplines. Common threads recur—among them a bias in the heartland toward practicality, restraint, understatement, fecundity, cyclical thinking, social equality, and performative masking, among other traits and dispositions—that seem more marked than in the drama of other regions. But the Midwest revealed in theatrical performance differs in substantive ways from the same region depicted in fiction, poetry, memoirs, travel writing, or popular media. The limits of the dramatic genre itself—for instance, the necessity to restrict location to a performable minimum—focus more attention on iconic place, dialect, and character. Nonetheless, the portraits of the Midwest that emerge from plays set in the region or written by its inhabitants and visitors are strikingly evocative and little understood as expressions of cultural identity.

In terms of iconic Midwestern themes, one could hardly improve on Illinoisan Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, with its Kansas farm and folksy lifestyle twisted by storms and taken, astonished, through animated fields to a city of glittering skyscrapers. This masterwork insightfully juxtaposes the region's most salient dramas: flamboyant weather, the tension between wanting to stay rooted in home and soil or to escape for adventure, the aliveness of nature which can aid or torment, the sharp, glistening verticality of cities rising insistently from flat or rolling landscapes. These are quintessential dramas of the Midwest, which remain fixed in our imaginations from an astonishingly small number of books and movies, among them *State Fair, Field of Dreams*, and *A Thousand Acres* (all, interestingly enough, set in the typological state of Iowa).

The classic 1939 film incarnation of Baum's novel with Judy Garland in the title role conveys several different perspectives on landscape. At the outset and again at the end, the settled Midwestern farmhouse, rendered in black and white with comfortable rhythms enacted among trees, fields, and livestock, operates as a framing locus of nurture and stability. Soon, however, the tornado twists apart Dorothy's comfortable waking-world assumptions with an alternately dreamlike and nightmarish vision of defamiliarization. This dialectic between extremes of placidity and violence seems peculiarly Midwestern. Lurking in the regional placidity is a potential for boredom or stultification to erupt into sudden violence having the power both to kill and to renew and transform.

The story begins with repression and a strong desire to escape, for which Dorothy will later be made to feel guilty. The neighbor spinster, Miss Myra Gulch, whose very name conveys her dry barrenness, calls down the law on the Gale family for Toto's disobedience in her garden. Dorothy calls Miss Gulch "a wicked old witch," foreshadowing her re-appearance as the Wicked Witch of the West later, and longs for "a place where there isn't any trouble." She gets her wish after running away from home to the gypsylike wagon of itinerant Professor Marvel, whose crystal ball evokes her guilt for wrongdoing. A sudden tornado, appearing as if to rebuke her selfishness, causes Dorothy to run home, but the door to storm cellar safety is locked and she falls against the bed, knocked unconscious by an unmoored window pane.

Initially, Dorothy's imaginary departure from her quotidian world is cinematic, as she watches scenes pass by her floating bed-

room window. Once landed in Oz, however, she experiences a radical shift from black-and-white cinematography to color, her landscape thereby transfigured in vibrant dimensions. In contrast to the no-nonsense devotion to chores like feeding the chickens and hogs that denominated farm life at the outset, here the society seems almost European in its refinement and glamour, though conspicuously reduced in size. Dorothy literally towers over the Munchkins, who are dressed largely in Elizabethan costumes and in one instance in lederhosen. She evens appears sturdy and reliable beside her protectress, Glinda, the Good Witch of the North. This imaginary world is strikingly ceremonial and festive, with widespread dancing and a horse-drawn carriage on which Dorothy and Toto are paraded as heroes for having vanquished the regionally symbolic Wicked Witch of the East.

Once Dorothy and her three companions begin their journey along the Yellow Brick Road, the landscape becomes very *alive*—with vitality, with magic, and even with torment. This development signifies a Midwestern understanding of landscape having its own power and dynamism, at least partly beyond the control of humans. Glittering Emerald City serves as an idealized version of many urban vistas in the heartland that rise abruptly out of the relatively undramatic woodlands or fields, with glass towers that glint in sparkling contrast to the exposed open windows and blowing curtains of the original farmhouse. The dialectic thus enacted between urban and rural is consistently reinforced, as is the paradigm of departure and return, home and away.

Within this series of settings, Dorothy operates as a quintessential Midwesterner. She is conspicuously wide-eyed and innocent, archetype of the surprised naïf we see in Howells's plays, or in the Vietnam trilogy of David Rabe. Dorothy is also iconically "nice" and good hearted in a stereotypically Midwestern way. On the other hand, she remains practical, straightforward, and no-nonsense in her actions and dealings with others. She also has no tolerance for sham and pretense. Her unveiling of the fraudulent wizard near the end represents an archetypal example of Midwestern insistence on truth-telling. Dorothy also stands up for the weak and against injustice, most noticeably in her encounter with the Wicked Witch of the West, when she rescues Toto and innocently destroys her opponent.

Dorothy's three companions all represent deficiencies: of heart, mind, and courage. Interestingly enough, the conglomeration of ani-

mal (lion), vegetable (scarecrow), and technological (tin man) brings together three major components of Midwestern life, inextricably woven together in economic and social dependency. On the other hand, we are made powerfully aware of their individual shortcomings and the desire each one has for completion. In classic Joseph Campbell style, the completeness is achieved through a common quest involving journey and return, augmented by trials, mentors, and spiritual apotheosis.

The Wizard of Oz, himself a native Midwesterner, signifies the emigrant who left the region and, like William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, or Johnny Carson, performed colorful tricks for outsiders. The wizard masks himself in performance designed to obscure his humble, plain-speaking origins. Dorothy's outing of him is satisfying theatrically in a paradigmatic way, but the wizard also reveals a pitiable side as someone who tried to play a game of glamorous appearances and, for all his masquerading, is nevertheless found out. This reinforces Midwestern disapprobation of dishonesty while displaying the lengths to which natives hide, or feel the need to hide, their regional identities.

Yet the wizard does enact a series of what could be called practical miracles, reinforced by maxims of sensible morality. He awards an honorary degree to the scarecrow, a medal for bravery to the lion, and a ticking heart to the tin man, each presentation delivered with down-to-earth truisms. Earlier, Dorothy told the scarecrow, "You could be another Lincoln, if you only had a brain," reinforcing the Midwestern democracy of opportunity available to anyone willing to work for it. The wizard also orchestrates a plan for Dorothy to return home—by means of a hot air balloon marked "State Fair, Omaha." Though he fails in his pompous, technology-based performances designed to impress, the wizard nonetheless does "complete the quest" for three of the four companions by means of his down-home wisdom.

The final moral lesson of Oz comes from Glinda, given to Dorothy just before her return. The Good Witch tells her that, "you always had the power to go back to Kansas." The magic incantation, "There's no place like home," seems almost frighteningly astute in its enunciation of Midwestern ideology regarding the home. As we shall later discover, this ideology undergirds most of mainstream drama from the heartland, rooted in domestic realism yet spinning periodically into astonishing worlds of longed-for desire or haunting tor-

ment. The movie provides at least two other final twists: once Dorothy has awakened in her familiar, black-and-white Kansas bed surrounded by family members, she cannot convince those gathered around to believe her astonishing narrative of "a truly alive place." Despite her sense of alienation, however, she intones a pledge of social conformity: "I'm not going to leave here ever, ever again."

Unlike many portraits of the Midwest by outsiders, particularly on television or in popular films, *The Wizard of Oz* does not gloss over pain and struggle, despite its upbeat surface and ending. It also revels in crops and landscape and innocence, refusing to apologize for its provinciality. Obviously, the film I have discussed cursorily does not do justice to Baum's more complex vision expressed over a range of interconnected works. But the classic motion picture has lodged itself in the American consciousness in ways that few other works have, *The Music Man* or *State Fair* among them. Its visual iconography is easily and clearly understood by viewers. Baum's masterpiece marked the ascendancy of Midwestern culture at the turn of the twentieth century. *The Wizard of Oz* also prepared the way for later appreciation of Midwestern habits of thinking and being, down to the encoded Germanness of the Munchkins.

For more than a century, the preferred dramatic mode in Midwestern plays has been domestic realism, which nonetheless almost invariably turns transcendent at key moments during the action. This characteristic does not mark all plays from the region; the most experimental works, like those of Adrienne Kennedy, for instance, escape into more abstract theatrical territory. And one may legitimately question whether Midwestern plays are inherently realistic, or only those that have reached the national public and won recognition and awards. Certainly, the national bias, like the regional one, has been toward "expanded realism" since the arrival of Twain and Howells. But the Midwestern preference for domestic realism encompasses defining features that set it apart from other varieties in the same mode, suggesting a deeper causality.

A sizable majority of Midwestern plays have been set in the home, certainly those that have become most famous and successful. This assertion even applies to works like David Mamet's *American Buffalo,* where the seedy pawn shop functions as the only real "home" the three characters know. The domestic pattern dominates the stage works of the originators of Midwestern drama, Twain and Howells, which are not set in the heartland but in the East. Yet the

full implications of characteristic Midwestern elements clustered around domestic realism can be most clearly seen beginning with *The Faith Healer* (1909) by William Vaughn Moody, the first significant drama actually set in the Midwest.

The home, of course, is a central setting in virtually all cultures and in every region of the country. But the Midwestern home differs in key respects from the Northeastern, Southern, or Western homes in the United States, at least as depicted on stage. The domicile in the nation's midsection is portrayed as deeply rooted in its environment, whether rural or urban, fundamentally egalitarian (and middle class), and without significant history or legacy. It typically offers grounding and solace for its occupants and can be relied upon for stability. Dramatic characters occupying the home exhibit fewer (if any) class barriers compared to other regions. In many plays the home serves as a kind of character in its own right, much like Eugene O'Neill's New England homes, but without the menacing, haunting, or imprisoning qualities.

The uniqueness of the Midwestern home can be seen most clearly by comparing it to those located elsewhere. It lacks the strong historical legacy of the Northeast, with echoes of Puritanism and witch hunts on the one hand or exclusive social hierarchy on the other. William Dean Howells's Boston plays focus precisely on this social exclusivity and its injustice to talented Midwesterners like himself. The Southern home, by contrast, is inescapably shadowed by the tragic legacy of slavery and the Civil War. Not even the contemporary domestic setting of Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1986) can escape the long arm of this racial dynamic. The Western home lies at an opposite extreme; as plays by William Saroyan, Sam Shepard, and others make clear, the Western domicile is transitory and fragile. The region's inhabitants understand the inherently transient nature of domesticity that began with tepees, wagons, and mining camps. One only needs to compare the Midwestern farmhouse of Shepard's *Buried Child* to his Western motel in *Fool for Love* or the trashed-up apartment in *True West* to see the stark difference.

In establishing the domestic setting, the Midwestern playwright typically provides an extended depiction of daily chores. Great emphasis is placed on rising, making breakfast, going to work, returning from work, preparing and eating supper, and going to bed. These activities occur in plays from other regions, of course, but the typical play from the heartland does not just feature eating or sleeping. Most often, characters are shown actually performing chores like washing dishes, ironing, or cooking as part of the dramatic action, so the audience gets a sense of their disposition toward work and social responsibilities. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* enacts these daily rhythms with particular care and loving detail. The various chores or tasks serve to delineate character and familial relationships.

These daily activities, moreover, are most often rendered emblematically, suggesting a rhythm of daily life that seems routine and comfortable, even comforting. So the cooking of dinner, or Berniece's evocative ironing of her daughter's hair in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, functions not merely as stage business but embodies a more fundamental pattern of living and relating to other people and the physical environment. This emphasis on simplicity has historical precedence: "the moral tone of Middle-western life acted as a deterrent to ostentation and arrogance" (Shortridge 30). Thornton Wilder blatantly calls attention to these unadorned rhythms in his revolutionary one acts and *Our Town* by denuding the stage and forcing audience attention on iconic quotidian gesture and language.[1]

In collaboration with these daily rhythms, the Midwestern understanding of time differs from that seen elsewhere. Residents of MidAmerica are strongly influenced by the regular cycle of seasons experienced in their midst, whether they are farmers or gardeners or not. Unlike the long months of cold in the high Rockies, with an organizational focus on skiing and other winter sports, or the beach attractions and long summers of golf of the coastal South, the progression of Midwestern time through planting, fertilizing, weeding, watering, harvesting, and wintering over has become deeply imbedded in both the mental and social landscapes of the region. Not surprisingly, enactment of time in Midwestern plays is strikingly cyclical without, at the same time, calling much attention to itself. Again, Wilder's *Our Town* and *The Long Christmas Dinner* offer perfect examples of cyclical time enacted according to its own structuring rhythms, within which the Midwestern home is firmly situated.

Within the foundational frame of domestic realism in Midwestern drama, another crucial ingredient makes itself known: at some point in nearly every Midwestern play of this persuasion, the language or the situation turns choric or transcendent. I use the term "choric" because not infrequently, as in the plays of Wilder or August Wilson, the dramatic action actually leads to a chorus of characters chanting

together. In many African American plays, the choric element originates in African chant or slave songs or spirituals. In other plays, like those of Moody, Howells, or Lanford, a ghost speaks, or a gramophone or tape recorder—always some other-worldly presence outside the quotidian that shifts the plane of the characters' experience. It is as if Midwestern drama begins in domestic realism, is grounded in it, but then challenges its assumptions by spinning off into unknown psychic territory far from the reliable everyday.

From its historic beginnings, the Midwest has distinguished itself as a more egalitarian area of the country, with a higher percentage of middle-class wage earners. Blacks escaping from the South and immigrants from many cultures, despite lingering racism, could own farms and businesses and work alongside whites in factories. Many unions were racially integrated fairly early. Women also enjoyed greater freedoms compared with other regions. For these and other sociological reasons too complicated to consider in detail, Midwestern drama reflects that emphasis on social justice and civil rights from Twain and Howells onward. The region produced a bumper crop of important female playwrights during the first three decades of the twentieth century, clustered around the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution guaranteeing equal suffrage for women. The range of African American dramatists from the Midwest is second to none.

A number of commentators have remarked on the laconic understatement characteristic of Midwestern discourse. Compared with the stereotypes of the fast-talking Easterner or the story-telling Southerner, the classic Midwesterner seems distinctly linguistically challenged, at least shy or cautiously spoken. Yet the Midwest as enacted on stage often forms a dialectic between rhetorical litotes and emotional outburst. Mark Twain's stage Missourians are flamboyant talkers, a complete contrast to Howells's subdued Midwestern gentlemen. Any number of characters in the plays of Crothers, Glaspell, Wilder, Inge, or Lanford Wilson speak in clipped sentences, only to erupt later in a barrage of words no doubt set loose by a general pattern of linguistic repression.

A similar dialectic operates on the level of social pressure toward conformity fighting against desires for individuality of expression or action. Strong communal forces can be witnessed in a number of Midwestern plays, particularly those of Glaspell, Wilder, and Inge. *Our Town* articulates both this collective ethos and the tragic toll such

norms can take on someone like Simon Stimson, who commits suicide. The same oppressive dynamic appears in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.* The pathetic downfall of characters who do not fit into the Midwestern small town—or the stalwart rebellion of a character like Miss Lulu Bett, who fights back—stands in sharp contrast to the Southern indulgence, even celebration, of the "madwoman on the porch." Whereas eccentricity is valued in the South as an assertion of individuality and colorful distinction, often the central drama in a Midwestern play features a misfit suffering alone and unsupported, seeking to escape the entrapments of social convention and language. William Inge, in his pathological shyness, seems like a perfect embodiment of this phenomenon, which led to his premature death, by his own hand, in 1973.

Practicality receives especially strong emphasis in Midwestern plays. Characters are often judged on their competence to complete tasks or solve problems. The many incarnations of William Dean Howells's "natural gentleman" from the Midwest include several engineers and/or inventors who literally solve mechanical problems like a stalled elevator between floors. On a more subtle level, the beleaguered husband in Rachel Crothers's *As Husbands Go* launches a subdued but highly effective, concrete counterattack to win back the affections of his wavering wife. Tennessee Williams's Jim O'Connor, featured in two of his St. Louis plays, as Gentleman Caller in *The Glass Menagerie* takes night classes, attends a conference on future development in Chicago, and plans soon to be married. From Williams's perspective, such characters know how to function effectively and productively in the world.

On the level of ideas, certain dialectics imbedded in dramatic conflict emerge with particular frequency in Midwestern plays. One of these involves the struggle between staying put and dealing with challenging realities versus escaping to what seems like greater opportunity or freedom elsewhere. This paradigm is deeply rooted in the early history of the region, when thousands of settlers decided either to remain in the heartland or to pull up stakes and move to California for cheaper land or for gold. In twentieth-century drama, the playwright most haunted by this dilemma was Tennessee Williams. More than a dozen of his plays are set in the Midwest, and most of them deal with precisely this conflict. The most important, certainly, is *The Glass Menagerie*, long since established as an American classic but rarely recognized as Midwestern.

Another related dialectic involves the clash between individual desire and community pressure. This fundamental conflict also operates in much fiction from the region; Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser spring immediately to mind. Again, the immigrant history of the Midwest, occurring considerably later than in the Northeast and much of the South, required the forging of small towns and cities through the fires of different ethnic perspectives and frequent sacrifice of individual liberties and prerogatives. William Inge and Lanford Wilson devote considerable attention to this foundational conflict, but it surfaces in many plays given strong pressures toward social conformity in the Midwest, where misfits are often driven underground or expelled. The flip side of this conflict, however, often results in a community that broadens itself to include new and divergent voices, as seen at the end of Moody's *The Faith Healer.*

Yet another conflict derives from the heartland's diehard contention with language. Midwestern characters are frequently depicted as struggling to articulate and come to terms with their desires, which, often as not, are repressed to fit in with social norms but then explode into full view. Obviously, this tendency is not just a matter of language but a much broader emotional articulation involving action and, frequently, violence. Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba* offers a particularly clear instance of this paradigm, with a nightmarish depiction of Doc's drunken attack on his wife. Inge's other works encode the same pattern of calm erupting into storm, while the departing characters in Tennessee Williams's St. Louis plays likewise struggle to name their discontent.

A particularly striking example of this "coming to language" occurs at the end of Adrienne Kennedy's powerful *Ohio State Murders.* The central character, who as a student at Ohio State University was confronted by appalling, arbitrary racial prejudice, also has to endure the brutal kidnapping and murder of her twin daughters. The police fail to investigate the murders, pressured to cover up what was feared would develop into a citywide scandal. At the end of this deliberately understated renarration of tragic events never explored or prosecuted, Suzanne responds to her critics simply, "And that is the main source of violent imagery in my work. Thank you" (173). Here we have, in the final line of the play, not only characteristically clipped, powerful Midwestern speech but also the bringing of language to frame a reality that, until then, had no name.

Compared to other regions of the country, the Midwest seems especially "karmic," to rely on a culturally slippery term. This trait results probably from the region's fundamental ties to food crops and cash livestock nourished in the nation's breadbasket. Unlike, say, tourism or tobacco farming, or tin and copper mining, the main products of the Midwest are literally eaten by the populace and harvested for livelihood and export. In the West, rapacious exploiters can and do sweep into town, excavate or chop down all the resources, and then abscond to new sites, leaving local residents to cope with the denuded results.

In the Midwest, by contrast, overuse of pesticides or fertilizers can literally lead to poisoned water and crops and ruin profits and lives. So a built-in system of agricultural retribution ricochets consequences rather quickly and dramatically back on the residents, whereas exploitation elsewhere—for instance, bad shore management on the Atlantic or Gulf Coast or overfarming of cotton that leaches the soil—has fewer direct consequences on the physical well being of the natives. This difference is one more of degree than of kind, but Midwesterners can suffer almost immediately and certainly viscerally from polluted crops and livestock.

This karmic element can be seen especially clearly in Arthur Miller's two Midwestern plays, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* and *All My Sons.* Particularly in the former work, a kind of Jewish, Old Testament retribution, inversion of the Job narrative, operates with devastating consequences. In the plays of August Wilson, the karmic influence almost always involves the legacy of slavery and racial violence directed against blacks, which shadows characters escaping to the North and haunts them even in the relatively freer and more benign Midwest. *The Piano Lesson* enacts this dynamic not only in the central conflict but also in the very piano which occupies the center of the stage, with its elaborate, artistic carvings of Southern black victims. The Midwest, as depicted on stage, is not a region where one can escape the consequences of one's actions.

The preceding elements dominate Midwestern plays, particularly those that have gone on to win national recognition and awards. However, more experimental, nonrealistic features have also marked Midwestern drama as a countertrend or alternative dynamic, dating back at least to William Dean Howells's verse satire, *Priscilla,* and other early plays. This avant-garde (for lack of a better term) strain in drama from the heartland runs through the feminist experimenta-

tions of Rachel Crothers and Susan Glaspell in the first third of the twentieth century. Also in the 1920s, the Little Theatre movement in Chicago and elsewhere revitalized dramatic performance in the region and explored new theatrical terrain.

Thornton Wilder's fusion of Pirandellian and Brechtian elements with the Midwestern tradition achieved national exposure in the 1930s in a way that revolutionized American theatre. In some of her late, posthumously produced plays, particularly *What Use Are Flowers?,* Lorraine Hansberry moved beyond conventional realism into an apocalyptic aesthetic. Perhaps the most radically experimental of all major playwrights from the Midwest, however, is Adrienne Kennedy, whose challenging, evocative, surreal plays have jolted audiences out of traditional assumptions into entirely new theatrical experiences of fractured time-space, layered symbolism, and fundamentally destabilized character interactions.

Such thoroughgoing experimentation also grows from Midwestern roots and the paradigms outlined above, in many cases through a fundamentally egalitarian regional mindset carried to logical, practical extremes. In the case of Howells, the assertion of Midwestern dignity and values against the Northeastern hegemony enacts an overturning of regional inferiority. Crothers and Glaspell assert female rights, while Wilder anatomizes oversimplified notions of "middle-American" habits and culture. Hansberry's experiments often decode race issues, while Kennedy's are yet more radical: not only an equation of rights between blacks and whites, males and females, upper and lower classes, but also an inseparable, interpenetrating connectedness of history and legacy. Experimental drama along these lines is grounded in bedrock Midwestern principles of equal rights and pragmatism enacted against various forms of oppression.

Obviously, not every play set in the Midwest exhibits the mainstream patterns characteristic of the region. In addition to experimental works that defy easy categorization, plays written by visitors to the heartland like Arthur Miller exhibit their own crossregional traits. Nonetheless, it is surprising how dominant this regional disposition has remained for more than a century. The plays of Twain and Howells, though not set in the authors' home region, nevertheless encode the recognizable features. A perfect example to illustrate the workings of these various regional elements can be found in William Vaughn Moody's *The Faith Healer*, the first stage masterpiece actually set in the Midwest. The defining elements evident in this play recur right through the century, with some accretions through African American drama, all the way to David Auburn's *Proof,* which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2001.

The Faith Healer is one of two great plays Moody wrote before his untimely death, both using geography to represent aspects of the American character. *The Great Divide* (1906) is set in both the mining area of Arizona and a sitting room in Massachusetts, enacting a dialogue between East and West. *The Faith Healer,* by contrast, is set in a "farm-house, near a small town in the Middle West" and never leaves its rooted place (3). The entrance door "opens upon the side yard, showing bushes, trees, and farm buildings" (3). Though the weather improves from persistent fog to resplendent sunshine on Easter morning at the end, it seems to enwrap the play and its inhabitants, offering security, solace, and renewal.

The language and emotional longing are kept in check, enacted through a pattern of daily chores, until the arrival of the Faith Healer, an "otherworldly" drifter from the West, who brings along an Indian boy he revived after three days, now called Lazarus. Biblical allusions permeate the play. Martha concerns herself with chores and running the household, while her sister Mary, incapacitated since the drowning of her brother five years before, and the emotionally wounded Rhoda respond immediately to the ministrations of the Faith Healer. Mary experiences compelling visions that deracinate her from everyday routine and annoy her down-to-earth husband, a devotee of Darwin and Spencer.

On one level, *The Faith Healer* enacts a contest between religion and science, belief and material evidence; on another, a clash between true religion and false. Rev. Culpepper, the local minister, rejects the Faith Healer's brand of ministry as fakery and the multitude who surround the farmhouse as misguided idolaters. Mr. Beeler, on the other hand, rejects the Faith Healer as a modern-day Pan, who seduces women and believers with "this hoodoo business" (57). Both can be seen as representatives of Midwestern common sense under challenge.

For his part, the Faith Healer experiences a crisis of faith while staying at the settled farmhouse, temporarily losing his vaunted healing powers. After decades of wandering in the West, he falls in love with the grounded Rhoda and sees "the vision of another life" (30) in her. Initially, he shrinks from what he fears will be a contest between

his divine calling and more earthly love. Eventually, he recognizes that Rhoda's pure (if wounded) heart is part of "the new-risen hope" he has found in the Midwest, his confidence and healing powers return, and he enables Mary to walk for good after five years in her chair (157).

In the context of paradigms presented earlier, *The Faith Healer* can be seen as enacting the "coming to language" pattern of Midwestern plays. Although much of the action entails a conflict between individual desires and community norms, and to a lesser extent the karmic remnants of earlier events, the central dynamic, arrived at particularly by the end, involves Mary, Rhoda, and the Faith Healer all coming into their own proper articulations of their deepest selves. Only part of this involves actual language as such, but the larger process of articulation through behavior and action leads not only to healing and fulfillment of hitherto unmet individual needs but also to productive resolution of conflict and integration into the community.

Mary, Rhoda, and the Faith Healer are thereby renewed in this place, in concert with the movement through Good Friday to Easter, and religion has been restored to some balance with science and pragmatism. *The Faith Healer* is a rich play with an overall momentum from sickness, allied with guilt and loss, to renewal and health. The process takes place in the settled Midwestern home, under biblical auspices undergirded by romance and realization of dreams. Common sense and pragmatism, embodied in domestic realism, do battle with idealistic or mystical longings, manifest in ritual, music, and religious prayer and chants. For his period, Moody's neglected masterpiece features surprisingly strong and complex female characters in balance with men.

The national success of *The Faith Healer* and later Midwestern plays, especially those in the broad mainstream of transcendental realism, derives in significant measure from the region's unprepossessing habits of thinking and expression. The heartland often seems appealing for its straightforwardness that is neither exclusive nor condescending. Hierarchies are almost invariably disdained in Midwestern writing, though communal pressures like those experienced by the invalid Mary can be debilitating. With less focus on ancestry and tradition, works from the region like *The Glass Menagerie* or *Come Back, Little Sheba* can be more accessible than

those from elsewhere. Their emphasis on direct speech and everyday rhythms speaks to the American mainstream with immediacy.

On a deeper level, the rootedness of the Midwest feeds on American nostalgia for a simpler life located somewhere in the mythic past. The myth includes comfortable daily ritual, reliable and meaningful hard work, and connectedness to the environment, whether rural or urban. In this construct, mirrored in classics like *Our Town,* neighborliness is crucial to survival, and both people and life seem to "matter." This is a sentimental notion, but the myth is significantly true, and so deep is the longing in the American psyche for this imaginary heartland that Midwestern drama has continued to resonate well.

Stylistically, the common sense turn of Midwestern thinking and expression is embodied in domestic realism, mixed or in tension with fantasy, surrealism, or abstraction. This combination transfers easily to television and film, bridging the gap between American pragmatic materialism and a longing for spiritual or otherworldly experience. Midwestern plays seem tailor-made for the cinema in a way that those of Eugene O'Neill, for instance, do not. William Inge's four major plays moved seamlessly from Broadway to Hollywood and became great hits in the 1950s, pulling the two coasts closer together. In the subsequent era of civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation, Midwestern plays gave voice to those concerns in a down-to-earth way that effectively integrated those ideals into a realistic context that permitted wider acceptance and dissemination.

The element of communal pressure restraining the individual in the Midwest may not resonate as well nationally in an era of rampant individualism. But for its other signature qualities, Midwestern drama remains central in twentieth-century American theatre, embodying many of the iconic preoccupations and conflicts in our national life. The very invisibility of Midwestern drama—the way playwrights like Howells, Glaspell, Wilder, Rabe, and Mamet move to New York, California, or beyond without notice or trespass—has been a hidden strength, permeating and reflecting the culture to itself in a way that is neither surprising nor disconcerting. Midwestern theatre is recognizable and comfortable, so deeply resonant with the national consciousness as to be accepted as simply "American."

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NOTE

[1]For a fuller discussion of Thornton Wilder's strong connections to the Midwest, see my essay, "Wilder's Dramatic Landscape: Alienation Effect Meets the Midwest," *American Drama* 15:1 (2006): 43-61.

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MIDWESTERN HISTORY AND MEMORY IN ROBINSON'S *GILEAD*[1]

BETH WIDMAIER CAPO

"History could make a stone weep," Marilynne Robinson writes in her 2004 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Gilead* (190). The history in her novel is specifically a Midwestern history recreated through the personal memories of her narrator, John Ames. Robinson's interest in and knowledge of history are evident in interviews and in her 1998 essay collection, *The Death of Adam. Gilead* is written in this same vein and exposes many thematic and stylistic similarities with her nonfiction: Both reveal knowledge of American political and religious history in a reflective and rhetorical tone. In the Introduction to *The Death of Adam*, Robinson states, "I propose that we look at the past again, because it matters . . . . By definition it is all the evidence we have about ourselves, to the extent that it is recoverable and interpretable, so surely its complexities should be scrupulously preserved" (4). In *Gilead,* the past matters to the narrator, John Ames, as he attempts to leave a lasting record to his young son; the past also matters to readers, who enter into an intimate recollection of national history.

Is *Gilead* a historical novel? Is it, in fact, even a novel? Reviewer Mona Simpson calls this designation into question when she writes, "One hesitates to define *Gilead* exactly as a novel. It is a beautiful book of ideas" (138). Perhaps Simpson's hesitation stems from the novel's lack of action-driven plot, its reliance on the reflections and musings of one old man that create a sense of eavesdropping on a personal conversation. Robinson herself questions strict boundaries that seek to fit narrative into the binaries of fiction and nonfiction: "Anyone who reads and writes history or economics or science must sometimes wonder what fiction is, where its boundaries are, if they exist at all. The question implies certain distinctions, as between fiction and fact, or, more cautiously, between fiction and nonfiction. I

would suggest that, while such distinctions are real, they are also profoundly relative, conditional, and circumstantial" *(The Death of Adam* 76). This transgressing of boundaries is evident in *Gilead,* an epistolary account whose narrative voice, that of the Reverend John Ames, weaves together personal memory with family, local, and national history.

From its opening line, *Gilead* establishes a tone of intimacy and tenderness. "I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old" (1). This opening frames the narrative situation: John Ames is seventy-six years old and suffers from a heart condition; this extended letter to his young, not-quite-seven-year-old son is his legacy, full of gentle advice, family history, and a strong sense of love. It is this narrative voice, that of a third-generation preacher and an elderly father, that bridges personal, family, local, and national history. Ames drifts from the past to the present, from ruminations on sermons to observations of the family cat, but throughout it all is the tone of intimate conversation. Unable to have serious, extended conversations with his young son, he seeks to leave his words in written form as evidence of his love and of his son's heritage. He tells his son: "For me writing has always felt like praying . . . You feel that you are with someone . . . And there's an intimacy in it. That's the truth" (19). The character Ames is here echoing Robinson's own statement about art, which Robinson says is "an utterance made in good faith by one human being to another" *(The Death of Adam* 4). Writing of any kind becomes an act of art, as Ames tells his son: "A good sermon is one side of a passionate conversation" (45). The narrative's consistent tone places the reader in the son's place, giving us insight into Ames's character while creating the sense that we are at his knee, alternately receiving advice, hearing a sermon, and learning a history lesson.

Structurally, the novel drifts gently, conveying the sensation of Ames's stream of consciousness as his mind wanders. Memories of his sermons lead to recollections of the historical context, such as Spanish Influenza during the Great War: "It was like a war, it really was. One funeral after another, right here in Iowa. We lost so many of the young people. And we got off pretty lightly. People came to church wearing masks, if they came at all" (41). A national epidemic is personalized, made local to the experience of a small Iowa town.

Memories of historical significance are interspersed with childhood memories: of pranks with his best friend, of his first wife Louisa as a girl, and of his father and grandfather. Throughout, Robinson maintains a high degree of historical accuracy. For instance, the narrator remembers going as a child to watch Bud Fowler, the first African American in professional baseball, who played one season for Keokuk, Iowa (46). All history is narrative, but historical fiction filters events through personal experiences, as when John travels with his father to Kansas during the drought of 1892 to search for his grandfather's grave. Thus, history is provided as the lived experience of the common people, complete with memories of traveling on foot, the boredom, blisters, dust and hunger (11-14, 104). In this, Robinson's novel utilizes a more recent trend in historiography, "bottom up" history that depends on personal narrative, blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction.

Many historical events are touched on in the novel, but the town of Gilead's role in abolition and the Civil War recur and are central to the history of John Ames's family and to the town itself. This focus, and Robinson's choice to set the present moment in 1956, create an underlying theme of American racial history. The narrator has lived in Gilead for most of his life, as he tells his son early in the novel: "At this writing I have lived seventy-six years, seventy-four of them here in Gilead, Iowa, excepting study at the college and at seminary" (9). Gilead is not a real place name in Iowa, but the town is modeled after Tabor, Iowa. Robinson's choice of "Gilead" as her setting's name references the ancient city in Palestine depicted in the Old Testament as a place of refuge, witnessing, and bloodshed ("Iowa"). All three meanings are relevant to Robinson's fictional Gilead.

Is place important to Robinson's novel? John Ames understands the ambivalence toward small Midwestern towns. His brother Edward told him when he was a boy: "This is a backwater—you must be aware of that already. Leaving here is like waking from a trance" (26). Ames reflects on Edward's loathing of Gilead, deciding that "[h]e thought he would do me a favor, taking a bit of the Middle West out of me . . . But here I am, having lived to the end the life he warned me against, and pretty well content with it, too, all in all" (24). His parents, too, suggested he leave Gilead, yet Ames loves the place for its history and beauty. He states with wonder, "I love the prairie! . . . Here on the prairie there is nothing to distract attention from the evening and the morning, nothing on the horizon to abbreviate or to

delay . . . to me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded" (246). But beyond the physical nature of place, it is Ames's appreciation for its history that holds him there. Consistent with the notion of a people's history, Gilead has been forgotten by the historians who focus on leaders and battles, but Ames tells his son: "There have been heroes here, and saints and martyrs, and I want you to know that. Because that is the truth, even if no one remembers it" (173). In his decision to include this admonition in his written history, Ames ensures that someone will remember.

Midwestern towns like Gilead— "forgotten little abolitionist settlements," as John Ames calls them (58)—played a crucial role in our national history. These towns became especially important after the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened territories to slavery if voters approved: proslavery "Jayhawks" and antislavery "Free Soilers" poured into Kansas through the Iowa border towns, planning to influence the vote (Etcheson). Settlements along Iowa's border such as Gilead were home to Underground Railroad stations. John Ames recounts for his son a story he had heard of a town so enthusiastic to help hide runaway slaves that they built a tunnel so large it collapsed and left a depression in the middle of town (58-63). Tabor, the town on which Gilead is based, was the starting point of an overland route into Kansas territory and was where antislavery emigrants would gather and arm before crossing the border. The infamous John Brown passed through Iowa on his way to Kansas many times between 1856 and 1859 and came to Tabor in 1857 to buy guns (Byers). According to one account, written in 1888, "He was so often and so closely connected with the state that people almost forgot that he was not an Iowa man" (Byers 1). Jim Lane, a "Mexican War hero and former Congressman from Indiana," also led his militia "army" into Kansas from Tabor (Bristow). Both John Brown and Jim Lane are mentioned in Gilead, tying the town's history, and John Ames's grandfather's work, to abolition.

The narrator's grandfather, also named John Ames, had moved from Maine to Kansas "just to help Free Soilers establish the right to vote" (75). Although too old to join the regular Union Army, he volunteered as a chaplain and lost his eye in the battle of Wilson's Creek, the "first major Civil War engagement west of the Mississippi River" (National), "on the day of the death of General Lyon" (Robinson 31). The narrator's grandfather is characterized as a fervent abolitionist, representative of what historian John Stauffer has called a Radical

Political Abolitionist. The narrator recalls his impression of his grandfather: he "seemed to me stricken and afflicted, and indeed he was, like a man everlastingly struck by lightning" (49). Like John Brown, Grandpa saw himself as a prophet "preparing for a new and glorious age—a new America that would be free from sin and oppression . . . . In their quest for a perfect society, they accepted righteous violence" (Stauffer 2). John Brown is perhaps best known for his failed raid on Harper's Ferry in Virginia in 1859, after which he was hung, but prior to that he was one of many who led the violence between Jayhawkers and Free Soilers after 1854 that earned the territory the nickname of "Bleeding Kansas."

The narrator recounts that "[i]n course of time I learned that my grandfather was involved pretty deeply in the violence in Kansas before the war" (85). He used his church once to hide John Brown (105-110) and may have killed a man. The blood on the church floorboards from the wounded John Brown is a fitting image, as his grandfather used his pulpit to preach a radical message of righteous violence. Indeed, we are told, "He did preach those young men into the [Civil] war" (88). His grandfather's role in history created a rift with his own son, the narrator's father, who became a pacifist. Thus Robinson accurately reflects a divide that is still relevant over the role of clergy in a time of war. By embedding a renowned historical figure like John Brown into her narrator's personal recounting, Robinson asks readers to reconsider historical violence and John Brown himself. While Brown himself is a marginal figure to the novel, the narrator's grandfather is a figure whose righteous calls to violence echo Brown's. In this revisionist history, *Gilead* acts much like works by novelists Russell Banks and Bruce Olds, and indeed like some historians, which seek to complicate our perhaps too comfortable and simplistic national mythology (O'Rourke). Robinson also indicates that this history is important to the present by passing it on to a son who would be Robinson's own age.

What happens to those places where historical events occurred? If a significant battle takes place, a monument or national park might be erected. For instance, the Battle of Wilson's Creek, where the narrator's grandfather lost his eye, has been commemorated as a National Battlefield site. But this does not happen in the little towns that served as fueling points for those battles. Do we only remember history that has been written down in official textbooks or consecrated with memorials? Grandpa's words during a Fourth of July

speech roughly thirty years after the Civil War are largely ignored by the crowd, but his words point to a forgotten past: "The President, General Grant, once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism. But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes" (176). The passionate belief that fueled historical events has been lost amidst complacency. Over sixty years after his radical grandfather's speech, the narrator ruminates:

> A stranger might ask why there is a town here at all. Our own children might ask. And who could answer them? It was just a dogged little outpost in the sand hills, within striking distance of Kansas. That's really all it was meant to be. It was a place John Brown and Jim Lane could fall back on when they needed to heal and rest. There must have been a hundred little towns like it, set up in the heat of an old urgency that is all forgotten now, and their littleness and their shabbiness, which was the measure of their courage and passion that went into the making of them, now just look awkward and provincial and ridiculous, even to the people who have lived here long enough to know better. (234)

Many of these small Midwestern towns are today returning to this history, touting it on Chamber of Commerce websites as a way to draw tourists and bring needed money to dwindling coffers. Grandpa would no doubt disapprove of a quaint historical façade unless it was supported by continued urgent activism.

Gilead makes use of more recent history to reveal the unacknowledged legacy of race relations in the Midwest. While Gilead had played a role in abolition, the "Bleeding Kansas" debate, and the Civil War, the one Negro church in town was burned by arsonists "some years ago, and what was left of the congregation moved to Chicago" (36). The novel is set in 1956, two years after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision that ended school segregation, and months before the Montgomery Bus Boycott that kicked off the modern Civil Rights Movement. This temporal setting is deliberate. In an interview with Carin Besser, Robinson says: "In 1956, the country was beginning to learn again, as if for the first time, what the abolitionists could have taught them. This alarming lapse of collective memory has seemed to me to be worth pondering—the fact that such a great, hard-won advance of justice could have been lost so completely that almost no one knew it had ever been made." Robinson points to the way history becomes fragmented in our national memory, allowing us to remember a glorious past that supports a patriotic nationalism while selectively forgetting the political activism, the sacrifice for "justice" and equality, that might trouble our current comfort. The complexity of history as a shared memory whose meaning can change is explored in the narrator's ruminations: "I have thought about that very often—how the times change, and the same words that carry a good many people into the howling wilderness in one generation are irksome or meaningless in the next" (176). Robinson implies that it is not historical events and heroes themselves we need to remember, but the passionate principles that motivated them. In a separate interview Robinson remarked that the novel began with an interest "in the problem of how it is that people have in the past done the right thing" (O'Rourke). John Ames himself has not followed his grandfather's example but has lived more like his father, attempting to do the "right thing" for his community and family by acting in a pastoral capacity. The novel ends with Jack Boughton, the narrator's godson, realizing that he cannot bring his "colored wife" and mixed-race son to live in Gilead, despite its history of fighting slavery (Robinson 228). The question of the "right thing" to do is not answered beyond the message implicit in the entire narrative: reflect, communicate, remember, and believe.

Readers and critics alike have hailed *Gilead* as a quiet novel of "big ideas," one that "appealingly dramatizes the act of puzzling over charged questions" (Boler, O'Rourke). The text presents a complex, layered narrative, a history of loss and love that is at once personal and national. Its popularity with Book Clubs and readers ensures that the narrative voice of *Gilead* will become another strand shaping our popular understanding of American history. While reading this novel might not improve failing test scores in our nation's schools and will not provide a comprehensive account of the history of race in America, it can quietly question the boundaries of "history" and "memory," "past" and "present," in our personal lives. In *Gilead,* memory, like official history, can both "sanctify" (96) and "make a thing seem to have been much more than it was" (66). The history in this novel contains a translucent quality as filtered through one man's voice. "A moment is such a slight thing, I mean, that its abiding is a most gracious reprieve," Ames writes to his son (162). A sense of timeless wonder that transcends place and time inhabits Gilead, as exemplified in one beautiful passage: "This morning a splendid dawn passed over our house on its way to Kansas. This morning Kansas

rolled out of its sleep into a sunlight grandly announced, proclaimed throughout heaven—one more of the very finite number of days that this old prairie has been called Kansas, or Iowa. But it has all been one day, that first day" (209-210). All of history is one day, this day, as it circulates in our memories.

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NOTE

[1]A version of this article was presented at the American Literature Association conference, May 28, 2006.

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REREADING HAMLIN GARLAND'S *THE BOOK OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN*

MATTHEW LOW

This trip to Indian Territory turned out to be a very important event in my life . . . It gave me an enormous amount of valuable material and confirmed me in my conviction that the Indian needed an interpreter...
—Hamlin Garland, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*

Though Hamlin Garland is mostly known as a writer interested in chronicling the hardships, disappointments, and tragedies faced by those who first attempted to settle and farm in the American Midwest, the scope of his fiction was, in fact, much broader. At the same time, little attention has been given to authors writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who took as their subject matter the increasingly unjust treatment of indigenous Americans, who were being pushed further west as the century progressed. Indeed, as Lucy Maddox states in her work *Removals:* "[I]n our reading of nineteenth-century literature, we have generally assumed that only a handful of writers were actively concerned with the politics or the ideology of Indian-white relationships, and that the only major one among them was James Fenimore Cooper; the rest were minor frontier writers, western local colorists, or negligible sentimentalists" (6). Maddox goes on to claim that Melville, Hawthorne, and Thoreau were just some of the writers equally concerned with the themes that made Cooper so famous, including the relationship between Euro-Americans and the natives they displaced. Building somewhat on her work, I would like to resist further such limited readings by examining an understudied work of Garland's that departs significantly from his usual subject matter and looks instead to the "politics" and "ideologies" of the "Indian-white relationships" noted by Maddox.

Specifically, I would like revisit Garland's *The Book of the American Indian*, comprising fifteen short stories and one novella, a work published in 1923 but largely researched and composed from 1895 to 1905, during which time Garland visited numerous reservations in the Midwest, Plains, and West, conducting interviews and gathering information precisely for the purpose of writing and publishing material on this topic. The years that Garland visited these reservations were vastly important for the history of indigenous people living in America. Though Maddox begins her work in 1830, with the signing of the Removal Act by Congress and the establishment of the Indian Territory west of the Mississippi, she stops in the 1850s when, as she notes, "the attention of the general public shifted from the problem of the Indians to the problems of slavery and sectionalism" (7). This assertion is problematic, however, because regardless of the fact that the "attention of the general public" may have shifted, American Indians nonetheless continued to receive unfair treatment. The years of the late nineteenth century, just before Garland began his research, were particularly significant, as the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887 and the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 were two hugely significant events to occur in postbellum America.

Furthermore, indigenous scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. has noted in *God Is Red* that "[f]rom the 1890s until the 1960s Indians were truly the 'Vanishing Americans' and most people believed that the tribes had largely been exterminated" (1), giving further proof that America's interest had shifted elsewhere. Thus, the mere fact that Garland was writing about these very issues at this time warrants closer scrutiny of *The Book of the American Indian*. Some scholarship on Garland's American Indian writing does exist, but it was mainly produced in the 1960s and 1970s by such critics as Lonnie E. Underhill, Daniel F. Littlefield, and Roy W. Meyer, and while it helpfully contextualizes Garland historically, the typical conclusion drawn by scholars in this group depicts Garland as a "sympathetic" writer who was a "friend to the Indians." However, the stories contained in *The Book of the American Indian* warrant a greater, an updated, and a more intricate reading of the issues involved in Garland's research, composition, and publication of fictionalized accounts of indigenous Americans, many of which are told in the first person. Reading through the lens of indigenous literary and critical theory, such as the work done by Deloria and his successors in this

field, I contend, allows for a reading that recognizes such complexities. Indeed, recent work by Deloria, Gerald Vizenor, Paula Gunn Allen, and Robert Allen Warrior—to name a few—has opened up a new way of approaching nineteenth and twentieth-century texts by or about American Indians. Turning contemporary indigenous scholarship back on material written by Euro-Americans during these years of removal and hostility can—much like recent postcolonial readings of Conrad, Forster, and Orwell—produce alternate readings of canonical texts and new readings of understudied texts.

Because *God Is Red* serves as an early touchstone of indigenous studies, it is possible to document something of an "indigenous agenda" coursing through its pages, many points of which have been picked up by later scholars and theorists. More than anything, Deloria's work is about reclaiming and restoring indigenous American cultural traditions. As the title of his work implies, for Deloria this starts with religion. Another major theme established by Deloria is the importance of physical places and landscapes to American Indian religious and cultural experience. Along with physical space, Deloria is also concerned with preserving abstract, intellectual spaces unique to indigenous society. Finally, Deloria also spends a large amount of time in *God Is Red*—but even more so in his work *Custer Died for Your Sins*—on the topic of self-governance and political sovereignty. These themes—concerning religion, nature, culture, and governance—not only form the bulk of indigenous literary and critical work of recent years, but also were of great concern in Garland's time. The problem was, as Deloria points out, they were largely ignored by mainstream American culture.

How these indigenous themes also manifest themselves in *The Book of the American Indian* is worth attention because of the historical lens it provides, the contribution it makes to indigenous studies, and the impact it has on Garland's status in the American canon. For example, a story like "Rising Wolf—Ghost Dancer" gives the close reader an accurate depiction not only of what the Ghost Dance was, but also some of the political motivations that lie behind it. The story follows Rising Wolf as he first becomes a powerful medicine man—telling the narrator that he "could do many things white people never see" (53)—and then, after he is driven off his land by white ranchers, puts his faith in a "wonderful man" who "is the friend of all red men," but also "is white, but not like other white men. He has been nailed to a tree by the whites" (55). The conflation of this new

"messiah" for the Indians with themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition is an idea Deloria revisits frequently in *God Is Red.* Namely, the shifting of homelands and sacred sites—mixed with a continual barrage of Christian theology by American missionaries—often resulted in a loss of traditional practices and the adoption of confused hybrid religions that sold a quick remedy and forsook ancient customs. Deloria touches on this development when he notes that "[t]he hazard that appears within the spatial conceptions of religion is the effect that missionary activity has on its integrity when it tries to leave its homeland" (69). In other words, native religions rooted in physical places are susceptible to corruption when forced to develop new traditions in foreign lands. Thus Rising Wolf, desperate for a way to help his people by driving out the white settlers and bringing back elements of traditional culture—such as the buffalo—not only learns the Ghost Dance, but teaches it to others in a last-ditch attempt to reclaim the life and land of his people. His efforts are in vain, however. The dance is performed for four days under the watchful eye of the white agent and his troops—as prescribed by the Messiah—but it fails to drive them off their land. After the agent tells Rising Wolf that "[y]our Great Spirit can do nothing. Your Messiah lied" (61), he is forced to concede that "[t]he trail of my people [is] ended"and to "follow the white man's trail" (62) is his only option. Garland, pulling this story from his interviews with American Indians resettled to reservations, has established a clear theme that pervades his stories and indigenous writing—specifically, the tumultuous situation experienced by native religions during these times of continual removal and relocation. That Christian missionaries ignored the importance of place and the land to traditional religious practice only made things worse, a fact Garland is clearly conscious of throughout *The Book of the American Indian.*

Garland's story, "Drifting Crane," is also centered on the importance of place to indigenous cultural practices. This story is one of many emphasizing the prevalence of landscapes that serve as sites of cross-cultural interaction and conflict, or borderlands. Gloria Anzaldúa's work, *Borderlands/La Frontera,* is perhaps the most helpful indigenous text for defining such sites. Centered on the US/Mexico borderlands, Anzaldúa nonetheless claims that "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory," also asserting that "[i]t's not a comfortable territory to live in

. . . Hatred, anger and exploitation are prominent features of this landscape" (19). Such a definition is certainly applicable to almost every story in *The Book of the American Indian* but is especially relevant to "Drifting Crane," in which almost all of the action is located in the "borderlands," with the invading culture forcing the other off its traditional lands. The story opens amicably enough, stating how "[t]he valley was unsurveyed for the most part, and the Indians naturally felt a sort of proprietorship in it, and when Wilson drove his cattle down into the valley and squatted, the chief, Drifting Crane, welcomed him, as a host might, to an abundant feast" (112). However, it doesn't take long for the "hatred, anger and exploitation" mentioned by Anzaldúa to set in. Soon enough the rancher Wilson, through the authority of the United States government, makes a claim on the land, telling Drifting Crane that "I'm here to stay. This ain't your land; this is Uncle Sam's land, and part of it'll be mine as soon as the surveyors come to measure it off" (116).

Garland's characterization here of the western rancher—which he also describes as "the unflagging energy and fearless heart of the American pioneer"—reflects the conflicting ideas about space and place elaborated upon by Deloria in *God Is Red.* Wilson and the white settlers look upon the land with what has been called the "gaze of development" by Joel Martin in *Sacred Revolt,* his study of the Muskogee Red Stick revolt of 1813-1814. Briefly, Martin defines this uniquely Western phenomenon as "that cultural and economic grid and logic through which Anglo-Americans unrelentingly processed all land" (92). Martin places this in contention with Native American land use, which he sees as much less rigidly defined and far more communally oriented. Deloria is interested in these conflicting views of land use as well, noting in *God is Red* that "Indian tribes combine history and geography so that they have a 'sacred geography,' that is to say, every location within their original homeland has a multitude of stories that recount the migrations, revelations, and particular historical incidents" (121). This observation is also reminiscent of what Keith Basso has observed of the western Apache in his work *Wisdom Sits in Places.* Specifically, he writes that "what matters most to Apaches is *where* events occurred, not when, and what they serve to reveal about the development and character of Apache social life" (31). Garland's fiction adds a nice balance to the theoretical work of Martin, Deloria, and Basso, as he clearly picked up on similar sentiments in his travels and interviews.

Drifting Crane is just one of many indigenous characters in his fiction who come in conflict with white characters looking to cash in on their established homelands. And despite Wilson's change of heart at the end of the story, saying that "[t]here's land enough for all of us, or ought to be" (118), it doesn't change the fact that he and the American government did all they could to take these sacred lands away and exploit them for their fullest economic potential.

Yet indigenous homelands are not the only thing white settlers intended to appropriate and exploit. Deloria and other indigenous scholars have made it clear that intellectual sovereignty was also at stake in the cultural conflicts occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Similarly, Garland's fiction is full of examples of this more abstract effort to dominate the indigenous population through propaganda, misinformation, and linguistic subversion. Indeed, the collection opens with "Wahiah—A Spartan Mother," a story that very much builds on these three ideas. However, "The Iron Khiva" perhaps most explicitly deals with the painful experience of having a group's intellectual traditions taken away. This narrative recounts the story of a remote group of American Indians, who "were on the maps of Arizona, but of this had no knowledge and no care" (25). Moreover, the intellectual leaders of the community—the "priests and the soothsayers"—play a more prominent role in this story than in others, and Garland writes of how they "deeply resented the prying curiosity and the noisy impertinence of the occasional cowboy who rode across the desert to see some of their solemn rites with snakes and owls" (25). Inevitably, this indigenous group is beset by Western missionaries who move onto the land and build the eponymous iron khiva to teach the "new religion." However, the intellectual leaders are resistant, telling the missionaries that "[w]e do not need a new religion. Why should we change? Our religion is good. We understand it. Our fathers gave it to us. Yours is well for you—we do not ask you to change ours" (27). The iron khiva stays, however, and eventually the children are forced to attend.

Deloria's underlying critique throughout *God Is Red* is that the intellectual sovereignty exercised by pre-contact indigenous communities did a far better job of meeting the spiritual, religious, and educational needs of a society than did the forced teachings of Christian missionaries. Similar sentiments are forwarded by the indigenous scholar Robert Allen Warrior, whose text *Tribal Secrets* builds on much of Deloria's earlier writing on intellectual sovereignty. In this work Warrior identifies the years 1890-1916—the very time in which Garland happened to be researching and writing—as among the most damaging to American Indian intellectual and religious traditions. Indicative of this time period was Richard Henry Pratt's Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which aimed to take American Indian children from their native communities in the West and send them to this eastern boarding school. However, Warrior identifies an implicit agenda, writing that "[t]he general intent of Carlisle and other eastern boarding schools was to turn young Natives against the traditions of their communities by any means necessary, including beatings and forced separation from family" (7). Indeed, this agenda turns out to be the ultimate motivation of the missionaries in Garland's story, who are not satisfied with the re-education undertaken in the iron khiva—thus, they insist on sending six of the children back East, to a boarding school no less. At first the Indians resist, threatening to fight, though they ultimately give in and agree to send their children. It is only when two of these children run off into the desert and kill themselves, rather than be forced to leave behind their homes, that the Christian missionary agrees not to force any children to leave. Such an act is a dramatic illustration of the actions to which a desperate community will resort if pushed hard enough, a truth Garland surely learned through his interviews on Western reservations.

Finally, as Deloria and other indigenous scholars have frequently pointed out, at the heart of conflicts over religion, land, and education—among many others—is the much larger fight by indigenous communities to be allowed to function as self-sustaining, autonomous governments outside of the reach of federal, state, and local regulations. Many indigenous writers and theorists, from as diverse a group as Vine Deloria, Paula Gunn Allen, Gerald Vizenor, Taiaiake Alfred, and Ward Churchill, have addressed this issue and see it as the core problem when tensions arise between Indian and Euro-American communities. Deloria's stance in *God Is Red* is that even though there is "no sense of national coordination" among the diverse groups seeking sovereignty and self-governance, all at least agree on the "issue of restoring the old ways and raising the question of people and their right to a homeland" (7). Though this solution is obviously not a cure-all for all of the problems in the relationship between American Indians and the United States government, many

indigenous scholars see it as a good place to start for resolving many other issues.

Garland is most conscious of this desire for self-governance in the novella that concludes *The Book of the American Indian*, "The Silent Eaters." This story chronicles the hardships faced by Sitting Bull in resisting occupation of his homelands by the American government. As Garland reveals throughout the story, what is at stake is not just land, but the ability to choose where one lives and how one governs his own people. Obviously, this stance results in frequent conflict with the US Army, including the Battle of Little Big Horn. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of this novella is Garland's decision to challenge continually the established story of this battle. Several times throughout, Garland—writing again in the first person as an "educated" Sioux—makes statements such as "You have heard that my people ambushed Custer. This is a lie" (159), or "You have heard it said that we outnumbered Custer ten to one. This, too, is false" (160). Likely taken directly from indigenous sources interviewed by Garland, these perspectives certainly would have been provocative to most white Americans in Garland's day. Yet this is the strength behind "The Silent Eaters"—Garland's continual effort to subvert the accepted beliefs of his culture, in which he recognized that he was also implicated. So throughout the novella Garland frequently challenges his readers—who mainly would have been white Americans—with statements such as "How can I make you understand? Can you not see that we were facing the end of our world? . . . In all the history of the world there has been no darker day for a race than this when midwinter fell upon us in that strange land of the north" (178). Garland may not have been able to change the outcome of the story of Sitting Bull, or any of the characters he chronicles in *The Book of the American Indian*, but he can register a voice for those being suppressed within mainstream American culture. Thus, his work can be read as a place where legitimate American Indian concerns were put into circulation, at least until the second half of the twentieth century, when indigenous scholars began to get a foothold themselves and establish their own forms of scholarship, literature, and criticism. Indeed, in this way the novella serves as an interesting companion piece to James Welch's *Killing Custer,* which works to much the same end by retelling the story of the Battle of Little Bighorn through the first-hand accounts of the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Crow warriors that fought there.

As a way of conclusion, at least one indigenous scholar offers a perspective that may challenge this reading of *The Book of the American Indian*. Specifically, Vine Deloria's son Philip J. Deloria, in his work *Playing Indian,* takes issue with the numerous ways white Americans have appropriated—typically for their own benefit—American Indian identity. He gives examples such as the Boston Tea Party and the Tammany societies of post-Revolution New England as key examples of this hijacking of Native American culture, in which the participants literally appropriated "Indianness" by dressing up in traditional garb, speaking in "Indian" language, and enacting "Indian" customs. While these events are critiqued for their use of both costume and performance, Deloria does note other forms of "playing Indian" that are more subtle. One example that he notes from the middle of the nineteenth century, just before Garland started writing himself, is his concept of "salvage ethnography." For Deloria, "salvage ethnography" is a specific type of anthropological study interested in "the capturing of authentic culture thought to be rapidly and inevitably disappearing." However, as are all things critiqued in *Playing Indian,* this endeavor is filled with contradictory assumptions, such as "[t]he salvage workers are required to believe in both disappearing culture and the existence of informants knowledgeable enough about that culture to convey worthwhile information" (90). Based on this definition, it is difficult to argue that Garland was not implicated in the practice of "salvage ethnography"—certainly anyone arguing this point would have a strong case. However, to me at least, there is something different about Garland's choice to produce fictional stories, as opposed to strictly ethnographic observations. Garland did, indeed, write some of these as well, but the stories contained in *The Book of the American Indian*—not to mention other works of fiction like his similarly themed novel, *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop*—work strongly enough outside the strictures of nonfiction ethnography as to be fictional accounts not necessarily trying to "salvage" indigenous culture. Instead, his goal seemed to be to portray a still thriving and autonomous culture, not simply the "vanishing Indian," no longer a relevant part of American life and culture.

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TELL ME OVER AND OVER AGAIN: THE GENDERING OF THE VIETNAM WAR AND THE CYCLES OF TRAUMA IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS*

ROY SEEGER

> *At a time when the silencing of the nonhuman facilitates its devastation, what seems to matter most is "presenting" the nonhuman within human discourse in a way that counters destructive attitudes and behavior* (Gilcrest 44).

> *He found dead dogs, dead chickens. Farther along,he encountered someone's forehead. He found three dead water buffalo. He found a dead monkey. He found ducks pecking at a dead toddler* (O'Brien 106).

> *It was spook country. The geography of evil: tunnels and bamboo thickets and mud huts and graves* (O'Brien 103).

In the Lake of the Woods, Tim O'Brien's novel about John Wade, a senatorial candidate whose political career was ruined because he falsified records of his service in the Vietnam War, often juxtaposes violent war images with those of an exotic landscape. In one case, when a soldier in Charlie Company is shot by the enemy, O'Brien describes the wound as an outpouring of "his brains smooth and liquid," while the next sentence flatly states, "It was a fine tropical afternoon" (O'Brien 39). This jarring transition becomes complicated when we consider some of the premises of eco-feminist theory, which suggest that the Other, in this case the Vietnamese people, becomes interchangeable with their landscape due to their direct dependence upon it for their survival. In *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien illustrates the social and personal dangers of the suppression, redirection, and re-imagining of soldiers' actions through veteran John Wade and

his involvement with the disappearance and possible murder of his wife, Kathy.

John Wade, when he is in Vietnam, is nicknamed "Sorcerer" because of his ability as a magician, a name that works to relocate him both topographically and morally, due to his affinity with the mysterious or feminine, placing him, along with a Native American soldier, Richard Thinbill, on the outskirts of the gender division. Unlike Thinbill, however, Wade seeks to use his position to exploit the Other in the service of American interests. As Sorcerer, Wade could "whisper a few words and [make a] village disappear" (65). By naming Wade "Sorcerer," his platoon is attempting to co-opt the mysterious unknowable forces that get labeled feminine. They give Wade special treatment because of his talents while simultaneously condemning him to the group's outskirts as a mediator of Otherness.

The interconnectedness, for the American soldier, between the Vietcong, the Vietnamese civilians, and the Vietnam landscape make it an interesting example of how American hegemonic relationships with the feminine persist even in a foreign setting, often in exaggerated ways that are dangerous when we consider Lawrence Buell's premise that "[p]lants and animals are, after all, bound together; bodies and worlds are caught in a network of dependence" (283). This is no more the case than with Vietnamese farming villages like My Lai (Thuan Yen). For the American soldier it was hard to separate the landscape, and those who utilized that landscape, from the enemy. In fact, Lieutenant Calley, the only nonfictional soldier brought up on charges for My Lai (which O'Brien incorporates into his fictional narrative), finds there to be no difference between the South Vietnamese soldiers and the landscape when O'Brien has him say, "'Kill Nam' . . . [As] he pointed his weapon at the earth, burned twenty quick rounds," (O'Brien 103). Calley's action works to polarize the landscape as the primary opposition.

However, to read the Vietnam War solely, as Susan Jeffords suggests, as "a conflict of gender," runs the risk of merely repolarizing factions in terms of good and evil, of right and wrong (xi). Labeling Nature as "good" does not dissolve its conflict with culture, which is then relabeled "evil." Not only do these labels ignore ecological and human concerns for the sake of semantics, they work to oversimplify the complexity of the American soldier's psychological landscape during the Vietnam War, which could be more accurately defined as multigendered. This oversimplification of gender roles is detrimental, not only to the soldier's relationships with his landscape and the feminine, but also to his readjustment to society. To vilify soldiers and their often violent actions is to renounce America's patriarchal agenda while perpetuating its systems of subjugation which encourage the commodification of Vietnamese corpses by initiating, as Jeffords points out, "rewards of three-day passes . . . to those who 'produced' the most" (7). This reward system, reminiscent of frontiersmen trading Native American scalps for money, shows the tendency of American culture to exploit other cultures in a way that leads to the continued feminization and exploitation of its people and landscape, as well as the repetition of similar human atrocities on both the global and domestic level.

For an American soldier in Vietnam, however, different cultural rules apply. By forcing soldiers to oppress/deny these exaggerated culture rules, we are forcing them to place these emotions and beliefs in a state of psychological limbo where their resurfacing is sudden and oftentimes violent. Laurie Vickroy explains the process of this resurfacing as:

> A psychology of oppression [emerging] from these dehumanizing and conflicted situations, wherein a process of internalizing oppression brings about social and psychic manifestations of trauma, such as emotional restrictions, fragmented or split identity, dissociation, and problems with self-knowledge. (36)

It is only through the voicing of this internalized oppression that we might begin repairing the damage caused by that oppression.

The template for the actualization and internalization of these new feminized structures, in *In the Lake of the Woods,* is Richard Thinbill, a Chippewa soldier in Charlie Company who does not participate in the killings at My Lai except to shoot "some cows" (O'Brien 193). Thinbill's confession about the cows implies that he, unlike most of Charlie Company, was able to distinguish between animals and humans, while further suggesting that he was partially susceptible to American cultural pressures despite his Native American heritage. That Thinbill and Wade feel guilt over their silence places them into what Vickroy identifies as "situations of subjection and colonization [that] have fostered many of the conditions for feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that create trauma" (36). However, they each respond differently to this trauma—Wade by erasing his experience both physically and psychologically and

Thinbill with his sudden obsession with flies and his eventual confession. On one level, the flies represent the literal waste the soldiers make of the landscape. However, the flies contain multiple meanings, able to represent Thinbill's conscience while metaphorically acting as Nature's response to the slaughter. Thinbill's witness of this response causes him to act as the landscape's voice, repeatedly drawing attention to the flies or the "evidence."

The fact that Thinbill is Native American is not arbitrary; not only does he physically connect the events of My Lai with similar events of Native Americans' destruction, feminization, and oppression throughout American history, but he is able to implicate similar colonial forces in each instance of destruction. Thinbill embodies the possibility of our overcoming a gendered dichotomy by presenting a different cultural template to help Americans re-imagine our relationship with landscape as multigendered (or nongendered). By remembering our historical subjugation of other cultures, we might understand that the ramifications of that subjugation are long term. Wade's strained connection to and dependence upon the demonized Vietnamese landscape for his sense of identity, however, is a more difficult one to navigate.

It is John Wade's confusion over differing systems of behavior that, upon his return, transforms his prewar habit of stalking Kathy into a dangerous parallel of a combat mission as he blurs the line between his identity as Wade and his resurfaced Sorcerer persona. These multiple personas struggling for dominance illustrate the Vietnam veteran's struggle to reclaim a socially acceptable belief system while simultaneously finding an outlet for his repressed trauma. In this instance, Wade re-enacts a cycle of trauma upon Kathy through his stalking. It is important to note that this manipulation did not begin, for Wade, with his involvement in the war, but with his involvement with women. His prewar stalking of Kathy may be a less violent form of control rooted in a prewar trauma, but it is no less symptomatic of a larger cultural problem—a need to know and therefore possess those things labeled feminine.

For John Wade during the Vietnam War, this antagonism targets a hostile feminine landscape. However, Wade rejects this wartime relationship with the feminine in favor of his more intimate and domestic ones after he returns home. However, this repressed violence emerges in Wade when, after he loses his election for falsifying his Vietnam records and his connection to My Lai, he pours boiling water over all the houseplants of their rented cottage, killing them and creating a humid stink that recreates the smell of the Vietnam jungles, thereby bringing Vietnam and its set of repressed rules to the domestic realm. This symbolically violent act shows Wade reasserting his repressed masculinity by killing the feminine, claiming it was "not rage. It was necessity" (O'Brien 50). The fact that Wade cannot remember whether or not he poured boiling water over Kathy shows Wade's blurring of the difference between Kathy and the cabin's house plants.

The navigation of these differing belief systems is dependant upon each soldier's ability to justify his wartime actions as "duty," forget them, or distort them, as John Wade does, with mirrors. These mirrors act as a complex metaphor that engenders John Wade, at an early age, as feminine, identifying him as secretive and mysterious. However, Wade's mirrors not only become a metaphor for his repressed and transformed feminine qualities, but also act as a survival mechanism he uses to deflect the unbearable truth of his actions, a tactic used by many veterans as they return home to a society that not only reviled them but a government that renounced the questionable actions they ordered those same soldiers to carry out. However, in order to assimilate themselves back into society, veterans had to change many of the accounts of their actions. This process begins for Wade with his letters home to Kathy. He quickly learns of her dislike of his Sorcerer persona when, after referring to himself as "Sorcerer" in a letter, Kathy writes back, "you scare me" (O'Brien 38). What follows, the repression of Wade's Vietnam experience when writing Kathy, strains his interaction with the feminine within a system that mirrors America's own dichotomy that rewards the subjugation of the feminine in various economic ways. This subjugation resurfaces in Wade's marriage when he forces Kathy to have an abortion for the sake of her husband's political career and again the night before Kathy disappears, when he boils all the houseplants and considers doing the same to Kathy (49-50).

That these violent actions work to silence Kathy's voice is obvious when she disappears into the Minnesota landscape and her disapproval of Wade is eliminated, as is his apparent need to compromise in their relationship. Wade's hypothetical antagonism toward Kathy, redirected through the plants, targets a hostile feminine landscape during the Vietnam War and correlates this relationship with his marriage after he returns home and outwardly readopts his old

belief systems. However, his repressed knowledge of Kathy's disappearance enacts Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory that, in such cases: "[T]here has disappeared the possibility of establishing a general theory of politics on the basis of topographic categories—that is to say, of categories which fix in a permanent manner the meaning of certain contexts as differences which can be located within a relational complex" (180). Kathy's death, in this equation, is a metaphor for the death of hope.

Wade's struggle to navigate these cultural systems that are normally separate topographies only becomes politically productive, however, after it is discussed in the chapters entitled "Evidence," which consist of a list of quotations concerning Wade's trial, mostly from fictional characters. However, interspersed among the fictional testimony are genuine quotations that act as a historical record of American violence toward what is labeled Other. The piecing together of this information works to create in the reader what Laclau and Mouffe call "the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination, [a time when] the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality" (154). Where *In the Lake of the Woods* becomes productive from this standpoint is in the dialogue it initiates over the historical documentation that leads the reader to detect those patterns of thinking that repeatedly lead to violent oppression and to recognize them as problematic. This is the case when O'Brien cites other seemingly unrelated sources as "Evidence," such as American General William Tecumseh Sherman's statement that his soldiers must "act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women, children" (O'Brien 257). O'Brien also connects My Lai to other travesties by referring to the Nuremberg trials, and the United States' own use of guerrilla tactics during the American Revolution and the response of invading British soldiers. To this end, O'Brien cites British Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, who stated that "[Our British troops] were so enraged at suffering from an unseen enemy that they forced open many of the houses . . . and put to death all those found in them" (O'Brien 259).

In the Lake of the Woods illuminates Wade's conflict on multiple levels through fragmentation, multiple perspectives, historical parallels, and the exploration and possibility of multiple outcomes of the same story. These strategies act, according to Kumkum Sangari, to

"[fix] the social locus of the production of meaning" (906). It is only through the collection of numerous Vietnam War experiences that we are able to contextualize those experiences and identify possible sources for continued acts of arbitrary aggression. In fact, in *In the Lake of the Woods,* the repeated testimony of soldiers who describe their violent acts at My Lai as a response to the landscape suggests not only a personal moral collapse but a flaw on the institutional level. Perhaps this collapse is, in part, the result of the American soldier's inability to distinguish between ally and enemy, but it is also exacerbated by the government's silencing and treatment of its soldiers, which O'Brien illustrates by including as "Evidence" a newspaper article in the Boston *Herald* about a homeless veteran involved in the My Lai massacre who was "killed in a booze fight" (O'Brien 261-2). This death shows not only how the trauma of killing women and children in a war setting debilitated American soldiers but, more importantly, how the government that ordered these killings has often ignored the physical and psychological problems of those soldiers. For John Wade, these psychological problems culminate, in *In the Lake of the Woods,* with his inability to recall his own actions surrounding Kathy's disappearance, which ironically acts as the catalyst to Wade's quest for self-knowledge.

It is through the identification of the parallels between the soldiers' relationships with landscape in Vietnam and the more complex domestic relationships upon their return that we are able to see both extremes of this oppression/suppression and the commodification of the Other, in this case Kathy Wade. All the evidence O'Brien compiles, then, is not only evidence against John Wade but also evidence against America and, more specifically, against the ambiguous American interests in Vietnam. That these interests remain ambiguous for the soldiers fighting for them becomes a matter of commercial strategy as Jim Neilson offers, "the United States government made the war unintelligible, but for politically intelligible reasons—that is, to sell a war that needed selling" (qtd. in Neilson 163).

Ironically, it was John Wade's need to "know" Kathy completely, combined with his need to sell himself as a normal husband and politician, which formed the foundation of their domestic problems that manifested due, in part, to Wade's desire to possess her more completely, or as Wade says, "suture [their] lives together" (O'Brien 71). However, Kathy's sister, Patricia, claims in one of the "Evidence" sections that "Kathy had troubles, too, her own history,

her own damn life!" (O'Brien 263). This revelation and its tone of frustration, show not only that these gender issues extend well before and beyond the Vietnam War, but also imply that neither Wade nor anyone involved in the investigation seriously considered Kathy's own set of traumas and *their* role in her silencing. Only after Wade begins to hypothesize about Kathy's disappearance and his implication in it does he consider her as not only an object or an ideal but also a human being and a partner.

O'Brien ultimately leaves Kathy and John Wade's fate up to the readers, forcing them to sift through and label evidence in chapters with crime drama titles such as "Hypothesis" and "Evidence." This narrative strategy encourages the readers to piece together the fragments of Wade's history and work to make their own connections between the fiction and the truth of Vietnam and the reasoning behind America's recurring use of violence to commodify aspects of other cultures and the feminine throughout history. This burden on the reader parallels John Wade's burden first to navigate his fragmented and revised memory and then to reconcile what he finds there. The ambiguous ending reflects the uncertain future for the United States in regard to these gender conflicts. To this end, O'Brien, in a footnote, offers the possibility that Kathy is not John Wade's victim but a co-conspirator, offering that, "he might have joined her on the shore of Oak Island, or Massacre Island, or Buckete Island" (O'Brien 300).

The implication here is that they are able to start a new life free of mirrors and ties to the hegemonic relationships established by American culture. This "happy" ending implies that John and Kathy Wade communicated the truth of their problems to each other and that through this communication they were able to create a new system of belief in which the landscape and the feminine are less defined by their opposition to cultural forces and more by a collaboration of those forces. O'Brien suggests that the possibility of their future and happiness is "a matter of taste, of aesthetics, and the boil as one possibility that I must reject as both graceless and disgusting" (O'Brien 300). The problem with the boil, however, is more than an aesthetic concern. The problem is with the connection this violent act has with countless avoidable travesties like My Lai. By believing the boil and the possibility of Kathy's murder by Wade's hand, the reader is rejecting Wade's potential to overcome his traumas and change his own belief in the systems of oppression that orchestrated those traumas.

The possibility that Wade and Kathy start a new life seems to depend upon Wade's ability to come to terms with his personal traumas, to navigate his fragmented consciousness, identify points of transgression, and, most importantly, accept and restructure those points along less antagonistic lines. The actualization of this restructuring is dependant upon John Wade's ability to transcend his role as Sorcerer and politician and enter into an open, honest dialog with Kathy. By rejecting the possibility of Wade's guilt in Kathy's implied murder, O'Brien shows his own interest in restructuring the hegemonic relationships established by American culture and manipulated by our government during the Vietnam War. It also reveals O'Brien's belief in the possibility of this restructuring. Wade, by subjecting himself in the end to the Minnesota landscape, acts to merge with it, not only physically but also philosophically.

It is in this area of uncertainty over John and Kathy Wade's fate that not only the most danger lies, but also the chance to understand and correct our history of subjugating those things American culture labels feminine.

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SHADOWS ON THE ROCK: CATHER'S ANODYNE OF HOPE: CECILE DISPENSES AND RECEIVES

SUSAN A. SCHILLER

Shadows on the Rock, published in 1931, is Cather's tenth novel. As in her earlier novels, Cather borrows from historical events, influential people, and exceptional landscapes. Her reputation as a North American Francophile encourages acceptance of the point of view offered in the novel. It should be no surprise to those who know Cather's work to see her expertly spotlight a historic Quebec City—a city rich in French culture, history and extreme geographical conditions. She creates fictional characters to complement and interact with historical figures as a means to explore cultural crisis and development during a transitional year, 1697-1698, the last year of Count de Frontenac's governorship and life. Pastoral tendencies that appear in previous novels, such as *My Antonia, O Pioneers!*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* continue in *Shadows,* but in this tenth novel, Cather also integrates hope as a controlling trope. Hope functions to control textual development and to support events occurring in this deeply spiritual year. For many characters it compels a "transcendental epiphany of place" similar to that which William Barilla recognizes in *O Pioneers!* (67). Like Antonia of *My Antonia,* Thea Kronberg of *The Song of the Lark,* and Alexandra Bergson of *O Pioneers!,* Cecile Auclair of *Shadows* is another young female protagonist who manifests a coming of age and a destiny to become the "mother of true Canadians." Moreover, as a means to comfort herself, Cather creates a heroine who dispenses and receives hope, for during the years while writing *Shadows,* Cather was forced to manage personal transitions of her own when death and illness fell among family and friends. She naturally gravitated to her own art form for comfort and leaned on the reliability of history and place as literary devices that had worked for her in the past. In *Shadows on the Rock* she celebrates the human heart and its ability to adapt and survive

even when placed in extreme historical times or severe landscapes that isolate us from places and people we love. Cecile demonstrates this most strongly in *Shadows* when she is strengthened by hope and love for all that is French Canadian.

New France was founded in 1608, and Quebec City became its capital in 1663 when the population was just 1,950. Count de Frontenac was appointed governor general of New France in 1672 by King Louis XIV. He served ten years, was recalled to France for seven, then returned to Quebec to serve again until his death in November 1698. During his later years, he unsuccessfully petitioned the king for his return to France. His death marked a political transition from the old to the new and encouraged the British, who had unsuccessfully attacked Quebec City in 1690 in King William's War. However, eventually the British were successful in 1759 when they fought on the Plains of Abraham for control of the region. Fortunately for the Quebecois of 1759, England allowed religious freedom and accepted the region as French speaking and Catholic. Cather's characters in *Shadows* retain and allude to most of this history ("History of Quebec").

Cather's fiction anticipates the Quebecois of 1759 as she creates the Auclair family and the patronage bestowed on them by Frontenac. It is at Frontenac's invitation to follow him to Canada as his personal physician that brings Auclair, apothecary and philosopher, to Quebec City. He travels with his wife and four-year-old daughter, Cecile. Cather's depiction of Quebec City establishes the Lower and Upper town with distinctions that follow historical accounts. The Lower town is an economic center, while the upper town features those offices concerned with government and religion (Murphy and Stouck 400). Situated on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River, the major seaway into North America, Quebec depended on shipping as its main source for supplies and contact with France. Seasonal conditions created a natural cycle of arrivals and departures to which the people soon adjusted. Winter conditions imposed isolation on Quebec, but Cather is quick to describe the place as "the little capital which was just then the subject of so much discussion in Europe, and the goal of so many fantastic dreams"(4). It is clear that Cather wants readers to see that hope infused those who strove to achieve fantastic dreams this landscape promised.

It is through Cecile, the primary character of the novel, rather than through Auclair or Frontenac that Cather conveys hope and heal-

ing. Cather's conscious decision to feature a single transitional year, a pivotal year that is both personal and political, follows the minimalist approach she took in *The Lost Lady.* During this year, Frontenac falls ill and dies. Auclair and Cecile are forced to face the loss of their beloved governor and friend and what it means to lose the benefits forthcoming from his patronage. Although born in France, Cecile was brought to Quebec as a young child. She does not remember France and is content in Quebec, recognizing it as her geographical and spiritual home. Auclair, on the other hand, yearns for and expects to return to France when Frontenac is recalled. At the point when Frontenac offers to send Auclair back, even though he himself has not been recalled and is facing death, Auclair remains loyal to Frontenac and refuses to return. Auclair reaches a spiritual crisis when Frontenac dies, but Cecile sustains him, and he eventually experiences his own epiphany of place when he accepts his destiny to remain in Canada. Most of the tension in the novel is created by juxtaposing Auclair's yearning for France with Cecile's fear of leaving Quebec. They experience and survive Frontenac's last year and face their own fears by sustaining hope.

The transition that Cather's characters experience is similar to the ones that Cather herself had been living through. In 1928 Cather returned to Red Cloud for her father's funeral. That same year, she visited Quebec City twice and began writing *Shadows on the Rock.* At the end of that year, her mother had a stroke and Cather traveled to California early in 1929 to be with her. She also made two trips to Quebec for pleasure and research. After her mother entered a sanatorium, Cather traveled to France, returning to Quebec City via ship. Cather was able to see her mother one last time in 1931 but was unable to attend her funeral. However, she did return to Red Cloud that same year for a family reunion, and *Shadows on the Rock* was published (Urgo 37).

A reviewer for the *New Mexico Quarterly* in November 1931 believed that "[t]he shadows are the people who strangely have picked this spot for the founding of a town, to which ships each summer make their way across the treacherous Atlantic to bring dispatches and supplies" (389). The first ship Cather places in the harbor is La Bonne Esperance, or in English "The Good Hope." Yet this ship is not arriving; it is departing Quebec. The people watch until the "last tip of white slid behind the curving shore, they [then] went back to their shops and their kitchens to face the stern realities of life"

(Cather 7). We know from Edith Lewis that Cather's life during the time that surrounds *Shadows* was a time of great loss, a time that forced her to face the stern realities of her own life. She had moved out of 5 Bank Street, "taken refuge in the Grosvenor Hotel" (Lewis 151), witnessed her father's first attack of angina while in Red Cloud for Christmas, and then in March "she got the news of his sudden death" (Lewis 152). She also watched the long two-and-a-half year illness of her mother (Lewis 156), whose eventual death in 1931 meant "the final breaking up of the family and the Red Cloud Home" (Lewis 163). Her long-time friend, Isabelle Hambourg, began a long illness as well during this period (Lewis 158). The people closest to Cather were leaving her. During this time, Cather made three trips to Quebec, spent time at Grand Manan writing *Shadows,* and traveled to Paris and southern France where she visited various historical spots, including the site where Frontenac's heart is buried. She returned from France on "one of the Empress boats, which docked at Quebec" (Lewis 160). Lewis tells us "the whole voyage became a sort of home-coming to *Shadows,* and the slow progress up the St. Lawrence, between woods on fire with October, was its climax—a dream of joy" (160). Cather stayed in Quebec and continued to visit historic sites that would appear in the novel (Lewis 160). We can easily envision Cather as a woman who has lost people around her and fears to lose more. She submerged herself in history of place, of people and of the spirit that created new culture out of old. Such a submergence into history invites a hope against hope because each generation typically believes it can learn from the mistakes of the ancestors. People believe they will succeed even when conditions nearly guarantee failure. A serious look at history additionally promotes feelings of survival and strength that ignite hope. Cather, who often traveled by ship, knew how to survive and enjoy a sea voyage. She knew first hand how it felt to enter Quebec harbor after a voyage that invited reflection, remembrance, and inspiration—all of which subsequently appear in *Shadows.* The shadows in this novel are not the characters that Cather creates to tell her story; they are the shadows of the people and the events in her own life that call for her personal need of an anodyne of hope. Cather herself said about *Shadows on the Rock* that "[w]riting this book . . . was like a happy vacation from life, a return to childhood, to early memories" (qtd. in Winsten 400).

Considering the shadows that had grown so large in Cather's life, it is easy to see her need for a vacation, a respite, a healing period sustained by hope. What better way to vacation than by creating a pathway for a transcendental epiphany of place and by conjuring an obedient little girl of hope and love who develops into the emblem of Canadian sensibility? Through *Shadows,* Cather creates and restores herself. She finds an anodyne of healing in artistry and uses hope in her work much as Auclair uses poultices for swelling or as Cecile imbibes the mysticism of the Canadian martyrs to restore her own hope of permanent residence in Quebec. The Good Hope may have been sailing out of the harbor but not before it unloaded a full cargo—a cargo full of medicine and loving reminders of France—a cargo containing "everything to comfort the body and the soul" (240).

Shadows on the Rock contains seventy-nine medicinal references. These include elixirs, tinctures, tonics, poultices, powders, herbs, pills, purgatives, sedatives, ointments, bandages, and others. We see these natural remedies prescribed for a range of illnesses and both the apothecary, Auclair, and his daughter, Cecile, dispense them. Hope also functions as medicine that they use to heal people. Of the sixty-two references to hope, Cecile dispenses hope in twenty-three of these passages and she receives hope in twenty-five to sustain herself. The remaining references contribute to conditions or atmospheres that create the environment in which the community members reside. Careful textual analysis of Cather's novel reveals that hope controls the well being and behaviors of most of the characters far more strongly than tinctures or elixirs and that Cecile, rather than her father, is the key ambassador of hope. Consider what hope is. The Second College Edition of Webster's New World Dictionary defines eight types: 1. expecting to get what one wants; 2. inspiring; 3. a desire accompanied by expectation; 4. trust; 5. reliance; 6. to look for; 7. akin to; and 8. to want very much. Hope against hope, a common adage, means to continue having hope though it seems baseless. All these forms of hope appear in the novel and evoke various cultural, spiritual and personal responses.

Cather implicitly establishes hope from book one when she introduces readers to Auclair as the educated authority on natural remedies and up-to-date theories of healing, even when these remedies and theories are contrary to popular opinion and practice. Hope lies at the foundation of healing, for it is a given element in the physician's efforts to diagnose and treat illness, just as it is an essential element in the patient who strives to be healed. In books one through five, Cather infuses hope into the text, but she waits until book six, as she reaches a turning point in the novel, to give Auclair an explicit statement about hope as a healing agent. When Bishop Saint-Vallier urges him to use more popular practices to heal the dying Frontenac, Auclair answers, "I shall do nothing to discourage my patient, Monseigneur, any more than I shall bleed him, as many good people urge me to do. The mind, too, has a kind of blood; in common speech we call it hope" (290). Although Auclair speaks these words, close reading will show us that the primary dispenser of hope is Cecile, for when Auclair is in crisis and has lost hope of ever returning to France, Cecile sustains him with her own hope against hope.

At age twelve Cecile already has assumed the role of healer. We first see her as a little girl singing. We hear a child's voice and then immediately Cecile speaks of ways she helps her father dispense medicine (14). She has already cared for a dying mother and a grieving father. Then we see her mothering a little boy, Jacques, always concerned about his body and soul. When her father is absent from the apothecary, she dispenses the traditional medicines he has prepared, but outside the apothecary, she also moves about the town dispensing hope and love to those she deems needful. We see various conditions in characters, including her father, improve through her ministrations. She dispenses and receives hope as an anodyne, so that by the end of the novel, all the main characters are firmly grounded in contentment, good health, and prosperity. Fear of relocation, fear of permanent exile from France, fear of loneliness, and fear of the future, are all remedied. Auclair is happy to remain in Canada, Cecile is married to Charron with four sons, Jacques is enjoying a seafaring career and residing with Auclair when in port. Saint-Vallier, wiser, but regretful of youthful beliefs and actions, is hopeful and appears content to live his remaining life in humble conditions "on the rock." Ironically, Vallier's epiphany occurs not in Quebec, but in England where he was jailed for five years as a prisoner of state. When he is finally allowed to return to Quebec City, he is old and greatly changed by his hard times in England and France, and he erroneously sees Quebec as a place where "nothing changes." While his epiphany has not given him greater political insight, it has made him appreciate Quebec City. The book finishes with Cecile on a pedestal. Cather places her "in the Upper Town, beyond the Ursuline convent . . .

[and] well established in the world" (319). This is an important geographical location, because it is safely out of range of ship cannons. Quebecois retreated to this distance when the city was fired upon during British attacks. Even Saint-Vallier states that Cecile is the mother of the "Canadians of the future" (320), and her father acknowledges her as someone who "would be quicker than anyone to sense the transformation" (321) brought to Saint-Vallier. Both men feel hope for the future, because they see it is in the hands of Cecile's sons.

The view of hope as an anodyne can be explicated further by juxtaposing references to it with medical references throughout each of the six books and epilogue that form the novel as well as the pages given over for these references. We also can get a stronger view of the way Cather uses Cecile in each book by identifying when Cecile dispenses and receives hope (see the chart below for quantified occurrences). In terms of pages used, the University of Nebraska Press scholarly edition presents the novel in 321 pages; thirty-four contain medical references, but sixty-five reveal hope. No wonder then that William Lyon Phelps, who reviewed the book in October 1931, noted that Cather had written "a book of healing" (qtd. in Murphy 361).

	Medical	**Hope**	**C. Disp.**	**C. Rec.**
Book I, The Apothecary	14	9	3	1
Book II, Cecile and Jacques	8	20	12	10
Book III, The Long Winter	15	6	1	3
Book IV, Pierre Charron	4	5	0	3
Book V, The Ships from France	27	9	3	6
Book VI, The Dying Count	9	7	2	2
Epilogue	2	6	2	0
Total	79	62	23	25

Cather immediately establishes the atmosphere of hope and healing at the beginning of the novel. As soon as The Good Hope leaves Quebec, readers are introduced to Quebec as a place of dreams (8), full of Norman Gothic architecture that symbolizes fingers pointing to God as in prayers of hope. This symbolism is both religious and social. The river, as the avenue to the world, symbolizes the path of hope that arises out of connection to nature as well as out of a connection to culture. We see that Cecile lives on Mountain Hill Street, a street Cather describes as the link between the lower and upper parts

of town. This street provides equal access to all the people and situates them in a strong location for dispensing medicine. Mountain Hill Street, as a roadway, is social and political, yet its name of Mountain Hill is a link to the natural geographical terrain of Quebec. We meet Blinker and learn that he is "one of the cares . . . inherited" from her mother (21). Cecile's role as a nurturer and a provider of hope is extended by this relationship. With Blinker, Cecile provides cultural and emotional hope. It is natural, then, for her to provide even closer, well-tended care for her father by spending evenings with him cooking, reading, talking, and walking about the town. We learn that order and household regularity are important to Cecile because it is her mother's wish for Cecile to carry on "our way" (32). This "way" provides security and acts as a salve for homesickness in others. People come to visit their home to partake of its atmosphere because in it their hope and longing for France is assuaged (32). Again, Cecile is essential to promoting a hope of preserving and maintaining French culture.

Two years after her mother's death, in book two, Cecile assumes responsibility for Jacques's spiritual growth and some of his basic care. She brings hope into his life. When he needs shoes, she turns to the Count in hopes that he will become Jacques's benefactor. We see Cecile creating hope and achieving this goal. Even the drummer boy, Georgio, acknowledges Cecile's importance and value with his silent drum roll when she arrives at the count's door. During the interview with the count, Cecile describes her life as more play than work and we can surmise that there is more hope in play than in work. When Jacques and Cecile take refuge in the Church of the Infant Jesus, Cecile becomes Jacques's catechism teacher. From her, he learns of saints and heaven. He learns that the little Jesus is a source of joy and hope and readers see a child's view of heaven. This is an innocent view, full of hope. Cecile establishes herself here as a dispenser of hope that is both spiritual and religious, and when she and Jacques enter the cobbler's home, both the cobbler and his mother rise to greet her almost in homage of her personage. They accept and welcome Jacques because he receives her patronage. Then Cather inserts into book two a great deal of detail about All Saints Day; St. Edmond, the boy saint; and the recluse of Montreal, another young girl of saintly power. This section culminates in Cecile's offering Jacques her silver cup, a sign of security and privilege that gives him hope, as a priest offers wine during communion. And when Jacques's mother

enters the scene as a foil to Cecile, readers are reminded that in this society of Quebec, Cecile is not the mother of Jacques. Yet her role as spiritual mother is undeniable. We also learn in book two that Cecile desires and hopes to remain in Quebec rather than to return to France. Throughout book two, All Souls Day, the day of the dead, links Cecile to the martyrs and great missionaries. It helps create her transcendental epiphany of Quebec. Even Holy Family Hill, where she and Jacques go sledding, implies hope of special things in Canada. Madame. Pommier and Cecile envision this and afterward Cecile invites Madame Pommier to visit her on Christmas Day. This is an invitation in which they all find hope, and we see Cecile carrying on as her mother would do or would wish her to do. We see Cecile sustaining cultural and spiritual hope that creates greater French Canadian cohesion. As book two closes, we learn of Cecile's fears of France and her hopes to stay in Canada; we also see her fulfilling hopes for many people through the Christmas party she prepares. Jacques foreshadows Cecile's role as the mother of Canadian sons when he gives his carved beaver for the crèche. The little beaver, a symbol of Canada, becomes his permanent gift to Cecile and it reinforces Cecile's French Canadian identity. Here Cather is celebrating a creation of a new identity, not one that is only French or only Canadian, but one that is both.

Book three introduces readers to the young and arrogant antagonist Bishop Saint-Vallier. Additional references to the recluse and to St. Catherine of Sienna help provide background for Pierre Charron as well as establish the Canadian hope for miracles. Cather defines miracles for us as "the flowering of desire" (160). Then she connects hope to medicine when Auclair treats Antoine Frichette's rupture. Devotion appears as a "natural grace in women," and Cecile's true devotion to Canada is placed within this context and recognized by Father Hector. Auclair then uses confession as a medicine when he hears Blinker's story. Auclair administers laudanum for sleep, for relief from the waking terror of memory that Blinker expresses. Hope is likewise an anodyne in this passage, because hope for forgiveness and relief from worldly affairs is at the heart of confession. Auclair blends spiritual hope and natural medicine at this point but does not explicitly remark about hope as he does about laudanum. Moreover, while he is listening to Blinker, he consciously chooses to protect Cecile from Blinker's worldly struggles by administering to Blinker

as Cecile sleeps through the night. Auclair seeks to preserve her innocence and pure state of being by shielding her from worldly ugliness.

Book four contains the fewest references to hope and medicine, yet in it Cather places Cecile's coming of age experience in which many hopes are received. Spring arrives, and with it the handsome Pierre Charron. After a long winter, spring sings of hope in a way unlike any of the other seasons. Cather makes the reader aware that this section of the novel marks a special period of hope through rhetorical strategies, plot, and character development. Pierre is the embodiment of spring; he is profiled as a strong Canadian, a man of many natural resources. We learn of his and Cecile's history and of her hopes to travel within Canada to places she has heard about from priests and missionaries. We see Pierre respond to her hopes when he takes her to the Ile d'Orleans. He satisfies her desires for travel. This short journey away from Quebec, only four miles down river (211), exposes Cecile to the "country style" (216) of living that is so different from her own. When what her mother calls "our way" is so vividly juxtaposed with another way, Cecile's new and complete vision of "our way" automatically transforms her into a young adult. It forces her to realize that, "one made a climate within a climate; one made the days—the complexion, the special flavor, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life" (227). The differing pastoral qualities and the power they evoke in cultural responses to them are felt by Cecile and bring about her transcendental epiphany of place. At this point, we see that Cecile's mother's hopes for Cecile have all manifested. This is a climatic point in the text and the rest of the plot is nearly predictable.

Cather gives book five the title "The Ships from France" as a rhetorical device that emphasizes hope. With each spring, five ships return from France with goods, news, and people. For three days as the ships are unloaded, the festival atmosphere surpasses even that of great-feast days in Quebec (235). Great hope is abundant and all the people receive it. Auclair unpacks his medicines; Pierre arranges a little party with the captain of the ship. Discussion swings to their return to France, and Cecile tells her father that she will never forget her friends in Canada. She strongly wishes to remain in Canada and feels homeless, full of despair when faced with leaving. She weeps and prays to her mother, she worries about Jacques. She meets Bishop Laval at the Cathedral and procures a promise from him to care for

Jacques. She is comforted by Laval, and as she remembers the Canadian martyrs, her hope is restored.

"The Dying Count," or book six, provides the falling action of the literary structure and in it Cecile's greatest wish, the hope to remain in Canada, is granted. Auclair finally declares hope as "blood for the brain" (296). He loses all his hope when the count dies, but Cecile attempts to restore it with warm milk and brandy. She is stronger than her father at this point, even though she is likewise thrown off balance by the count's death. Her own strength, security, and hopes are restored completely, however, when that true Canadian, Pierre Charron, appears at their door to spend the night.

The epilogue, a true denouement in this text, describes the main characters fifteen years later, in approximately 1713. All are better than ever. All hopes have manifested. Even the antagonist, Bishop Saint-Vallier, is transformed and is content to stay in his humble rooms "on the rock." Cecile resides in the "Upper Town" and is well established. She is married to Charron and has given birth to four sons, the "true Canadians." The final scene sends a grateful, older Auclair to Cecile's to dine where she still dispenses hope for body, mind, and soul. The final scene also illuminates the transitions evolving out of conditions described in the preface, which Cather borrows from Marie of the Incarnation, an early settler, who wrote to her sister in August of 1653: "You ask me for seeds of the flowers of this country. We have those for our garden, brought from France, there being none here that are very rare or very beautiful. Everything is savage here, the flowers as well as the men" (Murphy and Stouck 393). The people we see of 1713, two generations after Marie of the Incarnation, are the French Canadian flowers of early European seeds, but they are not savage. Their hopes, their dreams, their habits of healing one another render beauty as well as cultural adaptation and survival. And readers will again see parallels with *O Pioneers!* When Alexandra Bergson states that "the history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman" (*O Pioneers!* 70), she speaks wisdom that Cather extends and magnifies through Cecile's destiny to recognize and respond to Canadian soil and to establish the French Canadian tradition.

All through this novel, hope functions as a centralized essential literary element that contributes to multiple levels of textual components. Cecile is the fulcrum on which it swings as she dispenses and receives Cather's anodyne of hope. She is the ultimate symbol of

hope and healing, not just for other characters, Quebec City, or readers, but also for Cather, who at the time of writing this novel needed a respite, needed a vacation from the stern realities of her life. Discerning readers can see how fiction itself becomes the balm, the salve that heals, and that hope underscores Cather's creative endeavors to meet her own circumstances head on and on her own terms. Discerning readers will see Cather dispensing and partaking of her own anodyne—an anodyne of hope and place.

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LIFE WRITING/WRITING A CULTURE: LAURA INGALLS WILDER

SUSAN LARKIN

While working on *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, Laura Ingalls Wilder was asked to give a talk about being an author of children's books, and this talk offers some insight into the series:

> When I began writing children's stories I had in mind only one book. For years I had thought that the stories my father once told me should be passed on to other children. I felt that they were much too good to be lost. And so I wrote *Little House in the Big Woods*. The book was a labor of love and is really a memorial to my father . . . . I did not expect much from the book but hoped that a few children might enjoy the stories I had loved. ("My Work")

Considerably more than a few children have found pleasure in Wilder's books. The *Little House* series represents some of the most beloved children's literature written to date. The books have never gone out of print in the seventy-plus years of their existence and have spawned a series of accompaniments that include cookbooks, dolls, fictional stories of Laura's ancestors, the well-known television show, and more recently, an appallingly bad Disney mini-series.

Wilder published the first of the *Little House* books, *Little House in the Big Woods,* in 1932 when she was sixty-five years old. Eight more books followed, the last of which, *The First Four Years*, was published posthumously. The nine books come together to depict Wilder's life from shortly before her sixth birthday through the first four years of her marriage, a span of about twenty years. While numerous biographies of Wilder have been written, none have the power or magnetism of the *Little House* books themselves. Written with the help of her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, the books capture a spirit that has appealed to readers for generations and have become one of the most widely read collections of children's books in America.

This popularity has also prompted critics, historians, and biographers to explore and consider Wilder, her life, and her writings from a number of different angles. What interests me, however, is looking at Wilder not as a writer of fiction, as she is most commonly perceived, but as a woman who is writing the story of her life and, in doing so, inscribing a culture for future generations.

The overwhelming popularity of these books means that Wilder has brought her experiences and her culture to many others in a way and on a scale that not many authors have managed. Readers are not only hearing Laura's story but are also taking in Wilder's voicing of a culture, a fact that she herself noted in a speech that she gave at a 1937 Detroit book fair:

> I realized that I had seen and lived it all—all the successive phases of the frontier, first the frontiersman, then the pioneer, then the farmers, and the towns. Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American History . . . . It seemed to me that my childhood had been much richer and more interesting than that of children today even with all the modern inventions and improvements. I wanted the children now to understand more about the beginnings of things, to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it. (qtd. in *Sampler* 217)

Wilder's life did span an amazing time. During her life, she watched people travel by covered wagon, train, automobile, and airplane. She watched the American frontier move toward the Pacific Ocean and lived as a pioneer, farmer, and writer. Wilder wanted children to know how our country got to where it is now, and her stories admirably do that even today, more than seventy years after the first book was originally published.

Because the *Little House* books are still read, the frontier culture that Wilder depicts is a part of our history of which many children grow up aware. Her novels offer a glimpse into what it meant to be a woman on the frontier. Elizabeth Hampsten has done a great deal of work with Midwestern women's writings. Her studies bring to the forefront a reading of the turn of the century that focuses on the female perspective. Noting that writings by men from this period are rich in descriptions of the land and its possibilities, Hampsten then contrasts those with the writings of women who seem to prioritize in a vastly different manner. The women whose writings she works with speak of the others in the community, their work, and their fears.

Using this disparity to critique other studies of frontier writings, Hampsten explains, "Women, then, locate themselves in their immediate circumstances . . . Women describe where they are in relation to other people more than according to a spot on the map and its attendant history and economics. Often they even neglect to mention the name of a place" (40). This observation makes sense, for women on the frontier frequently lived an almost nomadic existence, thus having to rely on means other than place to create a sense of home and self.

As depicted in Wilder's writings, the Ingalls women certainly had become adept at creating a home in any environment. They moved frequently, and only some of their travels are noted in the *Little House* books. Ma finds a way to make their situation homelike no matter where the family ends up. Whether they live in a shanty, a dugout, a railroad camp, or a house with glass windows, Ma can establish a feeling and sense of home and teaches her daughters both the value of this ambiance and how to re-create it. When each new home is created, it is christened by the placement of Ma's china shepherdess. Laura first describes the doll as a very young child: "The little china woman had a china bonnet on her head, and china curls hung against her china neck. Her china dress was laced across in front, and she wore a pale pink china apron and little gilt china shoes" (*Big Woods* 62). The fragile trinket is a frivolous item for the family to be carrying with them during their travels, but in every new home, Laura comments on its placement on the bracket that Pa had carved for Ma:

> The last thing, Pa hung the bracket on the wall by the front window, and Ma stood the little china shepherdess on it . . . . That was the same smiling little shepherdess, with golden hair and blue eyes and pink cheeks, her little china bodice laced with china-gold ribbons and her little china apron and her little china shoes. She had traveled from the Big Woods all the way to Indian Territory, and all the way to Plum Creek in Minnesota, and there she stood smiling. She was not broken. She was not nicked nor even scratched, she was the same little shepherdess, smiling the same smile. (*Plum Creek* 122)

In a life without permanency, touches like the china shepherdess help to create a sense of home. Regardless of where the china woman stood, she stood smiling. Wherever the Ingalls family lived, Ma and the girls weathered the difficulties and built a home.

Wilder's earlier writings, writings that depict her adult life, reveal that Laura learned these lessons well. After Laura and Almanzo married, the couple had to work through illness, financial troubles and the loss of their house. The Wilders moved from tree claim to homestead claim and back in De Smet, South Dakota; to Almanzo's parents' farm in Minnesota; to Florida; back to South Dakota; and finally to Missouri, where the family finally settled. For the Wilders, it is not a china shepherdess but a glass bread platter that labels a place as a home. Laura and Almanzo bought the platter as a gift to each other their first Christmas, and it survived a fire that destroyed their South Dakota house and their many journeys. *Little House on Rocky Ridge*, one of Rose's stories told by her godson Roger Lea MacBride, describes unpacking the plate when the Wilders reach their new home in Missouri: "Mama carried in the glass bread platter . . . . She propped it carefully on the fireplace mantel, where they could look at it . . . . Hundreds of loaves of Mama's delicious bread had been served on that platter" (234). A home is not created by any one item, but both Laura and her mother had something which served as an emblem, anointing each new place a home after the necessary work had been done. Dolls and dishes may get written off as unimportant in many accounts of frontier life, but the shepherdess and the bread plate have great meaning and significance, as they represent all that goes into making each new place into a home. These items and the stories that go with them are often lost in histories but are remembered and passed on through Wilder's writings.

Although Wilder preserved specific details, such as the shepherdess, she did take creative liberties with other aspects of her life. While the *Little House* books are autobiographical, Wilder was very conscious of the story that she told and how she depicted frontier culture, her family, and herself. The *Little House* books were not Wilder's first attempts at authorship. Wilder was in her sixties when she began writing her novels. She was new to writing for children, but had already written an unpublished memoir and many newspaper and magazine pieces.

"Pioneer Girl" was Wilder's first attempt at memoir. Although well received, it was rejected by several publishers who told the author that there was little call for nonfiction at that time (Hill 133). Lane prompted Wilder to rework parts of "Pioneer Girl" into a children's story, and *Little House in the Big Woods* was born. *Little House in the Big Woods* was not initially going to be the start of a

series, but its popularity led to the writing and publishing of the others. As Wilder crafted the later books, she began to construct her story more carefully and because of this improvement in craftsmanship, there are several differences between "Pioneer Girl" and the *Little House* books.

Isolation is an overarching theme of the *Little House* books and perhaps the most carefully cultivated revision by Wilder. The fictional Ingalls family is far more on their own than the real figures who actually lived. In *Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Writer's Life,* Pamela Smith Hill points out that "Pioneer Girl" does not separate the family from others as the later published series of novels does: "In the memoir, Wilder wrote closer to the facts of her experience; in her novels, she transformed these experiences into an almost mythic kind of truth. She deliberately heightened her family's social and physical isolation, a transformation that ultimately strengthened not just her first novel, but the remaining books in the series" (17). Hill brings in many examples from the Ingalls family's real life to show this change, but the most surprising is that the family was not alone during the months depicted in *The Long Winter*; they actually had George and Maggie Masters and their newborn child staying with them (Hill 49). The omission is one of many and is key, for as Hill notes, "The fictional family's isolation sets them apart, makes them special, and gives their everyday lives an almost archetypal quality" (17). This mythic feel is more customary in men's frontier writings, but emerges fairly strongly in the *Little House* books.

Anita Clair Fellman remarks that the frontier that Wilder creates "is not a simple depiction of the way things 'really were' in her childhood but a collaborative creation born of memory, wish fulfillment, artistry, and ideology" (114) and urges readers not to consider the books to be a sacrosanct depiction of history. Looking back, Wilder had to decide how to frame her life. In essence, she had to decide whether to simply be or to perform for society. Wilder's writing is undoubtedly at least partially performative. Sidonie Smith explains that autobiography is inherently a performative genre in her article, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance." Arguing that "There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating" (17), Smith is instead asserting that the subjectivity built into an autobiography is unique and newly created during the autobiographic narration. The subjectivity that is created as a result of the autobiographic narration is also dependent

on the "interiority" that is foisted upon it by society. Explaining that "[t]he interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an effect of autobiographical storytelling" (18), Smith is exploring how autobiography is defined and delineated by the social forces that are at work during its creation. Thus, any autobiographic discourse is a performance whose shape and delivery are determined by both internal and external factors, with the external factors being so pervasive that they impact even the interiority that is revealed in the discourse. In essence, even as Wilder is writing the culture, the culture is writing her.

The combination of the interiority and the external factors create a rich cultural depiction. In Wilder's writings, there are places where we can see the conflicts between the desires of the self and of society. Laura's ever present sunbonnet is an example of this conflict, as it reveals her inner desires, society's dictates on women, and Wilder's attempts to reconcile these. Laura first comments on the limitations of the sunbonnet in *Little House on the Prairie* after Ma tells her to put the hated item on: "Laura's sunbonnet hung down her back. She pulled it up by its strings, and its sides came past her cheeks. When her sunbonnet was on she could see only what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat" (123). The struggle with the sunbonnet continues through the books, serving as a metaphor of Laura's struggles to become society's proper woman.

In one notable scene when Laura is thirteen, Ma criticizes again Laura's unkempt sunbonnet: "'It would be fresher,' Ma said, 'if you took care to keep it so.' Laura's bonnet was limp from hanging down her back and the strings were limp too. But that was Laura's own fault" (*Long Winter* 17). It is Laura's fault that she is not becoming the woman that Ma is or that society demands that she be. With this exchange, Wilder takes any blame from Ma and puts all of the responsibility on Laura for her less-than-ladylike moments. Even when Laura would seem to have become all that she was supposed to and has married Almanzo, the sunbonnet haunts her. Just as the couple is driving off to their new home after all of the goodbyes have been said, Grace, Laura's youngest sister, makes sure that Laura hears the message one last time:

> When Almanzo was lifting the reins, Grace came running with Laura's old slat sunbonnet. "You forgot this!" she called, holding it

> up. Almanzo checked the horses while Laura took the sunbonnet. As the horses started again, Grace called anxiously after them, "Remember, Laura, Ma says if you don't keep your sunbonnet on, you'll be brown as an Indian!" (*Golden Years* 284)

Everyone laughs, but the final sentiment that sends Laura off to begin married life is a reminder of the expectations of her as a woman. While Laura consistently chafes against gender constraints, she eventually conforms to society's and her parents' expectations. Whatever rebellion Wilder allows Laura, the texts also consistently reflect an image of what the author felt that women should be. Laura may never remember her sunbonnet, but the author never forgets to rebuke her for this. The reader, however, cheers Laura's escape from the dreaded sunbonnet.

These messages are as revealing as they are conflicting. I agree with Smith's notion that the subjectivity created in the moment of writing is unique and reflective of multiple influences, not just the moment that was lived. Thus, the fictional Laura is Wilder in her past and in the moment of authorship, revealing some feelings and truths of both perspectives. The sunbonnet shows society's expectations for women, Laura's resistance and struggle to conform, and, in my reading, Wilder's sympathy for her younger self, even as she reinforces the standards. With moments like these, with things that seem as simple as descriptions of sunbonnets, shepherdesses, and bread plates, Wilder not only voices a culture, but also simultaneously celebrates and critiques it.

I see more celebration than critique. Having read her books, I know what it takes to get a house or a shanty or a dugout ready to be christened a home by a china shepherdess. Laura came to learn this too, for in 1919, Wilder, writing for the first time not as Mrs. A.J. Wilder but as Laura Ingalls Wilder, wrote an article for *McCall's* on being a farm wife. She comments that "There has been a great deal of pity spent on the farmer's wife" (qtd. in *Sampler* 133), but notes:

> If you want to give, as well as to take; if you want to be your husband's full partner in business and homemaking; if you can stand on your own feet and face life as a whole, the troubles and difficulties and the real joys and growth that come from them; if you want an opportunity to be a fine, strong, free woman, then you are fitted for the life of a farmer's wife, to be his partner, the providence of your own little world of the farm and bread-giver to humanity, the true lady of the world. (qtd. in *Reader* 142-3)

The *Little House* books work to show that true lady of the world and how she came to be. In doing this, they also draw a picture of a little girl and a young woman on the American frontier. Laura Ingalls Wilder is more than an author of popular children's literature; she is a life writer and the voice of a culture.

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EDITING WITH HERB MARTIN

DAVID SHEVIN

There are so many wonderful stories about writers and editors. I always treasured the tale of the transatlantic cable that came when Scott Fitzgerald wanted a report of the sales on his latest book from Maxwell Perkins. Fitzgerald saved on the bill by sending a single character: a question mark. Perkins cabled back an exclamation point. Another tale of that era concerned the early days of *The New Yorker,* when the staff got the bright idea that Robert Benchley would make a dandy travel correspondent. Benchley arrived in Venice, Italy. Back in New York, a dispatch quickly came from Benchley: "STREETS FULL OF WATER. PLEASE ADVISE."

I became an editor for two of Herbert Woodward Martin's books partly by accident and partly by design. In the middle of the 1990s, I had been doing quite a bit of editing with Larry Smith and with his ambitious venture, Bottom Dog Press. (The name of that press, incidentally, comes from the age of Fitzgerald and Benchley: it is the title of the class-based experimental novel by Kansas City writer Edward Dahlberg, and delivered into press by D.H. Lawrence.) At the same time that Larry and I were projecting some plans for the press, Herbert Woodward Martin became the first artist in residence at the Paul Laurence Dunbar House in Dayton.

Herb, true to form, did an energetic and high-profile job in that post. Not only did he champion Dunbar's legacy, but he also set up a high-profile set of readings by black poets and publicized these well across Ohio. He wrote me in Tiffin, up in the Toledo corner of the state; we had been friends and correspondents for a couple of years by then. Among the readers were Pulitzer winner Yusef Komunyakaa and Central State University poet Deborah Ellen Stokes; Stokes was to become the second artist in residence at the Dunbar House.

By the time that Deb Stokes began her tenure as the second resident artist at the House, I had come to admire both poets and their divergent approaches to the Dunbar legacy. While Herb Martin had

embraced the whole legacy of the "Negro Shakespeare," including the dialect poetry and the minstrelsy that Howells celebrated, Stokes took a more selective approach, leaning to Dunbar's political essays, fiction, and standard English poetry as the source for her celebration. Given that both very talented writers were appearing in sequence and lifting the profile of literary Dayton, I proposed to Larry Smith at Bottom Dog Press that a collection of the two writers would make a good book. He agreed, and gave me a pretty free hand in the editing.

Working with Martin and Stokes proved to be widely different experiences. When I ran the book suggestion by the two writers, Martin quickly got me the manuscript that became *Galileo's Suns.* Herb is a wonderfully prolific writer, and a huge range of his experience turns to poetry. I received a large envelope full of materials from him in the mail—far more than a book's worth of material. I corresponded with him that we had only sixty to eighty pages to work in for the project, and he encouraged me to take a free hand in selecting from the materials. He did want to work with that title, *Galileo's Suns.* He said he had been thinking of the title for a long time and meditating on the challenges to religious and scientific orthodoxy that Galileo represented. (Similarly, I have often focused on what the conversations must have been like when former prisoner John Milton went to Rome to welcome Galileo upon the latter's release from prison.)

I looked for poems that went to narratives about struggle and challenge as we went back and forth on the poems to be included in the book. There was an embarrassment of riches in the manuscript, so I found a thread of poems that ran from childhood memories to current challenges. The poems remember ancestors, meditate on Midwestern segregation scenes, and intone observations on nature and human nature. I was especially taken with the contemplations on his parents and on Hermin, the grandfather. Then there was a magnificent prose poem, "An Abundance of Words," piecing together folklore and confrontations with the symbol of the coffin. ("The ironing board is shaped like a coffin," the old woman in the poem says. "Never take it out at night no matter what you do.")

If getting poems from Herb was easy, the task of working with Deb Stokes was a pleasure of a different order. Deb's poetry is a mix of spiritual precision and wild hilarity, and she is not always certain about what she wants to put into print. She is immensely talented, something of a protégé of Martin. She knew him when she was a

graduate student at the University of Dayton. She looked at the title Herbert had given to his section of the book and wanted a parallel verbal structure, a proper possessive and a noun for her title. Fortunately, she had already written a wonderful paean to pleasure called "Epicurus' Dominion." This became the title of her collection in a small anthology presenting the two books, *Suns and Dominions.*

I did not work with the same winnowing-the-wheat freedom Herb offered me in assembling *Epicurus' Dominion.* I met with Stokes often to select, adjust, and present the book. If Martin's approach to putting a book together was adaptability, Stokes's was grooming a child for church presentation. "Does this poem fit? Is this one too personal? Does this resound right in its placement?" were typical concerns. While *Galileo's Suns* was a process of selection and placement, *Epicurus' Dominion* was much more an exercise of birthing and creation. The difference of method echoes a difference of temperament. Martin pours ideas onto the page generously, while Stokes is more calculating in her crafting of a poem. Thus, one tends to be far more prolific than the other.

Of course, Stokes need not have worried so much. The work is strong, consistent, and uplifting. It is also interesting how the two poets present humor so differently. Martin has a humor that emerges from character and from foibles, while Stokes embraces wordplay: in one poem, she celebrates her "crazybugs," "looney" friends; another, entitled "America's a Holstein Cow," is subtitled "Mooove Over."

The two collections did share a common love of the drama of everyday experience. Martin's "What of the Pain in the Songs You Sing" is as tactile and sensual as the ceremony Stokes recollects in "Bathrite." Now, almost a decade after the book came out, I still am impressed at the way the poets complement each other in print as much as they do in an ongoing friendship.

Martin's poem, "My Mother at the End of Her Days," forecast the next project in which I engaged with him. Martin wrote a cycle of poetry concerning his mother's cancer battle, and we wrote back and forth on placement and shaping of that manuscript.

The next project we had come to press was another Bottom Dog book, the 2005 volume *Escape to the Promised Land.* On this one, I again had a large amount of manuscript to work with, which arrived unsectioned, like a long stream-of-consciousness epic. A lot had happened in Herb's career in rapid order. One award after another had

been coming his way, he had edited a couple of Dunbar editions, and Ron Primeau's biography was at press as we worked on the book. The first real issue that we debated was the title of the book. If my memory is correct (our family motto is "Often Wrong, Never Uncertain"), the title on the papers that came my way was *Painful Laughter.* If that is not exactly right, it was something similar, with an old and brooding feeling to it, like a Sherwood Anderson tale out of a gothic and forgotten prairie. I thought to myself, "This is fraught with symbolism, but just does not say what I think the book is about."

The phrase that really struck me was the title of a prose poem late in the collection, a reflection on leaving the young part of his life for New York City. The poem was called "Escape to the Promise Land." I loved how the title caught an air of liberation, a theme present in a lot of the book's poems. Too, the dropping of the final letter "d" on "Promise Land" echoed the way that my students so often write their speech. Instead of the participial form of the verb ("promised"), Herb had two nouns up against one another: "Promise Land." Like Lapland, or Candyland. The play inherent in this vernacular usage was so appealing!

Herb liked the idea of using this as the title poem for the book, but insisted on correcting the usage. The "d" would go in, and he was insistent. Now the book was *Escape to the Promised Land,* and I set about setting the collection into sections. We agreed by phone and post on which poems were to be included, and which would go, once again attentive to a page count. There were also a number of small suggestions about a line placement here, and a word choice there. Martin is one of those writers who hear suggestions on poetry filtered through his enormous skill as a musician. Each decision incorporated both measures of sense and sound. I once had a songwriter friend get irate over the posting of song lyrics all over the web: "Let nobody ever forget that a song is words AND MUSIC!" he proclaimed. Herb approaches poetry and the business of putting a book together with the sense of a songwriting collaborator. The sweet note goes with the deep sentiment, for access. The harsh note can mute the hilarity. The downbeat can carry the motif that will follow.

The sectioning of the manuscript was suggested by the original ordering of the selections. Some moving of order was required, but there were tones and themes that already suggested themselves. The first works were incantatory and called upon both spirit and traditions. The next poems grew from memoir. These often rested on per-

sonal and literary friendships; most of the experiences in this part of the book carry dedications to the other individuals involved. The third section looks more outward than inward; here we find the interpretations of Walker Evans photographs, the travel notes, the street scenes and the process descriptions. The fourth section accomplishes in verse what Ed Sanders calls "investigative poetry": what a reporter does with the paragraph, Martin accomplishes with the verse. Here we have essays on society and culture filled with carefully recorded notes of voice and detail. Instead of a personal, we have an attentive cultural memory at work. For example, we hear one story of an amputation and another of a superstition taken far too seriously. In another poem, an older black woman recounts Elvis Presley making his first Ed Sullivan appearance: "It's dangerous to watch that young man / from the waist down. He's pure sex" (*Escape to the Promised Land* 55). The final section, in a very spiritual way, captures and directs the lessons of deliverance that the book title suggests. The same way that "Escape to the Promise Land" echoes a liberation theology of the underground railroad, the gospel, and the spirituals, these poems direct the book toward a quirky and highly individualized sense of freedom.

Take, for example, the poem, "Grapes," which begins in images of the desired fruit just out reach, suspended from a tree, like the harvest in Aesop's fable. Martin comes to a very different conclusion than the Greek slave did: " . . . what lies we ate in those days when lightning electrified the air; /when it burned the synapses and we took axe to the tree./We found new implements of justice to change the roots of growing" (*Escape to the Promised Land* 74).

This final section ends with a remarkable personal incantation, "To Bedlam and Back," where the singer tests the madness of our times ("When Hate becomes a full fledged citizen,"/"When all the songs of love have vanished like wisps of smoke") and pleads repeatedly, "[T]ake me to Bedlam." After leading the reader through images from the commonplace to the visionary, the musician-poet calls upon a soprano's voice to anoint a personal order:

> When all the coca cola has been drunk
> take me to bedlam
> When all the lawyers have pleaded their own guilt
> O, take me to bedlam
> When the last tobacco reed has been extinguished
> take me to bedlam

> When Caballe has had the final opportunity to sing
> I shall have arrived at the gate of bedlam.
> (*Escape to the Promised Land* 80)

This theme of escape and deliverance was picked up well by publisher Larry Smith, who placed a panel from Jacob Lawrence's powerful "Migration of the Negro" on the book's cover. With the sections of the book now defined, I set to drawing titles, as for chapters, from the poetry. This was a simple part of the organization, for Martin's lyric intensity provided for memorable and surprising phrases: "Hungry Dilemmas of Word and Spirit," "The Hen Dips Snuff," "Angel Fury," "A Spare Turnip in this Land," and "Blue Unannounced Satellites."

Approaching each of the books, the choices for organization came by theme, rather than by tone or technique. For example, Martin often writes in the prose-poem form. No attempt was made to cull out prose poems from more traditional versification. Too, there was a modernist tradition for a poet to cull the light verse from the more weighty pronouncements; a famous example is that Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* is excluded from the *Collected Poems* and bears no resemblance at all to the bulk of his work. Here, too, no attempt was made to distinguish the devastating from the hilarious. In fact, reading any of Martin's collections, the reader will be surprised to turn from a page of solemn deliberation to a poem like "Advertisement," in which a woman posts a "Husband Wanted" personal:

> *...you must be willing to love any woman named julie ann pizza and enter her life with hat in hand preferably riding a palomino of distinguished breed vowing to be a party to everything the horse is inclined to do; you must hate zits and do everything to eradicate them from the body politic; you must love bubble gum and children on hot blue days as well as those days which are exactly opposite because I am a woman who requires it.* (*Escape to the Promised Land* 66)

The range of tones and topics that Martin manages to address in a book reflects the lessons he has learned from his own practice and from his mastery of the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who worked effectively in poetry, fiction, and the stage libretto. As Larry Smith and I planned the layout and the look of the cover for *Escape to the Promised Land*, the remarkable, affirmative author Carol Berge con-

tributed some words for the book jacket: "Although these poems are thoroughly modern in their range and exploration of forms, their innate classicism makes them feel like old friends to whom one can turn for wisdom, humor, warmth and deep compassion toward the human condition."

In these qualities, the books are much like Herbert Martin himself, to whom friendship and literature are virtual synonyms.

Subsequent to the publication of these Bottom Dog Press books, Kent State University Press brought out Martin's *Inscribing My Name. Selected Poems: New, Used, and Repossessed.* Approximately half of the poems from *Galileo's Suns* and a third of the poems from *Escape to the Promised Land* are anthologized in this new selected edition, and I was pleased to see that W. D. Snodgrass, in his forward to the book, singles out many from the first collection as among his favorites. Both Snodgrass and the author comment on the close associations of the compositions with the composition techniques in classical music. Reading the poems anew, this precision is just below the surface on every page. On the surface are bright discovery, hard-won insight, wide-eyed recognition, and a whole heap of fun.

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ANNUAL BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MIDWESTERN LITERATURE, 2005

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This bibliography includes primary and secondary sources of Midwestern literary genres published, for the most part, during 2005. Criteria for inclusion of authors are birth or residence within the twelve-state area that defines the Midwest. Fiction and poetry using Midwestern locales are included irrespective of their authors' ties with this region. Primary sources are listed alphabetically by author, including (if applicable) designations of locale within square brackets at the end of each citation. However, because of space constraints, primary source materials are limited to separately-published works; those appearing in literary journals and magazines are generally not included. Secondary sources, usually journal articles, books, or doctoral dissertations, are listed by subject.

Periodicals published for the first time in 2005 that relate in some way to Midwestern literature, either in subject, content, or locale, are listed alphabetically by title in the third and final section of this bibliography.

Not included in this bibliography are the following types of material: reprints or reissues of earlier works, except for some new or revised editions; baccalaureate or masters theses; entries in reference books; separate contents of collected essays or Festschriften; audio or video recordings; electronic databases; and internet websites which have the tendency to be unstable or ephemeral.

Abbreviations used in the citations denoting genre and publication types are as follows:

A	Anthology	juv	Juvenile fiction
bibl	Bibliography	lang	Language; linguistics

biog	Biography	M	Memoir
corr	Correspondence	N	Novel
crit	Criticism	P	Poetry
D	Drama	pub	Publishing; printing
I	Interview	rev	Review essay
jrnl	Journalism	S	Short fiction

Citations for novels, poetry, short stories, memoirs, and other types of literature about the Midwest, as well as those written by Midwestern authors, are continually sought by the editor for inclusion in this annual bibliography. Please send them to Robert Beasecker, University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, Michigan 49401.

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Loren Logsdon

of

Eureka College, winner of the 2009 MidAmerica Award

and

Scott Russell Sanders

of

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These awards, along with four writing prizes, will be presented on May 8th at the Society's 39th annual meeting, May 7-9, Michigan State University Union, East Lansing, Michigan.

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- Centennial Roundtable on Gene Stratton Porter's *Girl of the Limberlost,* chaired by Mary Obuchowski
- Presidential Panel on Wisconsin Women Writers, chaired by Kenneth Grant

For registration information, go to the "annual symposium" link at ssml.org

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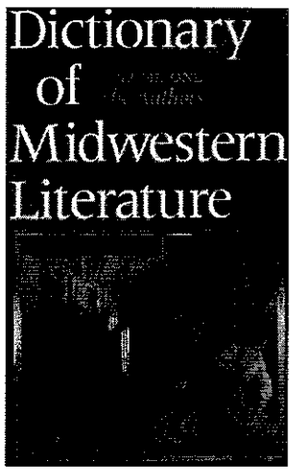

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1988	Diane Garden
1989	Maril Nowak
1990	Alice Friman
1991	Margo LaGattuta
1992	Daniel James Sundahl
1993	Sharon Klander
1994	Edward Haworth Hoeppner
1995	Mary Ann Samyn
1996	Terrence Glass
1997	Rod Phillips
1998	Ann Bardens
1999	Jim Gorman
2000	Diane Kendig
2001	Patricia Clark
2002	Leonora Smith
2003	Rane R. Arroyo
2004	Patricia Clark
2005	Claire van Breemen Downes
2006	Ellen Arl
2007	Todd Davis

PAUL SOMERS PRIZE FOR CREATIVE PROSE

1991	Mario Bruno
1992	Etta C. Abrahams
1993	Linda Ryeguild-Forsythe
1994	Christopher Stieber
1995	No prize given
1996	David Diamond
1997	Jim Gorman
1998	David Diamond
1999	Etta C. Abrahams
2000	Paul P. Somers
2001	Claire van Breemen Downes
2002	David Diamond
2003	Jim Gorman
2004	Michael Kula
2005	No prize given
2006	No prize given
2007	Maria Bruno

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2006	Michael Merva
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1995	Guy Szuberla
1996	Thomas Wetzel
1997	Nora Ruth Roberts
1998	Nancy McKinney
1999	Thomas Wetzel
2000	Kenneth B. Grant
2001	Robert Dunne
2002	No prize given
2003	Jeffrey Swenson
2004	Luchen Li
2005	No prize given
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2007	Christian P. Knoeller

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Frederick Manfred	1981
Wright Morris	1982
John Voelker (Robert Traver)	1983
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Gwendolyn Brooks	1985
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Andrew Greeley	1987
Harry Mark Petrakis	1988
Dudley Randall	1989
Jim Harrison	1990
Don Robertson	1991
Ray Bradbury	1992
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Herbert Woodward Martin	2002
David Citino	2003
Richard Thomas	2004
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Stuart Dybek	2007