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the Midwest as seen by non-Midwestern writers*

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## PREFACE

Inspired in part by “The Midwest as Seen by Midwestern Writers,” a Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature roundtable at the 2005 MLA conference, as well as the panel I organized for the 2008 SSML conference, “The Midwest as Seen by Non-Midwestern Writers,” and conceived as an alternative companion piece to the Spring 2009 issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*, which considered Midwesterners writing about places other than the Midwest, this issue investigates the constructions of the Midwest from a non-Midwestern perspective. Overall, the edition asks what this outsider perspective brings to the textual representations of the Midwest and what these depictions signify. The notion of writing “out of place,” resonates with the questions of regionalism today that explore and complicate the idea of region in much broader terms, as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have demonstrated in *Writing out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (U of Illinois P, 2003). The seven essays presented here offer wide-ranging responses to the notion of a Midwest as seen by non-Midwestern writers, documenting how, from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, artists, travelers, settlers, immigrants, feminists, and authors have explored disparate, rich, and varied Midwestern topics. Yet through their analyses, these essays are also connected by overlapping concepts of personal, regional, and national identity, constructions of self and nation, and the unique perspective of the outsider-insider.

Jeffrey Hotz investigates the implications of an Eastern readership for Caroline Kirkland’s first-person account of settlement in the Michigan territories in the late 1830s. In “Imagining a New West, a Midwest, in Caroline Kirkland’s *A New Home, Who’ll Follow?*” Hotz explores Kirkland’s attempts to “easternize” the West (a Midwest) in an effort to homogenize and domesticate the distinct diversity and flavor of the Midwestern frontier. Marilyn Atlas also touches on Kirkland’s work in her essay, “One Bostonian’s Romantic, Realistic, and Modern View of the Midwest: Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*.” Unlike Kirkland’s gendered position as a permanent outsider-insider, Atlas considers Margaret Fuller as an outsider visiting the Midwest. But through her narrative, her hybrid travelogue, “Atlas posits that the Midwest symbolizes a

new Eden for Fuller, which allows her to rediscover a sense of self. Here, the outsider can see inside, as it were. From this perspective, Fuller constructs both a sense of place and self that is feminist and egalitarian. Despite this derived empowerment, however, Fuller’s criticism of the region’s Indian Removals, much like the plight of the Indians observed by naturalist John James Audubon, also encapsulates some of the underlying tensions and anxieties of the region.

Christian Knoeller’s “Writing in History’s Wake: Audubon’s Portrayal of the Midwest in His Missouri River Journals” focuses on the Missouri travel journals of the naturalist. With a Caribbean birth and childhood in France, Audubon’s writing captures a dramatic, non-Midwestern depiction of the Midwestern frontier in 1843. In comparison to the earlier accounts of the Midwest by Lewis and Clark and the newspaper dispatches of the artist George Catlin, Audubon’s work records the transformation of the Midwestern frontier, its peoples (especially the Native Americans), and its communities. In the construction of his frontiersman identity, Knoeller argues, Audubon also creates a legendary American narrative out of his Midwestern journey.

Anita Helmbold’s “East Meets (Mid)West: Repressed Violence and Violent Repression in Stephen Crane’s ‘The Blue Hotel’” addresses the more extreme brutality of this Midwestern life and culture. To Crane, the Midwest is neither idyllic nor civilized; rather it is a savage and hostile environment, especially for outsiders as the tale’s main protagonist, a New Yorker and a Swede, discovers. Helmbold notes the story is constructed to focus on the experiences of outsiders in contact with Midwestern society, an experience which is a lot less affirming than Margaret Fuller’s trip to the Midwest and a lot more alienating than the struggles portrayed by Drude Krog Janson and Olë Rølvaag.

The sense of alienation and clash of cultures evident in Crane’s “Blue Hotel” is embedded in the analysis of the next essay, “The Midwest, the Artist, and the Critics: Edith Wharton’s *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*” by Jayne Waterman. Waterman contends that Wharton, instead of perpetuating Midwestern stereotypes as critics charged, portrays the Midwest in far more subtle and complex ways. Wharton’s Midwest is constructed as a metaphor and a catalyst to parody the modern and revive the values of the past. In this way, the region becomes a textually analogous template that allows Wharton to sharpen her critical commentary of modern

America and understand her identity as a writer from both an inside and outside perspective.

Rosalie Baum's "Depictions of the Midwest by Drude Krog Janson and Olë Rølvaag," in its analysis of two Norwegian works about the process of Americanization through the Midwestern region (Minnesota and South Dakota), speaks to another source of regional distress: immigrant outsiders adjusting to their new life in the Midwest. Without any real sense of belonging, these novels capture the trauma of transition and transformation in a diverse region that is constantly forced to redefine its identity. In the final essay, the British viewpoint of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* introduces an additional perspective: the presence of mythology, magic and the supernatural in the Midwestern landscape. In "'Flyover Country': Neil Gaiman's Extraordinary Perceptions of the Midwest," Sara Kosiba argues that instead of perpetuating Midwestern stereotypes as critics charged, Gaiman takes the ordinary elements of Midwestern culture and renders them extraordinary by foregrounding these marks of regional distinctiveness against the homogenizing forces of globalization and technology. Through the heightened awareness of an author as outsider looking in, the novel's past and present, represented by the ancestral gods and the new gods, provoke a fresh understanding not only of the Midwest, but also of America. And it is this fresh understanding that characterizes the approach and aim of this special edition of *Midwestern Miscellany*.

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IMAGINING A NEW WEST, A MIDWEST, IN CAROLINE  
KIRKLAND'S *A NEW HOME, WHO'LL FOLLOW?*

JEFFREY HOTZ

Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?; or Glimpses of Western Life* (1839) offers a compelling woman's voice within the larger national narrative of Manifest Destiny and western settlement that took place in the first half of the nineteenth century. A native New Yorker, Caroline Kirkland migrated west to the Michigan Territory with her schoolteacher husband William and their family in 1835, first settling in Detroit and then founding the town of Pinckney, Michigan. Between 1835 and 1836 William Kirkland had purchased over thirteen hundred acres of land in order to realize his dream of settling his own town (Osborne 23). William Kirkland was one speculator among many during the land speculation boom of the mid-1830s that preceded the Panic of 1837. Caroline Kirkland's experience, as she moved with her four children to Pinckney, Michigan, would have been similar to many Eastern families who traveled west; her voice is, thus, one among many. Yet Kirkland's final vision, what she heralds as the future of the Michigan Territory, ironically takes shape as a replication of Eastern values and traditions that have been transplanted in the West. Kirkland imagines new settlements and homes that gradually homogenize the frontier's vast demographic, cultural, and ecological diversity into a monocultural vision or a single voice, defined by the ethos of white, predominately Anglo-American, middle-class domesticity.

Accelerated migration west of the Appalachian Mountains in the 1830s and 1840s also coincided with a population explosion in the United States. The nation grew from roughly six million people in 1800 to seventeen million, according to the 1840 census (Hietala viii). By the 1840s, the US population west of the Appalachian Mountains was equal to the population of the eastern United States

(Watts and Rachels xiii). Only four decades earlier, the center of American society and culture had been along the Atlantic seaboard, stretching from Baltimore to Boston. In his *History of the United States of America during the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (1889), Henry Adams notes that of the nearly six million people living in the United States in 1800, "more than two thirds of the people clung to the seaboard within fifty miles of tide-water, where along the wants of civilized life could be supplied" (5). The Kirklands' decision to settle in the West was part of a larger migration that shaped the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Caroline Kirkland's narrative of Michigan settlement exists as well within larger national debates concerning slavery and the status of Native Americans in the Great Lakes Region, as well as in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Tense national political debates about slavery centered on westward expansion, and the final admission of territories as states was calculated to maintain the tenuous equilibrium between free and slave states so that there would be electoral parity in the US Senate. For example, when Michigan entered the Union as the nation's twenty-sixth state in 1837—the same year that the Kirkland family embarked for Pinckney—Michigan's admission as a free state had followed Arkansas's admission as a slave state one year earlier, ensuring a thirteen-thirteen split between free and slave states (Nobles 141). In 1830, to address the reality of Native Americans living in the West and appease white settlers' desire for land, Congress passed and President Andrew Jackson signed into law the Indian Removal Act, which authorized forcible land purchases from Native American nations east of the Mississippi in exchange for lands further west. Implicit in Kirkland's vision of Michigan, and in her family's own migration, then, are complex attitudes toward the land that connect to all aspects of US national expansion.

Kirkland begins her 1839 account of her experiences in rural Michigan with a deceptively simple declaration? "I claim for these straggling and cloud crayon-sketches of life and manners in the remoter parts of Michigan, the merit of general truth of outline" (v). Kirkland's principal aim, however, is overtly political. Her family's settlement and her realistic nonfiction account of settlement endeavor to help lead the way toward the creation of a genteel civil society in Michigan in the late 1830s. Reginald Horsman describes the justification for US westward expansion in the nineteenth century as "an argument that only the Anglo-Saxon could bring the political

and economic changes that would make possible unlimited world progress" (189). The goal of settlement, and the intention of the book itself, is a concerted translation of values and culture, where Easterners migrate to the West and then transplant a version of culture that produces both a home and a literature: a site of newness. The title of Kirkland's account asks both pointedly and somewhat ironically, "Who'll Follow?" It raises the hope that others like Caroline Kirkland will settle in western regions like Michigan. Kirkland answers this question through depiction of marriages that flourish in the West and the homes that these characters create. Juxtaposed with these success stories, Kirkland presents "other" characters who, having settled in the West, must eventually depart because they are unable, or unwilling, to conform to a larger version of what the West should be.

Writing for an Eastern readership that she knew well, Kirkland discusses with candor the hardships of life in the contact zone of rural Michigan. The term "contact zone," coined by Mary Louise Pratt, describes "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relationships" (8). Kirkland's contact zone includes both her actual experience in the West and her translation of these experiences for her readers. Through the use of humor, sophisticated literary allusions, and a blend of genres, Kirkland creates a narrator, the self-deprecating Mrs. Clavers, whose voice mitigates and counterbalances the realism of the text. The main cultural encounters in the text center on the experiences of the well-educated, bourgeois New Yorker, Mrs. Clavers, as she interacts with her less sophisticated Michigan neighbors: farmers, land speculators, and settlers.

Impressed with her style and the larger conceit of a cultured Eastern woman's encounter with the West, the antebellum Eastern press reviewed *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* favorably, with many critics, like Edgar Allan Poe, praising its mix of realistic depictions with an entertaining, light writing style (Zagarell xi; Osborne 53). Kirkland's understanding of her audience's desires resulted in both a popular and critically acclaimed work that by 1842 had been through three editions (Kreger, "A Bibliography" 300). Through 1855, another nine editions followed (Kreger, "A Biography" 300). The contemporary success of the narrative lies in Kirkland's creation of Mrs. Clavers's unique narrative voice. Mrs. Clavers's voice and person offer a linguistic middle ground, a virtual contact zone, where an

Eastern reader would have the pleasure of encountering a seemingly realistic Western experience. Michigan is presented as an idea as much as an actual physical place, and Mrs. Clavers as a narrator participates in crafting a vision of place and geography that is realistic and immediate, yet waiting to be invented anew in a romantic manner. Although the term "Midwest" did not appear until 1894 in *Overland Monthly* (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), Kirkland, through Mrs. Clavers, presents an idea of Michigan as a Midwest, a heterogeneous zone of disparate peoples and values that are reconciled in her own satiric voice, becoming homogeneous and normalized in the text and in the vision of a new future. The West that Kirkland imagines appeals to an Eastern readership because it is a West that is becoming like the East, with each new settler like Mrs. Clavers contributing to the process of transformation.

Edward Watts and David Rachels describe the geography of the territory west of the original thirteen colonies up to the Mississippi River as the "First West," an area that underwent a process of exploration and settlement through the middle of the nineteenth century (xiii). They note that this territory encompassed "what was known as the 'west' in most antebellum American publications: the eastern Mississippi and Ohio valleys and the southern Great Lakes Region" (xv). The present-day core of the Midwest had been originally conceived of as the Northwest Territory with the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1787 (Glazner 23). This Midwest embodies incredible diversity in terms of Native American nations in both pre- and post-Columbian contact; patterns of European settlement; the varied ethnicities and classes of American settlers; the cultural histories that were established; and the natural resources available in specific geographies. The Michigan Territory, out of which Michigan and Wisconsin became states, although a subset of this whole, is defined by similar heterogeneity.

Kirkland's *A New Home*, with its standing invitation to Eastern readers, explains not only Montacute, the fictionalized version of the actual town of Pinckney, but also this larger complex geography, which an antebellum urban reader might have simply understood as "the West." Interestingly, Mrs. Clavers's effort to name the town involves choosing a name that is "a title at once simple and dignified—striking and euphonious" (12) in order to advertise to potential investors and settlers from the East. The selected name of Montacute references English nobility on the Salisbury line (Zagarell 204) and

is thus a way of simplifying and making sense of a vast heterogeneous space in terms of an established English name. This forthright description of how the very act of naming of Montacute is designed to appeal to investors serves as a metaphor for the project of the narrative itself: to render Michigan comprehensible in self-consciously realistic terms and yet still make in desirable to an Eastern reader.

Kirkland's version, then, of a motley contact zone as "a new home," literally expressed in the language of domesticity, anticipates a general homogenizing of the manners and customs of the country with the admixture of Easterners. Her work domesticates Michigan as a Midwest palatable to the East. Erika Kreger argues that Kirkland's depiction of Michigan, like the depictions of rural life by such contemporaries as Susan Fenimore Cooper in *The Rural Hours* (1850) and Alice Cary in *Clovernook* (1852), emphasizes "the value of an interdependent rustic life driven by communal rather than capitalistic forces and challenging conventional assumptions of what matters in both life and literature" ("Rustic Matters" 194). Annette Kolodny has characterized Kirkland's narrative as the "first sustained expression of American realism . . . derived . . . from a woman's need to reject (for herself and for others of her sex) the available *male* fantasies [of the West]" (157, italics in original). Kreger and Kolodny are both correct that the community vision established by wives and mothers provides an alternative to male fantasy; however, Mrs. Clavers's voice also expresses an underlying nationalism that subsumes the local and posits a future vision of the Midwest as a place of sameness in terms of class and race. Those who do not conform to Mrs. Clavers's vision of home, which is aligned to the East, will disappear; a process that already has begun in Montacute. The feminist vision, therefore, contains implicit within it a masculine controlling aim.

For instance, after telling a story about a Montacute mob that attacked an itinerant ventriloquist for no apparent reason, Mrs. Clavers notes that these unruly neighbors have thankfully left: "The most mobbish of our neighbors have flitted westward, seeking more congenial association. I trust they will be so well satisfied that they will not think of returning" (119). This leveling vision of a future community where undesirables have departed underlies all of Mrs. Clavers's realistic critiques of the West. Towns like Montacute, thus, have a manifest destiny all their own, defined by people who gradually become civilized by an emerging Eastern sensibility in the West

and a subset of people, who failing in this, eventually leave. Mrs. Clavers's realism must be read in terms of a latent idealistic vision of a national upper-middle-class community that extends from the East to the near West and which depends on continued settlement ever westward, where undesirable, irreclaimable people relocate and remove.

A main focus of the narrative is the home itself as a physical place and as a symbol. In chapters twelve and seventeen, Mrs. Clavers describes her first two homes in the West, a temporary log cabin that she and her family live in for a few months and their new permanent home in Montacute. These two homes themselves register a transition not only in the family's fortunes but also in the development of Montacute as a town, and by extension, of Michigan as a place. The homes represent the process of settlement, which will only be complete with the final long-term goal of replicating the comforts of the old home in the East in the new home in the West.

Eager to live under her own roof and not as a boarder with the Ketchum family, Mrs. Clavers chooses to move her entire family into the log cabin formerly tenanted by Mr. Green before Mr. Clavers returns from a business trip to Detroit. Historian Julie Roy Jeffrey observes that in women's literature "a favorite character, the pioneer mother and wife, was a heroic and domestic figure" (30). Here, Mrs. Clavers attempts to fulfill that role, but in keeping with the ironic self-deprecation of the narrator, she admits to being overwhelmed. She writes, "Behold me then seated on a box, in the midst of as anomalous a congregation of household goods as ever met under one roof in the backwoods, engaged in the seemingly hopeless task of calling order out of chaos" (42). The family's expensive moveable goods, which have been shipped from New York, would be unusual in any Montacute home or in any home in a recent Western settlement and are that much more anomalous when placed in a temporary log cabin. Mrs. Jennings, who is assisting Mrs. Clavers in unpacking, asks, "What on airth's them gimcracks for?" (42), when she sees japanned tables. At last, enlisting the help of a "neat looking girl" (44) through Mr. Jennings's suggestion, Mrs. Clavers resigns herself to her situation: "My ideas of comfort were by this time narrowed down to a well-swept room with a bed in one corner, and cooking apparatus in another—and this just fourteen days from the city!" (44).

In the winter, the family finally moves into its new home. "Our new house," Mrs. Clavers recalls, "was merely the beginning of a

house, intended for the reception of a front-building, Yankee-fashion, whenever the owner should be able to enlarge his borders" (64). The incomplete nature of the house nevertheless seems "absolutely sumptuous" (65) to Mrs. Clavers when compared to the log cabin. This move from log cabin to frame house in town heralds a real improvement in living standards and underscores Mrs. Clavers's acceptance of the temporary limitations of Western living: interestingly, from this point forward, the narrative contains very few descriptions of her own physical home. The richest linguistic description of the home in the narrative comes from the initial glee of Alice, a servant, who upon seeing "a kitchen, a real kitchen!" feels more elated than Robinson Crusoe in his "successive acquisitions" (65).

The scale of the house in its lack of completion metaphorically suggests a vision of a more prosperous future in the West, the promise of the realization of Mr. Clavers's dreams in years to come. The absence of further descriptions of the Claverses' new home in the narrative is ironic, given the title of the work, and yet this is likely a deliberate technique to blunt the text's realism by minimizing the Claverses' economic advantages over her Western neighbors while also minimizing differences between her home and those of her Eastern readers, whom the narrator attempts to entice westward. The absence of this physical home in the narrative—aside from the sketch—is another homogenizing impulse that effects the revision of the log cabin—an intolerable living situation for a woman like Mrs. Clavers—and thus suggests an outline of homes to come for Mrs. Clavers and those like her who will migrate from the East.

In contrast, Mrs. Rivers, Mrs. Clavers's closest friend and another bourgeois émigré from the East, is unable to appreciate her own home, which is much like Mrs. Clavers's home. Mrs. Rivers's home lacks Eastern comforts but is superior to most other homes in Montacute. "Mrs. Rivers, who was fresh from 'the settlements,'" Mrs. Clavers observes, "often curled her pretty lip at the deficiencies in her mansion, but we had learned to prize any thing which was even a shade above the wigwam" (65). In an attempt to re-educate Mrs. Rivers about rural life, Mrs. Clavers gives her advice on the importance of cooperating with neighbors, even those who are of an entirely different social station: "What can be more absurd than a feeling of proud distinction, where a stray spark of fire, a sudden illness, or a day's contretemps, may throw you entirely on the kindness of your humblest neighbor?" (65).

Ana-Isabel Aliaga-Buchenau describes the friendship between Mrs. Clavers and Mrs. Rivers as "representative of a certain kind of female bonding born out of the situation on the frontier" (74). Significantly, the different views on their homes, expressed at the outset of their friendship, foreshadow the eventual departure of the Rivers family, who are unable to acclimate to the West. Mrs. Rivers's husband, Harley, a reprobate whose face "showed but too plainly the marks of early excess" (64), eventually absconds from Montacute after deliberately setting up a Wildcat bank, the Merchants' and Manufacturers' Bank of Tinkerville. In the role of bank president, Mr. Rivers defrauds the neighboring farmers by issuing unsupported paper specie in exchange for the farmers' hard currency and goods (126). Eluding law and the wrath of their Montacute neighbors, the Riverses return to the East with their ill-gotten gains. The reverse-migration east of the Rivers family is another example of how the Western community becomes harmonized, almost through a natural process of adaptation and adjustment.

Between the Rivers family and the real-life Kirklands is a notable similarity: each family returns to the East. Feeling burdened that they had encouraged investors to put capital in land speculations of William Kirkland and Company that failed after the Panic of 1837, the Kirklands themselves left Michigan in 1843 and returned to New York City (Osborne 25). Another reason for the Kirklands' departure was a longing for the culture of the East. (Kreger, "A Bibliography" 302). Despite her own reverse departure, Caroline Kirkland's later writings about the West, particularly *Forest Life* (1842) and *Western Clearings* (1845), express a vision of the Western pluralism emerging into a dynamic, unified community. As Sandra A. Zagarell puts it, "For Kirkland, the 'West' is a site where culture must be created from these heterogeneous and often conflicting groups, and *A New Home* traces the process of their slow and usually testy mutual accommodation" (xxix). The process of accommodation projects into the future a core of shared beliefs and values out of which a community identity is born. This future is akin to the Claverses' unfinished home. Those who do not fit into this vision or cannot wait for it leave, either traveling further west or east, before the anticipated future is realized.

In chapters twenty-four, twenty-five, and twenty-six—a middle section of the narrative that harkens directly to a sentimental literary tradition—Mrs. Clavers describes the three marriages of Mrs. Agnes



Beckworth. These marriages are analogues to the settlement of the West itself: the Beckworth family, like the West as a whole, defies ready comprehension but eventually becomes unified. While Mrs. Agnes Beckworth is in the kitchen making tea for Mrs. Clavers and Mrs. Rivers, who have paid a social call, Mrs. Clavers learns from Mr. Henry Beckworth that Agnes has a daughter, Mary Jane Harrington, and a son, Charles Boon, from two separate marriages. Startled that a woman with Mrs. Beckworth's "mild, intelligent, and very pleasing," countenance could have a personal history that comprises three marriages, Mrs. Clavers exclaims aloud, "Mrs. Beckworth thrice married! Impossible!" (88). When Mrs. Beckworth returns to the room with the tea, the conversation about marriages politely shifts to more general, safer topics, only to resume when Mr. Beckworth accompanies Mrs. Clavers and Mrs. Rivers part of the way back to Montacute.

The romance of Mr. and Mrs. Beckworth merits recounting in detail because their story exemplifies how the complexities of the East can be resolved in the West in "novel" ways—pun intended—that are beneficial to men and women. The tale of Mrs. Beckworth's three marriages begins with the budding but ill-fated romance between two cousins, Agnes Irving and Henry Beckworth, in Massachusetts. The culmination of their mutual affection in matrimony is forestalled by Agnes's poverty and Henry's desire to aid the Irving family economically. Unemployed, Henry reluctantly signs on as a sailor on an East India voyage and directs in a letter to Agnes—a letter that she never receives—that Agnes draw each week from his salary to support her family. When Henry returns two years later in confident hope of matrimony, he learns that out of desperate poverty Agnes has married John Harrington, who was able to provide a comfortable home for Agnes and her mother. Overcome with rage and sadness, Henry undertakes another voyage, which is plagued by numerous mishaps, and he returns many years later to learn that Agnes is now a widow. Arriving in his Massachusetts hometown, Henry resolves to propose again, but when he learns that Agnes is on the verge of marrying again, to Colonel Boon, an eligible and prosperous suitor, he desists. Since he is still impoverished, Henry chooses to depart on a five-year whaling expedition, concluding that this decision is in the best interests of Agnes and her daughter from her first marriage. Upon his return, after many years of travel, Henry, ever faithful to Agnes, learns she is again a widow and this time offers

his hand in marriage. At first she refuses, but when Agnes learns of Henry's travails and his constancy to her—"the whole web of his past life" (90)—she accepts his proposal. As middle-aged newlyweds, they move to Michigan more than two and a half decades after first falling in love.

Agnes's three marriages suggest possibility, feminist agency, and a woman's capacity for reinvention in the face of economic crisis. The placement of Agnes Irving's story in the middle of the book allows for multiple interpretations. Mary Kelley argues that critics should focus especially on the middle sections of nineteenth-century women's writing because these middle portions often "establish an area of female independence, competence, emotional complexity, and intellectual acumen that sets the stage for other women . . . to 'read' a far different message than the ones the novels overtly profess" (21). Agnes, who is described sympathetically throughout these chapters, marries for many reasons, including financial and familial concerns as well as love, and after each marriage, Agnes must support herself and her children. Agnes's actions stem from diverse motivations, and Mrs. Clavers focuses the story of the Beckworth's marriage on Henry Beckworth's version of events, as if to invite readers to form their own conclusions. Mrs. Clavers comments before she learns of Agnes's story that "like so many western settlers, the fair and pensive matron had a story" (88).

Significantly, Mr. Beckworth will only tell the story to Mrs. Clavers privately, while acting as a guide on horseback after the visit is over. Here, Mr. Beckworth recognizes Mrs. Clavers's own independence and she becomes his confidant. In retelling the story, Mrs. Clavers reaffirms the intrinsic value and importance of good women like Agnes in the eyes of faithful men like Mr. Beckworth. On these grounds, she advises a skeptical reader to accept the truth of her account: "Let none imagine that this tale of man's constancy must be the dream of my fancy" (98). Mrs. Clavers's reassurance subtly criticizes men by implying that a reader might be inclined to believe that the lack of such constancy is a male characteristic.

In keeping with the actual physical home as a symbol of the domestic sphere, the Beckworth family home is "not a Michigan farmhouse, but a great, noble, yankee 'palace of pine boards,' looking like a cantle of Massachusetts or Western New-York dropped *par hazzard*, in these remote parts" (87). The home, like the Beckworth marriage, represents metaphorically an ideal vision of a future

Michigan, transformed out of apparent chaos into an ideal order. The house correlates with the Beckworths' own moral goodness and faithfulness to the best of Eastern values, now transported to a Western setting.

To counterbalance the story of the Beckworths' happiness and to highlight the limits of possibility in the West, Mrs. Clavers relates the story of the Newlands, who live off the alms of their neighbors due to deceit and the alcoholism of Mr. Newland. If the Beckworths' story blends into the larger narrative of an ideal Western settlement defined by intriguing characters with unique histories, the Newlands' story has no place in this envisioned world. Describing a social call that she and Mr. Clavers pay at Christmas that is the antithesis of the visit with the Beckworth family, Mrs. Clavers expresses her dismay at finding Mr. and Mrs. Newland intoxicated and their children inappropriately dressed. According to Mrs. Clavers, the daughters were "decked in tawdry, dirty finery, and wearing any look but that of the modest country maiden, who, in 'choosing her garments, counts no bravery in the world like decency'" (109). Mrs. Clavers then recounts how Amelia Newland, the oldest daughter, died as a result of a failed abortion, most likely having gotten pregnant while staying "at a hotel in a large village at some distance" (109). Mrs. Clavers leaves open by suggestion, however, the even more unnerving possibility of an incestuous relationship, based on her description of the children's rakish clothing on her visit. She describes the abortion as "but one fatal instance out of the *many cases*, wherein life was periled in the desperate effort to elude the 'slow unmoving finger' of public scorn" (111). The Newlands consequently leave Montacute for points west; according to a relieved Mrs. Clavers, "the wide west is rapidly drafting off those whom we shall regret as little as the Newlands" (111).

In contrast to the stability of the Beckworths' home, much of the Newlands' home, a log-house, is physically dismantled by the Newlands and their neighbors: house parts are used for other purposes, including roof shingles that are refashioned into "quail traps" (111). The Newlands' presence is literally removed from the neighborhood, and fittingly, given their surname, they move to a new land. To make the erasure of the Newlands complete, the next chapter, chapter twenty-nine, begins with a scientific description of the rich fertility of the Michigan soil and its ability to nourish numerous crops despite Mrs. Clavers's perception that the climate there is generally dry. The soil of Michigan, like Montacute itself, is depicted as

innately regenerative, provided that the right elements are in place. In this chapter, Mrs. Clavers digresses into another scientific discussion of forest fires, enabling yet another figurative clearing of persons like Amelia Newland and her family, who are akin to dead wood and brush.

The Newlands and the Riverses encompass two ends of the economic and class spectrum of white settlers who cannot be homogenized and incorporated into the fabric of Western life. Most of the other characters, from the social climbing Miss Fidler to the indefatigably critical Mrs. Nippers, are reconstituted within the value structure of the West. Lori Merish rightly observes that "the opposition between lower-class vulgarity and upper-class civility . . . is one of the narrative's structuring oppositions" (495); the text itself finds a middle ground in which oppositions caused by economic and social inequalities become absorbed in a community that wards off extremism on both sides. Denise Kay Jacobs points out that Mrs. Clavers uses humor to unite all of the remaining characters that fall within the extremes, so that "readers might have felt as if they were participating in a broader democracy if they could laugh at themselves" (92). Humor becomes the index of difference, and characters from the lower classes, like Simon Jenkins, are often treated in a comical vein.

While addressing differences among white settlers along class lines in terms of an emerging, leveled community, Mrs. Clavers minimizes the real impact of white settlement on existing Native American communities, implying that Native peoples are inevitably disappearing through a process of self-destruction. She refers to the Native Americans she encounters as generic "Indians" instead of identifying their national tribal identity: they would likely have been Chippewa. For Mrs. Clavers, Native peoples lack any identifiable human community, and she only discusses Native Americans in terms of alcoholism or as objects of comic relief. For example, in a flat and nonexpository style, she recounts a story of "wretched looking Indians" who give "an Indian war-whoop" at a French trader's house in order to buy whiskey in the middle of the night (29). The Frenchman reprimands the Native Americans, and chastened, they meekly depart. Later, she describes Native Americans' ostentation when receiving beads or blankets: they have "an air of look at me" that "Broadway could hardly exceed" (81). In the same chapter, Mrs. Clavers expresses an uninterested, nonchalant attitude about the Native Americans whom she and Mrs. Rivers will likely see on the

road to Tinkerville, pointing out to Mrs. Rivers, who is unused to Native Americans, that “we should probably meet dozens of them in the course of our short ride” (85). Mrs. Clavers does not consider Native Americans outside of the brush strokes of unreflective caricature because she assumes that they are not part of Montacute’s future or the future of the West. In a narrative concerned with the physical, emotional, and communal dynamics of home, Mrs. Clavers elides the reality of Native American homes in the West: these homes are not represented in this book.

Lucy Maddox argues that “the question of whether Indians and whites could inhabit the same territory, physical or metaphysical, was unavoidable . . . and it was a question that had to be confronted by anyone who participated—whether by moving to the frontier, by becoming a candidate for office, or even voting for one, or by publishing a book—in extension to the claims of white culture to full possession of the country” (6). Mrs. Clavers confronts the question largely by ignoring it. Merish astutely notes that “the narrative’s (partial) erasure of Indians on the frontier, metaphorically registers the violence of Jacksonian policies of Indian ‘removal’ and dispossession and repressed the source of interracial struggle” (494). Unlike the Newlands and white families like them who move further west or families like the Riverses who return to the East, the narrative identifies no place—indeed no direction—for Native Americans except the liminal spaces between settlements, represented largely as absences in both a present and a future in which Native Americans appear to have no stake.

Mrs. Clavers concludes the narration with a revision of the Beckworth marriage in a six-chapter yarn of the marriage of two cousins from New York: Everard Hastings and Cora Mansfield. In chapters thirty-seven to forty-one, Mrs. Clavers chronicles the story of a young couple who choose to elope because they are too impatient to wait the three-year engagement period set by their parents. At the time of their engagement, Mrs. Clavers confides, Cora was “almost sixteen, reader, and *thought* herself a woman at least, though her mother—but that’s quite another thing” (155). The young couple flees clandestinely to Albany, New York, setting up a home on a few spare acres that they purchase from Mr. Gridley. During this interlude, Everard does not refer publicly to Cora as his wife, either when he checks into the hotel or later, when Mr. Gridley asks if he is married before selling his land. To the latter question, Everard replies, “I can assure you—I can assure you—” (165). Mrs. Clavers, in fact, never describes the marriage cer-

emony itself and their marriage is simply assumed. The story concludes with Cora’s pregnancy, the birth of a child who nearly dies of smallpox but survives, and the eventual happy reunion of the children with their parents. Because of financial reverses to the business of Hastings and Mansfield, which is co-owned by the couples’ parents, Everard and Cora must migrate west to Michigan to seek their own future.

The story of Cora and Everard’s romance functions as the climax of *A New Home, Who’ll Follow?* and gives one answer, through the persons of Cora and Everard, to the question posed in the title. Mrs. Clavers’s telling of Cora and Everard’s story rewrites Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (1791, 1794), a perennial favorite throughout the nineteenth century, which went through more than two hundred editions by the end of the century (Baym, et al. 879). However, unlike Charlotte Temple, who is abandoned by her lover Montraville and dies during childbirth, Cora Mansfield not only survives but succeeds, despite her decision to give in to her sexual impulses and to disobey her family. Cora and Everard’s romance, while beginning along the trajectory of *Charlotte Temple*—the story of the innocent young Charlotte who, like Cora, is not yet sixteen years old, and who is nevertheless enticed to marry—ends with Mrs. Clavers asserting that they are “the happiest people of my acquaintance” (169). If the story of the Beckworth family suggests Michigan as a place of renewal, Cora and Everard’s romance posits Michigan as a place for beginnings and new versions of old stories. Revising *Charlotte Temple* in the final chapters of *A New Home*, Mrs. Clavers underscores how the West is a place where even unlikely stories, like this one, bordering on the immoral, can blend into a whole narrative of Western potential. Inserting verse into the end of the narrative of the young Hastings family, Mrs. Clavers describes Everard and Cora’s ultimate yearning as a desire to return to a more natural past: “To forsake / Earth’s trouble waters for a purer spring” (169). Their disobedience becomes reconfigured as a naturalist longing for something new, wild, and wholesome: the prevailing ideology of the American West.

In her creation of Mrs. Clavers as a narrator, Caroline Kirkland balances stark realism with unexamined beliefs about the certainties of settlement that engage the politics of Jacksonian imperialism of the 1830s. Resolution of class conflict occurs by the dispersion, east and west, of those who do not fit into a vision of a homogeneous white Western village shaped by common communal values; those who

remain, like the Kirklands, at least until 1843, become incorporated within a community of shared values and shared white identity. Rachel Borup observes that Kirkland aims to “domesticate the West by making a case that the central drama of the region is the settlement of families and, in the words of her title, the construction of ‘new homes.’” (229). Yet construction of these new homes remained dependent on further displacements and unquestioned acceptance of the moral rightness of the larger process, if not its more specific manifestations. Mrs. Clavers explains this process with a simple formulation that blends the language of high and low, borrowing the language of both Western and Eastern class consciousness: “one cannot help observing that ‘leveling upwards’ is much more congenial to ‘human nature,’ than leveling downwards: (185).

The final amalgamation of values and peoples in *A New Home* is a vision of American exceptionalism. The narrative offers a bifurcated vision of the reality of what is and the promise of what will come in the future. Although John O’Sullivan would not develop the phrase “Manifest Destiny” until 1845, Kirkland’s *A New Home* and its representation of a Michigan that is “levelling upwards” through new marriages and new homes anticipates the rapid national expansionism of the 1840s. As evidenced in the destinies of Kirkland’s exemplary married couples, the new state of Michigan, despite its problems, can absorb white populations and reshape them into an integral American community. New towns like Montacute support a larger ideology and a belief that further expansion westward is on the near horizon, contingent upon all those “who’ll follow.”

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ONE BOSTONIAN'S ROMANTIC, REALISTIC, AND  
MODERN VIEW OF THE MIDWEST: MARGARET  
FULLER'S *SUMMER ON THE LAKES, IN 1843*

MARILYN JUDITH ATLAS

Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (1844), her first full-length work, published when she was thirty-four years old, six years before her death, has been seen through many fascinating and contradictory lenses.<sup>1</sup> This essay explores how Fuller's hybrid text constructs the mid-nineteenth-century Midwest and argues that, for Fuller, this Midwest was a new "city on a hill," another chance to find and build America, not as a theocracy, as John Winthrop had hoped, but as a pluralistic and feminist democracy.

Until recently, most literary scholars never accepted Fuller as a significant part of the Bostonian Transcendental community; they simply did not study her writings as they did those of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Born in 1810, Fuller drowned when the ship she was on hit a sandbar off Fire Island, New York. She was only forty years old. In her short life she managed a brilliant career as essayist, book reviewer, author, editor, reporter, feminist, public intellectual and free-spirited thinker, one who was not afraid to tell her friend Ralph Waldo Emerson that his tastes were too narrow.

When one studies the major texts of the American Renaissance, one may read *Walden*, *The Confidence-Man*, and *The Scarlet Letter*; yet Fuller remains a minor note. *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* has been reprinted only sporadically since its publication in 1844, yet it is a major work of the American Renaissance in a genre very popular during the nineteenth century—the travel memoir.<sup>2</sup> When feminist scholars of the 1970s were uncovering lost authors, Bell Gale Chevigny, a brilliant and dedicated Margaret Fuller scholar, published her seminal book on Fuller's life and writings, *The Woman and*

*the Myth*. But in 1976 even Chevigny didn't know what to do with Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*. She didn't care for what she thought were digressions in the text, digressions that included feminist allegories and passages of physical description about the places Fuller was visiting. What Fuller was trying to do in some of these sections—recreate the physical reality and possibility of the Midwest as place—Chevigny was willing to delete. She introduced an abridged version of *Summer* in *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings*—and explained why she did this in her headnotes: early critics and transcendentalists such as Orestes Brownson may have accepted this book as is, but excising certain sections would make it stronger, particularly with respect to understanding what she sees as significant in the text, Margaret Fuller's "social thought":

Published by Charles C. Little and James Brown of Boston, *Summer on the Lakes* may have been intended as a corrective to Dickens' *American Notes*, an infamous caricature of western manners in 1842, but it has its own bite. For [Horace] Greeley, it was "one of the clearest and most graphic delineations, ever given, of the Great Lakes, of the Prairies, and of the receding barbarism, and the rapidly advancing, but rude, repulsive semi-civilization, which were contending with most unequal forces for the possession of these rich lands. I still consider *Summer on the Lakes* unequalled, especially its picture of the Prairies and of the sunnier aspects of Pioneer life" (*Memoirs*, II, 12-3). Fuller initiated here a style of seeing and writing which would become more lean and pointed in the coming years. To concentrate on her social thought, I have here omitted her flamboyant digressions (one forty pages long on a German seeress), her survey of literature on the Indian, and many passages of physical description. (316)

In the twenty-first century it is generally and correctly accepted that Chevigny's approach distorts the text and silences Fuller's voice and intent. Fuller's "social thought" also appears in the excised sections; moreover, her sense of the physical, of nature and place, and of how different regions offer unique possibilities deserves the attention of contemporary readers. These thoughts are integral to the meaning and shape of the text and, more importantly, to her vision of the Midwest and of the role of the outsider in the world. Chevigny herself revised and expanded her book in 1994, this time including the sections that were excised earlier, reflecting her changed perspective on what it is that we can learn by reading all of *Summer*.

Two recent works by Meg McGavran Murray and Charles Capper underline how controversial and how complex Fuller's narrative of the Midwest is and how differently it can be read, even in the twenty-first century. Chevigny acknowledges the excellence of current Fuller scholarship in her August 2008 review essay in the *Women's Review of Books*, an insightful and powerful discussion of both of these very different and important new studies. In this article she comments on Fuller as pioneering traveler and what she found in the Midwest:

Fuller's adventurous expedition to the Midwestern frontier failed to reveal people any freer of bigotry and greed than those she had left at home, but it helped her refine her critical nationalism. Writing her book *Summer on the Lake, in 1843* ripened her to accept Horace Greeley's offer of a position at the *New York Tribune*. Rejecting Emerson's disdain for the 'foaming foolishness of newspapers,' she was excited by the prospect of what she would call the 'mutual education' of herself and her mass readership. (28)

Chevigny is pointing contemporary readers in a significant direction: as a result of her summer travels to the Midwest, Fuller refined her ideas about critical nationalism and democracy by studying the Midwestern people she met, the communities in which they lived, and the physical territories she was seeing with her own eyes for the first time sometimes realistically as a physical place and sometimes romantically as relatively virgin land with all sorts of possibilities that, for Fuller, the Eastern states no longer seemed to promise. The Midwest for Fuller is material: it allows her to go beyond examining texts. One can find evidence in her letters from this period that she is sick of texts and craves for something more visceral. Travel—experiencing the physical world, the new—is what Fuller believes she needs. As she travels, the Midwest becomes a symbol for her of what Americans have done correctly and what we/they have done wrong. She never forgets that she is seeing this new world with her own eyes and that, as an intellectual woman, she is homeless even in New England. Fuller may be from the East but she is not of the East. She is quite conscious that Europe represents America's classical and imperialist past; that the Midwest, though already damaged by Eastern commerce, is a place with greater potential because it is in flux; and that this territory points to her future rather than to her past.

Fuller is cheered by the physicality and by the possibilities of this new region of America.

*Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* was written several years after Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* (1839) and before Eliza Farnham's *Life in Prairie Land* (1846), when the Midwest was considered America's far western frontier. Fuller, unlike Kirkland and Farnham, did not move to the Midwest, even though she briefly considered doing so, as seen in a letter to her brother she wrote from Milwaukee on July 29, 1843:

Daily I thought of you during my visit to the Rock River territory. It is only five years since the poor Indians have been dispossessed of this region of sumptuous loveliness, such as can hardly be paralleled in this world . . . [a]nd there, I thought, if we two could live and you have a farm which would not be a twentieth part the labor of a N England farm, and would pay twenty times as much for the labor, and have our books and our pens, and a little boat on the river, how happy we might be for four or five years . . . (Hudspeth, Vol 3, Letter 417; 132-33).

Fuller has craved travel to gain perspective. She empathizes with the Indians' anger and violence in protecting their beautiful land, yet, as a realist, she is considering her own and her family's needs for beauty, employment and creativity. Romance and practicality are merged in her response to the places she visits in both her letters and in her book where she describes who she is and what she has experienced. She is not the angel traveling through the Midwest, but a woman, often lonely, sometimes distraught, longing for a better world as well as a secure and fulfilling place in it.

Fuller might have preferred to spend her summer in Europe rather than explore her own country, but she did not have the funds for Europe, and her Western journey presented a pleasurable and meaningful opportunity to see and study America. She is never fully comfortable wherever she is, often remembering her outsider status. Charles Capper reminds us that there were editors like Orestes Brownson who found her work and her personality frightening. In his *Quarterly Review*, Brownson writes that he finds Fuller "[t]he most dangerous radical intellectual in Boston" and "a heathen priestess, though of what god or goddess we will not pretend to say" (Brownson 546-47; qtd. in Capper 157; 562). While Margaret Fuller had her supporters, there were those who wanted her silenced, and *Summer*

reflects the self-consciousness and complexity that came with her knowledge that whatever she wrote, there would be those who would disapprove because of what she said and how she said it and because she dared to enter the world of art and ideas.

On this much-needed vacation with traveling companions James Freeman Clarke and his sister Sarah Ann, Fuller constructs both place and self. She could not have written this long, layered essay after traveling to Europe because Europe represented for her the world which had formed her while the Midwest represented for her a world she could impact because in her mind it was still malleable. Fuller describes the prairie, the flatland, the view, and she realizes that without having traveled to the Midwest, without having experienced the lakes, the rivers, the landscape, the geography of Detroit or Chicago, or Mackinac or Wisconsin, that she would have known less of her own past or her own future, for it was here in the Midwest that she confronted a new frontier of blending and compromise, the old and the new, the landlocked and free, the urban and the rural, the foreign and the native from which she could write a book and ask her reader in its last line to “read me, even as you would be read” (156).

Margaret Fuller used this trip to define what it meant to be an American, part of a civilization that misunderstood and abused Native Americans, one that thought and read, but did not necessarily understand. Fuller used her travels to see in transcendental and realistic ways and to reinterpret what she thought she knew because she was a reader, but she could not interpret well until she was actually, physically there. Seeing with fresh eyes was a goal for her, one that she knew she could never attain completely. She writes that she wishes at times that there were no preknowledge at all—that she could experience place with an originality that is impossible to achieve when there are pre-existent descriptions and expectations. But she did her best to see with her own eyes; the resulting book is a miscellany in which Margaret Fuller consciously defamiliarizes herself with nature and culture. She recurrently dialogues with herself, trying to look outside and inside and figure out the possibilities of the new world and the new self that she desperately needs, a world and self that will have room for sensuality and for intellectuals of both sexes from various cultures.

Annette Kolodny in *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier, 1630-1860*, analyzes how westering women, in transplanting Eastern values and artifacts such as

plants and musical instruments from their New England homes, made their new hybrid homes in the Midwest. Fuller did the opposite: she took “ideas,” “purity,” and blended “nature” from the Midwest back to New England, so that she could break out of her unnatural and overly cultivated box and be intellectual and sensual, feminine and feminist, a *mensch*—though she might not have known the term—in her own complex, dynamic way.

In *Summer*, Margaret Fuller is rejecting and complicating Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832). Good manners are a blend of cultures and can never exist without respect for difference. In her introduction to the 1991 republication of *Summer*, Susan Belasco Smith writes that Fuller “is unabashedly vitriolic about writers such as Frances Trollope who explored the country as so many John Bulls” (xv). Smith continues, explaining her sense of Fuller's relationship to the Midwest: “She reveled in her discovery of the writings of Morris Birkbeck (1764-1825), a disaffected Briton who wrote glowingly of his travels and subsequent new life in Illinois” (xv). but I think Fuller wanted more than appreciation for these new territories—she wanted a combination of past and future where one owned one's errors and rose to a more ethical and appreciative space that combined the intellectual and physical, the earthy and spiritual. Fuller was not afraid of creating a new order that fully included her.

Scholars such as Richard V. Carpenter and Kolodny have studied this text well, but they were not centrally concerned with the fact that she was visiting a place, the West, which would become the Midwest and be seen less as a central geographical region of America than as “flyover country.” Fuller saw this region as extremely significant to the creation of America's democracy; she saw the Midwest as the heartland. For Margaret Fuller the Midwest is the New Eden—another chance to get America right, to get close to both the European explorers and conquerors and to the Native Americans they conquered, and, most importantly, to do better with what was left of the original promise of America.

Fuller examines who she could be in this new world, in any new world. She brings that potential new self to the narrative and shares that self with others who can still make a difference in the ways in which they treat nature and people from other cultures whose rights have been trampled upon but what can still be treated more ethically, and she sees that recommended fairness as benefiting everyone.

Place is a multifaceted symbol in *Summer*, and Fuller consciously and vigorously goes beyond criticism or description of place. The Midwest in the text represents her version of John Winthrop's "city on a hill," radically transformed into a feminist and egalitarian vision, unlike his conception in "A Model of Christian Charity." For Fuller, nature is the true spirit that animates life on the prairies; cities like Chicago make her frightened and homesick for a world she rejects because it is chauvinistic and too businesslike, too much without a sensibility or soul. Fuller is tired of an elitism that rejects her because she is a woman who wants to think, feel, and affect the world. The Midwest offers her, at least momentarily, another vision of what life in America can be.

Away from the intellectualized life of Boston and her transcendental circle, Fuller gained perspective. In *Summer*, she recreates and uses the mid-nineteenth-century Midwest to discover her own new, more creative and dynamic self, creating alter egos, such as Marianna, who cannot survive in their time or place, so that in the writing of this text, Fuller—author and narrator—can actively refuse Mariana's fate. After her experience in the Midwest, Fuller returned to New England—a New Woman, reinvigorated, refusing to give up or give in, five years before the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. She went on to become a full-time literary editor of the *New York Tribune* and the first female war correspondent, under combat conditions, for a US daily newspaper. Through writing *Summer*, the Midwest became her metaphor for personal and national possibilities.

Margaret Fuller's "outsider's perspective" brought to her study of the Midwest a hopefulness, a new, useful, realistic romance with the land, a modern view of women's and minorities' potential roles in the Midwest, in America, and in the world. She was committed from her first chapter—even viewing Niagara Falls from the British side—to embrace the mutable, the indefinite: "The moonlight gave a poetical indefiniteness to the distant parts of the waters, and while the rapids were glancing in her beams, the river below the falls was black as night, save where the reflection of the sky gave it the appearance of a shield of blued steel . . . I gazed long. I saw how here mutability and unchangeableness were united" (9). Her second chapter, "The Lakes," written as "play of one's life," explores shape shifting; the four elements—air, water, earth and fire; and the character M commits to the earth: "The earth is spirit made fruitful,—life. And its heart-beats are told in gold and wine" (11). Poetry and lyrical prose

mingle in the chapters, as do the seashore and the land. Fuller tells the reader stories about human nature, bad marriages, bad choices. Madwomen appear in stories, as do alcoholism and precipice after precipice; the reader must atone, take care, and go on if the reader can. This is a subtle text and Fuller tries—by viewing the lakes with the reader—to teach the reader how to read the text: "But it was not so soon that I learned to appreciate the Lake scenery; it was only after a daily and careless familiarity that I entered into its beauty, for nature always refuses to be seen by being stared at" (17). Through thinking about the lakes and sharing her thoughts, Fuller learns what Ishmael in *Moby-Dick* will learn at sea—if you want to get somewhere, don't go directly or you will be locked by the wind. Take what you can, accept the invisible, and keep going.

Margaret Fuller couldn't be more ambitious in this text—and for America—aesthetically and spiritually: "I trust by reverent faith to woo the mighty meaning of the scene, perhaps to foresee the law by which a new order, a new poetry is to be evoked from this chaos, and with a curiosity as ardent, but not so selfish as that of Macbeth, to call up the apparitions of future kings from the strange ingredients of the witch's cauldron" (18). Margaret Fuller was not afraid of appearing a little gothic. By the sixth day of her trip, Fuller arrived in Chicago, reading, thinking, analyzing, thankful to be able to explore this territory through her own eyes. She saw the brilliant prairie flowers and experienced fairyland exultation (20). Fuller was ready: she wanted high and low experiences and she got them. She felt religious:

One of these groves, Ross's grove, we reached just at sunset. It was of the noblest trees I saw during this journey, for the trees generally were not large or lofty, but only of fair proportions. Here they were large enough to form with their clear stems pillars for grand cathedral aisles. There was space enough for crimson light to stream through upon the floor of water which the shower had left. As we slowly plashed through, I thought I was never in a better place for vespers. (25)

Nature, religion, and possibility are one in this beautiful Midwest.

Perhaps Fuller has read Sarah Kemble Knight's eighteenth-century travel journal. Travel tales were a very popular genre during the American Renaissance, and Fuller was a reader. Like Knight, Fuller could use humor in writing about her travels; there are touches of humor in chapter two, in which Fuller and the women sleep on bar



tables for a night and then continue their travels through Illinois, experiencing the many moods of nature and the various cultures that mingle in Illinois, including Irish, Scottish, and Native American. Fuller, in looking for America, found its mysteries and her own: "the earth is full of me." (33). She writes about Greeks and epics and Shakespeare, Italy and France and eagles, among the lupine and the phlox. Age has wisdom and so does youth. Fuller embraces the fragments (36), and, like most of the other American transcendentalists and other writers of the American Renaissance, made peace with the impossibility of unity and the wonder experienced in attempting it.

At times she seems to be selling the Midwest—one can own a house and some land at a reasonable price (37)—but mostly she follows the path of Booker T. Washington and simply asserts that the Europeans who have settled in this part of the world will be happy if they mingle their ways with what they find and cast down their buckets where they are. Fuller simply accepts that one cannot wear satin shoes to climb the Indian mounds (39). Fuller understands choices and metaphors.

Margaret Fuller and her friends traveled in circles. In chapter four she finds the farmers of Indiana rule. She meets German and Dutch and it is in this chapter that she tells us of Mariana's isolation (50). Many languages are spoken in the Midwest and Fuller was not privy to much of the conversation. In the cities she often read because there was no one with whom to socialize. Illinois endangered her sense of honor. She is conscious of what her race has stolen: "But you cannot look about you there, without seeing that there are resources abundant to retrieve, and soon to retrieve, far greater errors, if they are only directed with wisdom" (65).

Fuller begins chapter five in Wisconsin, still a territory, spending time in Milwaukee, and learning about Native Americans. In this chapter she gives us hope through men like Mr. Birkbeck, who is bred to farm, govern, and save the next generation so that it can build America in its own vision. Fuller also explores the German mystic, Friederike Hauffe, "Seeress of Prevoist," the hidden world, the mystery: "Let not the tree forget its roots," Fuller reminds herself and her reader (80). And the root of an intolerable reality, as Meg McGavran Murray points out in *Margaret Fuller, Wandering Pilgrim*, is sometimes romantic yearning, sometimes mesmerism, sometimes abandoning self-possession, sometimes walking in armor—never a preferred choice for Margaret Fuller (209). And sometimes it is not being

able to accept the reality of Mr. Birkbeck and Friederike Hauffe in the same chapter—both required for the full experience of living on this earth.

Fuller is a believer in the melting pot, a believer in exploration, conversation, multiple truths, and change (102): she asserts that Indian fighters can become berry pickers (103). Chapter six is devoted to her traveling alone—unaccompanied by her friends—to Mackinac Island, where she experiences its beauty and culture. Again, as she ends this portion of her hybrid travelogue, she demonstrates to her reader that she is the scholar as well as the traveler. Sault St. Marie reminds her to remind herself and other Midwesterners that if one lives in Chicago, one should visit the prairies and the literature is for everyone (147).

Fuller wants *Summer* to sell to those beyond the elite of Boston. On November 12, 1843, she wrote to Emerson that they differ—she wants her tastes and sympathies to be expansive—even more than they are (Hudspeth, Vol. 3, Letter 434, 161). She wants her book to be read broadly and to make money. Fuller sends her readers to the reading rooms of Harvard, where she sends herself to the world of fancy and the world of nature, to the world of opportunities for women as well as men. After completing *Summer* on May 25, 1844, she wrote to her friend Caroline Sturgis, commenting on Ellen and Ralph Waldo Emerson's having become parents of a daughter that "I had a fancy the child was born that day, and hoped it would have been a boy. However my star may be good for a girl, educated with more intelligence than I was. Girls are to have a better chance now I think" (Hudspeth, Vol. 3, Letter 459, 197). The world is hard for women, romantic or realistic; it is hard for women in the Midwest not used to physical labor; it is hard for Mariana and the Seeress of Prevoist; and it is hard for Margaret Fuller who manages, uneasily, to create a world not quite willing to allow women to be fully actualized humans.

One must read and think and experience life and nature first hand. Fuller has her narrator take risks in the book's final poem. This is not quite Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," but it is brave, sensual and noncomplacent, and its ending does not retreat from its central theme of experiencing the world through one's own eyes—as "Goblin Market" does—regardless of the cost:

If undeterred, you to the fields must go,

You tear your dresses and you scratch your hands;  
 But, in the places where the berries grow,  
 A sweeter fruit the ready sense commands,  
 Of wild, gay feelings, fancies springing sweet—  
 Of bird-like pleasures, fluttering and fleet. (156)

Nature scratches, but it provides a canvas where one can paint all sorts of human pleasures without doing damage. She ends the poem pleading for her reader to try the unusual and respect it:

Thus such a dish of homely sweets as these  
 In neither way may chance the taste to please.  
 Yet try a little with the evening-bread;  
 Bring a good needle for the spool of thread;  
 Take fact with fiction, silver with the lead,  
 And at the mint, you can get gold instead;  
 In fine, read me, even as you would be read. (156)

Fuller is writing "out of place," as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse have phrased it, to free herself. She attempts to see the Midwest with new eyes and to take home with her, and make permanent through writing, a fresh, permanent hope of a creative, fluid, modern, intellectual, domestic, aesthetic and sensual world where all individuals can actualize, experience, create, and break the molds that bind them. Fuller uses the Midwest to empower herself.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>See Stephen Adams's "That Tidiness We Always Look for in Women: Fuller's Summer on the Lakes and Romantic Aesthetics." *Studies in the American Renaissance*. Charlottesville, VA: UP of Virginia, 1987. 247-264; David Anderson's "Margaret Fuller's Great Lakes Tour." *Inland Seas* 15 (1959): 22-28; Anne Baker's "'A Commanding View': Vision and the Problem of Nationality in Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 44, 1-2 (1998): 61-77; Carmen Birkle's "Travelogues of Independence: Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 48.4 (2003):497-512; Sharon Stout Brause's "Wit in Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*." *Publications of the Missouri Philological Association* 18 (1993): 18-25; Richard Carpenter's "Margaret Fuller in Northern Illinois" *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 2 (1910): 7-22' Ken Egan Jr.'s "Poetic Travelers: Figuring the Wild in Parkman, Fuller, and Kirkland. *Western American Literature* 44.1 (2009): 49-62; Mary Jo Haronian's "Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* and the Condition of America." *Romanticism on the Net: An Electronic Journal Devoted to Romantic Studies* 38-39 (2005); Marcia Noe's "The Heathen Priestess on the Prairie: Margaret Fuller Constructs the Midwest." *The Old Northwest: A Journal of Regional life and Letters* 16.1 (1992): 3-12; Douglas A.

Noverr's "Midwestern Travel Literature of the Nineteenth Century: Romance and Reality." *MidAmerica* 4 (1977): 18-29; Susan J. Rosowski's "Margaret Fuller, and Engendered West, and *Summer on the Lakes*." *Western American Literature* 25.2 (1990): 125-44; William W. Stowe's "'Busy Leisure': Margaret Fuller, Nature, and Vacation Writing." *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 9.1 (2002): 25-43 and "Conventions and Voices in Margaret Fuller's Travel Writing." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 63.2 (1991): 242-62; Susan Belasco Smith's "*Summer on the Lakes*: Margaret Fuller and the British." *Resources for American Literary Study* 17.2 (1991): 191-2-7; Nicole Tonkovich's "Traveling in the West, Writing in the Library: Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes*." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 10.2 (1993): 79-109; and Christina Zwarg's "Footnoting the Sublime: Margaret Fuller on Black Hawk's Trail." *American Literary History* 5.4 (1993): 616-42.

- <sup>2</sup>Ward and Lock (London) reprinted *Summer* in 1861, along with Fuller's autobiography and a memoir by Ralph Waldo Emerson, W.H. Channing, and others. More than one hundred years passed before the book was again reprinted, this time by Haskell House (New York) in 1970. Subsequent editions appeared in 1972 in Nieuwkoop, Netherlands, (B. De Graaf's "Women on the Move" series), 1985 in Iron Mountain, Michigan (Ralph W. Secord Press), and in 1991 in Urbana, Illinois, (University of Illinois Press); the latter is still in print. Four print-on-demand publishers have also reprinted *Summer*; Kessinger Publishing (Whitefish, Montana, 2004), IndyPublish.com (Boston, 2007), BiblioBazaar (Charleston, South Carolina, 2007), and Dodo Press (Gloucester, England, 2007).

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WRITING IN HISTORY'S WAKE:  
AUDUBON'S PORTRAYAL OF THE MIDWEST IN HIS  
MISSOURI RIVER JOURNALS

CHRISTIAN KNOELLER

At the dawn of the nineteenth century—a heady moment for the exploration of North America—artist John James Audubon was destined to play a singular role. He arrived in the fledgling United States the very summer that Lewis and Clark were preparing for their expedition West under the auspices of President Thomas Jefferson with their charge to chart a passage to the Pacific. Lewis and Clark chronicled the indigenous peoples and natural history of the continent's interior in copious journals during the journey of the Corps of Discovery from May of 1804 to September of 1806. Throughout the first half of the century, the Midwest would be traversed and described by a host of explorers, artists, and naturalists. For instance, traveling up the Missouri River just a few decades later, in 1832, artist George Catlin published ongoing newspaper dispatches in the form of letters. While surveying everything from cartography and natural resources to American Indians and wildlife, such accounts capture a dramatic transformation of the region then underway. In an era predating photography, these written depictions—often accompanied by drawings or paintings—came to represent the Midwest in the popular imagination. When Audubon took the final collecting expedition of his career up the Missouri River in 1843, he kept extensive journals that made explicit references to earlier accounts. Unlike Catlin's romanticized western portraits, Audubon's published journals realistically depict a Midwest in transition, characterized by explosive population growth, people on the move, abundant fertile land and wildlife, and buffalo and Indian tribes threatened with extinction.

Audubon clearly wrote from a non-Midwestern perspective. His international pedigree included not only his Caribbean birth, but also his upbringing in France before he immigrated to the United States at age eighteen. Later, Audubon would claim to have been born in New Orleans, the story of a self-made man who deliberately invented—and more than occasionally revised—his identity. Sent abruptly back to the Americas as a teenager, presumably to avoid conscription in the armies of Napoleon Bonaparte, he arrived at his family's farm outside Philadelphia in Mill Grove, Pennsylvania. There he sought to fashion an identity that was somehow American—perhaps quintessentially so—as a self-proclaimed woodsman intimately familiar with the species he would paint.

Audubon traveled extensively throughout his life, making numerous collecting expeditions on the Mississippi and along the Atlantic seaboard as far north as the maritime provinces of present day Canada, as well as repeatedly enduring the rigors of ocean crossings aboard traditional sailing vessels. The year Audubon first began paddling, shooting, and painting, James Fenimore Cooper's first novel, *Precaution* (1820), was published. Art historian John Ewers recalls the historical moment:

Indians appeared in the popular art of the time as lovely dark-skinned maidens or tall handsome hunters beside some cool forest stream. They were the romantic creations of sentimental landscape painters, as unreal as James Fenimore Cooper's poetic redmen in *Leatherstocking Tales*. On the other hand, in the widely read horror stories of the period—the Indian captivities—Indians were presented as blood-thirsty savages who enjoyed torturing helpless prisoners. One extreme view of the Indian was as false as was the other. (502)

In 1823 the Monroe Doctrine was proclaimed. The Erie Canal opened in 1825, the same year the US adopted a policy to move Eastern Indians across the Mississippi. Audubon's journey on the Missouri in 1843 also followed closely in the wake of artist George Catlin's fabled travels there; Catlin's celebrated "Indian Gallery" displayed in New York City in 1837 had undoubtedly heightened Audubon's anticipation of traveling west.

In a sense, Catlin had a blank slate: "When George Catlin went west in 1830 the average easterner and the interested European had only a vague and confused impression of the country beyond the Mississippi and the people who lived there" (Ewers 502). His

accounts as a correspondent on the frontier were published prominently, appearing in New York newspapers such as the *Spectator* and the *Daily Commercial Advertiser*. Since Catlin traveled up the Missouri River so early—as far as Fort Union at the mouth of the Yellowstone in what is now North Dakota in 1832—artists and ethnographers visiting there afterward would naturally return to Catlin's images of the Blackfoot, Assiniboin, Ojibawa, and Crow and other tribes for a glimpse of how things once were. Audubon was to find the region profoundly altered from the one Catlin had portrayed only a decade earlier: "Catlin saw the prairie and its Indians in his youth, and he saw them before they had much contact with civilization. Audubon saw people already dispirited, corrupted, diseased, drunken, beggared, prostituted. And he saw the prairie with the eyes of one fast aging" (Peattie 275).

In truth, Audubon arrived on the heels of a variety of previous visitors, including explorers Lewis and Clark, as well as Prinz Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied and artists such as Bodmer and Catlin. Audubon was fully aware of his predecessors: "Even though Audubon desperately wished that the area had not 'been trodden by White man previously' and tried to convince others of its virginal state, his frequent reference to George Catlin's books and his familiarity with other travel literature of the period makes it clear that he never really believed this to be the case" (Peck qtd. in Boehme 86). By contrast, Catlin's legacy includes many paintings commonly viewed as historical documents from a time when "Indians were [still] as independent as their aboriginal ancestors had been when they met the first white explorers. The Great Plains were still Indian country" (Ewers 494).

Years earlier, while promoting *Birds of America* in Britain, Audubon had positioned himself as America's native son before the European aristocracy by catering to their expectations about the New World as a frontier, presenting himself as a prototypical frontiersman to bolster claims of authenticity as an American artist and naturalist. It is remarkable how Audubon intuitively maneuvered through the cultural riptides of a colonial era to achieve his own ends. Serendipitously, his arrival in England coincided with publication of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*; Audubon appeared to be the very incarnation of the America romanticized in such fiction and embraced by the European imagination. Having real

currency in Europe, Audubon's self-conscious embodiment of the legendary American woodsman ultimately worked to his advantage.

Audubon had portrayed himself flamboyantly in Europe as a backwoods American pioneer—a persona ironically intended to help sell the project abroad. Yet he did not actually venture west of the Mississippi himself until several decades later. Upon completing *Birds of America*, Audubon proposed yet another audacious project, *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, and arranged to travel up the Missouri River to sketch and collect specimens of all major mammals, large and small. As ambitious as ever, Audubon began to contemplate a long deferred dream: an expedition to the wilds of the American West. According to biographer Shirley Streshinsky, “He yearned to venture into that West, still largely unexplored land beyond the Mississippi, the Indian lands, where few white men went. He dreamed of the Rockies, of Oregon, of California. There had never been the time, never the money, never a safe place to leave his family. Now he had all three, as well as a reason to go: research for *Quadrupeds*. He made up his mind. He would go on ‘this grand and Last Journey I intend to make as a Naturalist’” (343).<sup>1</sup>

Audubon's account of that journey offers a unique perspective on the Midwestern frontier by an exceptionally well-traveled nineteenth-century artist and naturalist. Audubon's *Missouri River Journals* dutifully cataloged specimens collected, birds sighted, and game taken. He commented on frontier communities and the remnants of Indian tribes encountered along the way. Audubon's audience in the United States and abroad was sure to be hungry for fresh depictions of territories west of the Mississippi acquired through the Louisiana Purchase. Moreover, “by traveling to the western frontier at a time when such trips were still unusual, Audubon was able to renew his credentials as an explorer-naturalist” (Peck 89-90). Audubon's bedrock philosophy was that any worthwhile natural history had to be grounded in direct experience in the wild. According to Boehme, “his belief was that his own knowledge and observations of animal behavior provided superior images” (39). In his subsequently published writing, such narratives became a sort of rhetorical formula: Audubon had to manufacture accounts from memory—or even solicit them from friends—to give the impression that he wrote with the certainty of direct observation and firsthand experience. Consequently, Boehme concludes, “Audubon's projects depended on his experiences as a field naturalist . . . [since] He pro-

moted the position that his authority rested on his extensive field experience” (35). His carefully cultivated persona as an American woodsman was meant to lend credibility to his art and writing.

The Missouri is undoubtedly among the most storied rivers in American history. From its headwaters at Lolo Pass on the present day Idaho-Montana border to its confluence with the Mississippi north of St. Louis, the Missouri is—at 2,464 miles—the nation's longest river. When Lewis and Clark led the Corps of Discovery in search of a transcontinental waterway at the dawn of the nineteenth century, they naturally chose the Missouri. This event—in conjunction with the Louisiana Purchase and President Jefferson's ambitions for American commerce in the Rocky Mountain West—anoined the Missouri as the corridor of choice for waves of trappers and traders, soldiers and settlers who followed in quick succession. Traveling in 1843, Audubon realized that the frontier was in the process of a perhaps irrevocable change—one that he actually witnessed unfolding.

Audubon's *Journals* begin as he wends his way from home in New York City to Louisville, where as a newlywed thirty years earlier he had lived for two years at the Indian Queen Hotel. The first letters he sent home in 1843 marveled at the area's subsequent expansion: “Louisville like Cincinnati has grown beyond all calculation. . . . Louisville is now an overgrown City” (qtd. in McDermott, Audubon 25, 30). From Louisville he boarded the dilapidated steamship *Gallant* bound for St. Louis, passing the village of Henderson where he had spent a prosperous decade that ended in financial ruin involving an ill-advised mill and a stolen steamboat he had once owned there. Passing Henderson in 1843 en-route to the Missouri, he commented on how dramatically the town had grown, and how other, smaller villages were virtually unrecognizable due to progress: “We passed several villages now called cities and so improved in size that I with difficulty recognized them” (qtd. in McDermott *Audubon* 31). Evidence of the burgeoning population and migration westward was everywhere. His letters described “horses on board, waggons, carts, carriages, and furniture of all description belonging to new settlers going to the Missouri frontiers” (qtd. in McDermott *Audubon* 32). A Midwest in the midst of rapid and dramatic transformation is central to Audubon's depiction of the region as a whole.

Audubon finally arrived in St. Louis, where George Catlin had prepared for his expeditions west under the mentorship of none other

than William Clark, Captain with Meriwether Lewis of the Corps of Discovery. Though aging, Clark served as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Western tribes during much of the 1830s and was able to provide unprecedented access for Catlin as a young artist to leaders of many tribes such as the Potawatomi, Shawnee, Kickapoo, and Pawnee as well as Iowa, Missouri, Sioux, Omaha, Sac and Fox while attending treaty ceremonies with Clark at Fort Crawford. Later that year at Fort Leavenworth on the Missouri, Catlin painted "members of tribes removed from the Eastern Woodlands—Delaware, Kaskaskia, Kickapoo, Peoria, Potawatomi, Shawnee, and Weah" (Ewers 485).

Audubon depicted his own departure from St. Louis for the frontier with bravado: "Hie with us there to the West! Let us quit the busy streets of St. Louis, once considered the outpost of civilization but now a flourishing city, in the midst of a fertile and rapidly growing country, with towns and villages scattered for hundreds of miles beyond it" (*Quadrupeds* 174). As scholar Robert Peck recounts, "when John James Audubon and the rest of his party of five left the St. Louis docks on the morning of April 25, 1843, for a six-month trip up the Missouri, the self-proclaimed 'American Woodsman' was fulfilling a dream that had long possessed him" (71).

Writing from Boonville, Missouri, two hundred miles from St. Louis, Audubon described "settlements all along both shores and the Lands (are) rich enough to produce anything" (qtd. in McDermott *Audubon* 75). For the first several hundred miles of the trip, Audubon depicted the precarious existence of pioneers along the river, homesteads threatened or even displaced by flooding. "The Number of habitations halfway in the water is quite Surprising," he wrote (qtd. in McDermott *Audubon* 80); "in a great number of instances the squatters, farmers or planters, as they may be called, are found to abandon their dwellings and make towards higher ground" (*Journal* 559). After a week's travel, white settlements were still to be found but only on the east bank. After all, as early as 1843 white squatters had already begun to settle as far up the Missouri as Fort Pierre. Edward Harris, a naturalist who accompanied Audubon up the Missouri, notes in his journal passing an established farm near the fort with livestock, including pigs, as well as crops of potatoes and "Mandan corn" abundant enough to trade with travelers (McDermott *Up* 178). Yet, "after we have passed Independence," Audubon wrote, "we will enter the Indian countries" (qtd. in McDermott,

*Audubon* 76). Just two weeks upstream of St. Louis at Council Bluffs, Audubon breathlessly announced: "We are now positively out of the United States boundaries Westward and now all the people we will see will be Indians, Indians, and nothing but Indians" (qtd. in McDermott, *Audubon* 85).

Audubon was keenly interested in seeing Indians firsthand. Sailing 2,000 miles to Fort Union from St. Louis in a record forty-eight days and seven hours, he had many opportunities to observe and interact with members of a variety of tribes including the Sac, Iowa, Fox, Potawatomi, Omaha, Ponca, Arikara, Mandan, Assiniboin, and Gros Ventre (Ford 403). From the moment Audubon boarded the steamer Omega on April 25, 1843, he was already among Indians—fellow passengers embarking from St. Louis for Indian territories upstream. He wrote "We have 7 or 8 Indians, males & females, returning to their wigwams about 500 miles up the River," (qtd. in McDermott, *Audubon* 62) whom he described as "poor souls" and "tranquil onlookers" (*Journal* 555). The Omega ultimately reached the destination of the Indians on board: a broad prairie where, according to the resident Indian agent Major Richardson, some 1,200 Iowa and Fox dwelled. Throughout the first weeks of the journey, Audubon became acquainted with the patchwork of too often ambiguous landholdings and the ever-shifting proximity of Indians and whites. On May 16, he described passing "ten or more Indians who had a large log cabin and a field under fence" (*Writings and Drawings* 581) immediately before the steamer's arrival at a rudimentary fort maintained by a fur-trading company at the Vermillion River.

When the Omega at last reached certifiable "Indian Country"—stretching to the West of the Missouri—Audubon observed a "good number of Indians" whom he characterized as "partly civilized" (*Writings and Drawings* 564). Yet white settlers on their own scattershot homesteads were already on hand to hail the steamer as it passed. As the Omega approached the Black Snake Hills, he described the settlement—and its proximity to Indian land: "There are a few houses, one or two Grist and Saw Mills, and an abundance of loafers of all descriptions. We have passed the Kickapoo's Nation and are now opposite to that of the Sacs . . . In 3 or 4 more days we will have passed the bounds of Civilisation" (qtd. in McDermott, *Audubon* 82-4). Audubon positively ached for this moment, announcing in a letter written three days later that they had at last crossed "the line dividing the State of Missouri from the wilderness

I am now pleased to call the Country ahead of us” (qtd. in McDermott *Audubon* 85). Yet Audubon portrayed the place as already ripe for pioneers: a “truly beautiful site for a town or city, as will be no doubt some fifty years hence” (*Writings and Drawings* 566-67). The Missouri River seemed a porous border between worlds. Here, the distant drumbeat of progress could already be heard.

On May 22, a small band of Santee Sioux warriors on the shore signaled to the *Omega* to land. When the captain refused, they fired on the boat, underscoring that such a journey on the Missouri—even in 1843—was still rife with uncertainty, whether threats from the weather and rising water, or an unpredictable reception from Indians. As an adventurous young man, Audubon may have shared campfires with Indian companions while hunting in Kentucky, but by now he clearly held a station well above the wagons and mules afforded run-of-the-mill mountain men. Indeed, Audubon was to receive what amounted to a royal welcome from military commanders as far upstream as Fort Union—2,000 miles from St. Louis. Each military outpost served as a port of call where Audubon presented formal letters of introduction, only to find that even in such far-flung places his reputation had preceded him. After all, his credentials were impeccable given the stature of those who had written letters of introduction for him: Secretary of State Daniel Webster; Secretary of War John C. Spencer; General Winfield Scott; Lord Ashburton, the British Treaty Commissioner; and no less than sitting US President John Tyler, who wrote: “The bearer of this, John James Audubon, is a native citizen of the United States, who has informed me of his intention of traveling on the continent of America, chiefly to promote the cause of science by researches in natural history... I recommend him to my countrymen abroad and to the authorities and inhabitants of other countries” (Herrick 242). Remarkably, Audubon went as far as to stake his claim to a personal place in the grand sweep of American history, heir to a high-minded revolution that led to the birth of a nation. When approaching Fort Croghan on the Upper Missouri—named for an old family friend—he recounted how Colonel George Croghan and his own French father had “fought once together in conjunction with George Washington and Lafayette, during the Revolutionary War, against ‘Merrie England’” (*Writings and Drawings* 571). In the first half of the nineteenth century, this was the very stuff of empire.

When the steamer reached the Mandan villages at Fort Clark on June 4, Audubon reported seeing “more Indians than at any previous time since leaving St. Louis” (*Writings and Drawings* 615). Once again he wrestled with his own expectations—and the disparities between earlier accounts and his own impressions: “The Mandan’s mud huts are very far from looking poetical, although Mr. Catlin has tried to render them so . . . but different travelers have different eyes” (*Writings and Drawings* 615). Rather than attribute such differences to what must have seemed an unimaginably sudden collapse of the Mandan, Audubon instead calls into question Catlin’s credibility.

While at Fort Clark, Audubon visited a “Medicine Lodge,” marveling at the “magical implements” and ancient ceremonial Buffalo skulls in “this curiosity shop” where he met two elders apparently waiting there to die (*Writings and Drawings* 616). He then visited a “common hut” that belonged to the family of his Indian guide. He described the structure and its inhabitants who welcomed him with an offering of pemmican and corn. After touring the village, Audubon was again disenchanted, concluding in his journal that “this lodge, as well as the other, was dirty with water and mud . . . in this wild and, to my eyes, miserable country, the poetry of which lies in the imagination of those writers who have described the ‘velvety prairies’ and ‘enchanted castles’ (of mud), so common where we now are” (617). Harris corroborated these disparities in his journals: “We certainly paid our visit under very unfavorable circumstances, not at all calculated to draw from us so bright a picture as our illustrious predecessor, Catlin, has given to this place” (qtd. in McDermott, *Up* 90-91). Ironically, Harris seems to lament a missed opportunity almost more than the plight of the victims: “I regret very much that we shall not have an opportunity at this time to see the small remnants of the Mandans, a people who have excited so much attention from their differences in colour [sic], habits and customs from all the other tribes of the continent, and about whom so much has been written” (92).

In terms of wildlife, Audubon encountered staggering natural abundance and, paradoxically, buffalo herds threatened with decimation. The range of the buffalo, once a staple of the long-grass prairies of Indiana and Illinois—as recently as Audubon’s own youth—had receded steadily westward. Audubon entreats his readers: “you must direct your steps ‘to the Indian country,’ and travel many hundred miles beyond the fair valleys of the Ohio, towards the great rocky chain of mountains which forms the backbone of North-

America, before you can reach the Buffalo, and see him roving in his sturdy independence upon the vast elevated plains" (*Quadrupeds* 174). To witness such a spectacular scene, one must now, at least figuratively, accompany Audubon to the upper Missouri. By this time, the great herds had already been driven that far west.

After recounting the many buffalo hunts he had witnessed personally, Audubon turned to how a variety of Indian tribes made use of the animal—as close as Audubon ever got to ethnography. He detailed the strategies used by individual tribes, contrasting the Mandan's pursuit on horseback, for example, with the buffalo jumps employed by the Gros Ventres, Blackfeet, and Assiniboines who would stampede herds over a cliff. In his Missouri River journals, Audubon repeatedly chastised white hunters for taking only the tongue or hide and wasting the rest, whereas Indians reportedly found virtually every part of the buffalo to be somehow useful, whether for boots or bedding, shelter or sustenance. Scraps of hides were sewn into moccasins, hats, gloves, and even robes for children. Bones were ground to prepare marrow as a condiment. Bows were strung with buffalo gut. Shoulder blades served as primitive hoes. As Audubon concluded, "nothing is lost or wasted, but every part of the animal, by the skill and industry of the Indian, is rendered useful" (*Quadrupeds* 180).

Indeed, the decline of the bison must have seemed to him an emblem of the frontier as a whole. He repeatedly saw evidence of alarming exploitation, such as when a single shipment from Fort Pierre passed the Omega on four barges with colorful frontier names such as "War Eagle," "White Cloud," "Crow-feather," and "Red-fish" loaded with 10,000 buffalo robes. What is more, Audubon learned, these same boats would make several such hauls in a single season. Audubon would lament in his journal "What a terrible destruction of life, as it were for nothing, or next to it, as the tongues only were brought in, and the flesh of these fine animals was left to beasts and birds of prey, or to rot on the spots where they fell. The prairies are literally covered with the skulls of the victims. . . ." (*Writings and Drawings* 692-93). With a naturalist's eye, Audubon was among the first to recognize and speak out about safeguarding wildlife. Streshinsky comments that "[i]f others thought the great herds would last forever, Audubon did not. In *Quadrupeds* he would write that the buffalo was "'perhaps sooner to be forever lost than is generally supposed'" (355). Elsewhere in his Missouri River jour-

nals, Audubon declares "this cannot last; even now there is a perceptible difference in the size of the herds, and before many years the Buffalo like the Great Auk, will have disappeared; surely this should not be permitted" (712).

Audubon also recognized the alarming decline of Indian tribes. At that time, there seem to have been uncanny parallels between lamenting the extinction of species and the plight of Indians. Like the buffalo, by the middle of the nineteenth century American Indian tribes were also under siege. In certain ways their fates seemed tragically intertwined. In his Missouri River journals, Audubon scorned commercial hunters for decimating the herds when the buffalo was essential for survival of indigenous peoples. In fact, since the buffalo was central to the well being of the Plains Indians, its eradication would entirely undermine a way of life.

Audubon's assessment of Indian agriculture was equally bleak as he described "the cornfields, as these small patches that are meanly cultivated are called. We found poor sickly looking corn about two inches high" (*Writings and Drawings* 618). His depictions of Indians visiting the Omega to trade were often demeaning: "wolfish-looking vagabonds . . . It will indeed be a deliverance to get rid of all this 'Indian poetry'" he declared (*Writings and Drawings* 619). Here, Audubon mocked the romantic adulation of the noble savage found in popular literature, embracing another nineteenth-century view instead: that Indians were purportedly less than human.

Nonetheless, upstream of Fort Clark, Indians of various tribes including the Gros Ventre and Assiniboin came on board almost daily to trade, receiving tobacco and gunpowder in exchange for the "trifles" they brought to barter. These exchanges—as well as honorifics such as speech making and passing the pipe—were undoubtedly also intended to promote goodwill and ensure safe passage. When the Omega at last reached its destination at Fort Union on June 13, Audubon immediately penned a letter home that began "'We are now at the end of our Journey upward the Missouri River, for we have given up going into the Black feet Country'" (qtd. in McDermott, *Audubon* 114). This turned out to be as far upstream and deep into Indian country as Audubon would get. While Catlin had ventured well beyond Fort Union to paint Indian subjects on the upper Missouri, Audubon remained at the fort for the entire summer. And while his stated aim was the collection of specimens for *Quadrupeds*, in truth he engaged in a great deal of what amounted to sightseeing



and sport hunting. His journals are filled with sometimes hair-raising accounts of hunting buffaloes and wolves—ever alert for signs of the elusive grizzly bear. He also gathered Indian artifacts such as what he proudly described as “a complete dress of a Blackfoot warrior, ornamented with many tufts of Indian hair scalps” (*Writings and Drawings* 647).

Audubon also recorded stories of Indian skirmishes such as the arrival at the fort of an Assiniboin war party that had just routed their enemy, the Blackfoot. The scalp songs of the warriors were not silenced until their drum was taken away the next day by the Fort’s Commander, Alexander Culbertson. In his journal, Harris describes the fearsome spectacle: “On reaching the Fort we found a war party of Assineboin Indians just arrived, the greater part of them had their faces painted black, they were miserably clad and looked more like infernal than human beings. In the evening they were singing their war song in the Indian lodge at the gate, and most of the squaws belonging to the Fort being of the same nation were singing and dancing to the same tune and followed by all the children, making a most hideous uproar” (qtd. in McDermott, *Up* 129-30). It is telling that Assiniboin squaws living inside the fort joined in singing scalp songs and dancing to commemorate the death of an enemy, going as far as to paint themselves black or vermilion like the warriors outside. Describing a party of Assiniboins at Fort Union, Audubon wrote, “When and where Mr. Catlin saw these Indians as he represented them, dressed in magnificent attire, with all sorts of extravagant accoutrements, is more than I can divine . . .” (*Writings and Drawings* 693). Yet, as Ewers has observed, while Catlin became “a controversial figure in American art for generations,” accused by some of romanticism or even sensationalism, it is clear that his portraits systematically depicted the most elite and wealthy among each tribe, accounting for the apparent glamour and opulence as well as their often stately bearing.

On another occasion, several “squaws” from the fort—joined by two members of Audubon’s party—donned Indian regalia and performed on horseback. Behind such pageantry lay the interracial relationship between the fort’s white captain and a woman whom Audubon believed to be pure Indian. While such common-law marriages of convenience on the frontier were often seen as temporary, in this instance the two eventually wed decades later in St. Louis. As if to blur the boundaries of race, the riding pageant also involved a

cultural cross-dressing: the white riders wore Indian buckskins and face paint. Harris described the event in his journal: “Towards evening we had an exhibition of riding on the Prarie. Mr Culbertson, with *Squires & Owen*, dressed as Blackfeet chiefs and Mr C’s and another squaw dressed, the first in Blackfoot, and the other in Assineboin costume astride their horses” (qtd. in McDermott, *Up* 134). Audubon mused “how amazed would have been any European lady, or women of our modern belles who boast of their equestrian skill, at seeing the magnificent riding of this Indian princess—for this is Mrs. Culbertson’s rank . . . magnificent black hair floating like a banner behind her” (*Writings and Drawings* 677).

In Audubon’s day, of course, many assumed that Indians were sadly destined to vanish. What Audubon would not have anticipated, however, was that the time of his trip up the Missouri in 1843 in the wake of several major epidemics would make him an eyewitness to such a catastrophe. Unable to reconcile what he witnessed with popular preconceptions, Audubon’s writings reflect a radical transformation underway on the Upper Missouri. There was simply no way to anticipate such a sudden change, particularly in light of the glowing accounts Catlin had published just a few years before. Expectations for vibrant, wild tribes based on even recent descriptions already proved to be woefully out of date.

Audubon carried Catlin’s publications up the Missouri with him and naturally measured his own impressions against them. Indeed, it was inevitable that Catlin would be challenged by his rivals in this way: “Catlin’s pioneer work bore the brunt of the criticism of later artists. It set the standard they hoped to better” (Ewers 503). As Donald Peattie suggests in *Audubon’s America*:

In his own youth he had idealized “the noble red man,” and it is a James Fenimore Cooper sort of Indian that comes out to us from some of his early pages. Had Audubon seen the same Dakota scenes before Catlin, how different might have been his account! The very fact that Catlin saw the Mandan country first is enough to stir Audubon’s greatest failing, that of professional jealousy. Catlin with his dashing pictures, right from life, in the days when life in North Dakota must have been worth living, invaded the very province that Audubon liked to consider uniquely his own. (475)

Audubon returned from the Missouri somewhat disillusioned; clearly, he had arrived on the frontier just after the passing of what

must have seemed to him a proverbial Golden Age. Neither the landscape nor its indigenous peoples had measured up to his lofty expectations. The Wild West, it seemed, was apparently not all it had been imagined to be. He grew increasingly skeptical of earlier accounts—especially Catlin’s—that he now believed had misled him by exaggeration if not outright fabrication. Audubon lashed out repeatedly at Catlin as if Catlin were his nemesis; his commentary smacks of venom—and a lingering bitterness that he had arrived on the Midwestern frontier too late to witness for himself the fabled West in all its glory. Audubon by now rejected Catlin’s conception of the noble savage out of hand. He seemed to embrace instead an equally extreme and unfounded stereotype: Indians were categorically destitute and dangerous. This mindset tragically provided a political rationale during the period for both tribal relocation and the ensuing Indian Wars.

Given the predicament of many of the Indians Audubon met, it would seem that he might have been more sympathetic. He witnessed that the once proud Mandans—celebrated by Lewis and Clark as well as by Catlin—had been all but wiped out by the epidemics of 1837 that had also claimed three-quarters of the Blackfeet, half the Assiniboin and Arikara, and a quarter of the Pawnee: “Audubon told the smallpox story at length in his journal he kept on the Missouri River expedition, so he had reason to understand why the Indians he met were dirty, louse-ridden, and hungry, prepared to steal anything in sight. That his empathy failed him is another sad sign that he was growing old, picking up the prejudices of hard-eyed Western men around him” (Rhodes 425). As Donald Peattie suggests, we can only wonder: “Had Audubon seen these same Dakota scenes before Catlin, how different might have been his account” (275). Perhaps, like many of his contemporaries, he may well have lacked the imagination to comprehend a catastrophe of such magnitude.

Today in Henderson, Kentucky—where Audubon had made his home during its pioneer period—the museum at John James Audubon State Park prominently displays a bronze bust of Audubon dressed in an Indian beaded buckskin shirt that he was given during the journey on the Upper Missouri. The bust seems to capture both the bravado of a frontier wanderer and the stateliness of an accomplished artist. As if to add authenticity, an example of the actual Indian regalia Audubon had collected—similar to the bronze—is displayed beside the statue. For Audubon to have taken on such trap-

pings of the frontier—and to have paraded that way before Europe’s high society—was to invoke a myth in which the New World was imagined to be a kind of wild Eden. Audubon was its self-styled—and self-appointed—emissary. We can only imagine how flamboyant a “long-haired, wolfskin-clad American woodsman” would have seemed in nineteenth-century London (Lindsey xi). Remarkably, he is often remembered today in the very same terms—which is to say on his own terms.

Audubon positioned himself as a pioneer—that American archetype (Bourne, 1916)—perhaps never more blatantly than by his backwoods attire. As Alton Lindsey puts it:

During his years of promoting subscriptions to *Birds of America* among wealthy potential patrons, Audubon saw the necessity for self promotion . . . he not only created visual images of wild nature, but served also as writer, director, producer, narrator, advertising manager and salesman . . . It may have galled such a man to play the role of long-haired, wolfskin-clad American woodsman in the salons of Europe. Or perhaps, with his penchant for practical jokes, he enjoyed the irony . . . [Subsequently] Audubon has come to symbolize both woodsman and conservationist, two somewhat antithetical types, in his adopted country. Both kinds of symbolism have always had a powerful grip on the American imagination, and today we realize that further loss of wilderness not only means the loss of a part of our past, but of a part of our future as well. (xi)

Audubon sought to recast his own identity—and perhaps that of the nation—from the vantage point of the frontier. His self-conscious attempt to embody the quintessentially American frontiersman arguably was intended not only for the benefit of his contemporaries but for posterity as well. Consider his legacy. The name “Audubon” has become virtually synonymous with the conservation of habitat and protection of endangered species, as reflected by his namesake Audubon Society, which today numbers over 600,000 members worldwide. The organization’s mission statement emphasizes Audubon’s own ideals of wildlife preservation to this day.

Setting out on the Missouri from St. Louis when the river thawed in the spring of 1843, Audubon had above all hoped to glimpse the grandeur of the frontier. He discovered the Midwest changing in ways that at the time no one could fully comprehend. His journey up the Missouri—along with the legendary frontier itself—remains

indelibly inscribed in the iconically American stories that have come to represent his life.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Audubon's writings and from those of the expedition's naturalist, Edward Harris, are presented with their invented spellings and orthographic idiosyncrasies intact.

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EAST MEETS (MID)WEST: REPRESSED VIOLENCE AND  
VIOLENT REPRESSION IN STEPHEN CRANE'S  
"THE BLUE HOTEL"

ANITA HELMBOLD

First published in 1898, Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel" provides an Easterner's critique of the Midwest's subconscious adherence to a lifestyle of brutality by which its own identity is both defined and defended. This short story serves as Crane's exposé of the institutionalized violence that he found enshrined within a Midwestern culture that insisted to the outside world upon its propriety and progressiveness and upon the validity of its claims to a civilized respectability. Using plot twists wrought upon the formulaic Western genre, Crane's story explodes the peaceful mythos promulgated by Midwestern settlers as mere public relations propaganda, a thin and remarkably fragile veneer of civilization overlying an innate savagery ready to erupt at the slightest provocation. Against the observant outsider—the individual savvy enough to sense the barely repressed inclination toward violence and honest enough to threaten the ethos with exposure—the community marshals its most effective weapons of suppression.

"The Blue Hotel" is framed as a clash of values fought (literally) between Midwesterners and outsiders—a conflict emphasized through the use of epithets and descriptions for each of the visitors to Fort Romper, Nebraska, which either reflect their degree of otherness or downplay it. Of the three train passengers whom Pat Scully, the proprietor of the blue hotel, collects as his guests on the day with which the story concerns itself, one is known simply as "the cowboy."<sup>1</sup> The name aligns him with the values represented by the Wild West ethos of Midwestern Fort Romper, and, appropriately enough,

the cowboy's sensibilities most resemble those of the town through which he passes on his way to the Dakota line.

At a further remove is the aptly named Mr. Blanc, "a little silent man from the East, who didn't look it, and didn't announce it" (Crane 397).<sup>2</sup> Minimizing his own sense of difference from Midwestern values, the Easterner nonetheless has distance enough to recognize the inherent violence of this volatile culture, and wisdom enough, through quiet self-effacement, to distance himself from any of the dangers which it might hold for him. Finally, there is the story's protagonist, a man doubly outside the pale of Midwestern society, being both a New Yorker and a Swede, the latter term being the only identity by which he is known throughout the course of the story. In him, the clash between Midwesterner and outsider finds its ultimate expression, with lethal consequences.

Scully serves as something of a public relations agent for Fort Romper. He faithfully and dutifully meets each arriving train, putting a good face on the town by welcoming newcomers with a demeanor "so nimble and merry and kindly" that newly arrived visitors feel it would be unworthy of them to attempt to disentangle themselves from his ministrations (377). He escorts them to his hotel with a jovial and animated hospitality, conveying magnanimously to his guests the sense that they are the fortunate recipients of an august benevolence, having been singled out to receive "great favors" born of the natural and "philanthropic impulse" which Scully, on behalf of both his establishment and the entire town, confers (376).

The propensity for violence in the story is revealed early, through Crane's careful choice of diction as he describes both the setting and the human interactions. The remarkable blue hotel itself rages continuously, as it is painted in so garish a hue that it appears at all times to be "screaming and howling" (376) against an otherwise becalmed landscape. Scully's capture of three arriving hotel guests has the effect of virtually rendering them prisoners, who would manifest "the height of brutality" (as indeed, the Swede must literally do) should they attempt to escape (376). Scully's "boisterous hospitality" ushers his captives into a lobby that appears to function primarily as a symbolic shrine to brutality, "a proper temple for an enormous stove, which, in the center, was humming with godlike violence" (376).

Although the reader does not learn the full import of the scene until the final page of the story, the conditions are ripe for violence from the very start. As the newly arrived guests troop into the hotel

lobby, they find, seated next to the glow(er)ing stove, Scully's son, Johnnie, and an elderly farmer playing a game of cards; significantly, "they were quarreling." Although ostensibly the card game holds no relevance for the arriving guests, Scully nonetheless "destroy[s]" the game with "a loud flourish of words," and in contrast to the "heated" situation which he has now diffused, brings his clientele to "three basins of the coldest water in the world" (376). But, as the reader will learn at the end of the story, the Swede's accusation toward Johnnie regarding a further game of cards—that Johnnie is cheating—is well-founded. Furthermore, the story will later indicate that the town views as lawful prey the "occasional unwary traveler who came by rail," as well as "reckless and senile farmers" (394). That the Swede has been introduced with the epithet "quick-eyed" (376) lends credibility to the supposition that the Swede immediately discerns the cause of the farmer's "impatience and irritation": Johnnie is cheating. That Scully knows or at least suspects him to be doing so and wishes to hide such unseemly practices from the eyes of his visitors provides the motive for Scully's demolishing what otherwise should have been an utterly innocuous pastime. By accepting Scully's offer of an ironic baptism by ice water (both the "cowboy and the Easterner burnished themselves fiery red with this water"), the hotel guests are initiated into complicity with the ethos of violence that governs the Midwestern town. Only the Swede, already astutely aware of the propensity for violence inherent in such volatile circumstances, refuses the rite, merely "dipp[ing] his fingers" into the water "gingerly and with trepidation" (376).<sup>3</sup>

Scully represents Fort Romper as it would like to see itself and as it portrays itself to the outside world. Partially conscious of and fully implicated in the seamy underside lurking beneath Fort Romper's pretensions to respectability, Scully nonetheless asserts himself valiantly in defense of the town's public image as a wholesome place to live.<sup>4</sup> In attempting to reassure the Swede, who is in fear of his life and intent on leaving the hotel before violence erupts, Scully musters an impressive display of normalcy calculated to reassure the visitor of his safety. Scully's first line of defense is to cite the pace of civic improvement taking place in town. "Why, man, we're goin' to have a line of illictric street-cars in this town next spring," he begins, following up this incontrovertible evidence of civility by citing a new railroad line, four churches, a large brick schoolhouse, and a big factory as further testimony to the town's adherence to

accepted social norms (382). When mention of the town's institutions fails to allay the Swede's anxieties, Scully begins pointing out photographs of his children, hoping that his display of allegiance to family values will persuade the Swede that he is among civilized society. But, finding these resources exhausted and insufficient to counter the Swede's distrust, Scully turns to his final and most effective persuasion—alcohol—and thus unintentionally places his guest on the path that will lead to his death. In treating alcohol, and later violence, as a social leveler, Scully reveals his implication in and identification with the Wild West values by which the denizens of Fort Romper live.

Although Scully is initially welcoming and hospitable, just like the town, it takes only an accusation that his son, Johnnie, is cheating at a game of cards to catalyze Scully into endorsing a violent solution to the problem.<sup>5</sup> Although he is an Irishman by birth and technically an outsider, Scully's reaction to this incident reveals that he is fully identified with the subculture of violence which characterizes Fort Romper. His mirroring of the town's "might makes right" mentality renders him most truly one of its own; indeed, this ability to assimilate forms the litmus test by which the town measures all comers. Thus, all of the visitors to Scully's hotel either thrive or suffer on the basis of the extent to which they condone and live according to its Wild West mentality.

That the true issue at question is one of regional identity finds corroboration at key points in the story. While Scully, upstairs, attempts to persuade his recalcitrant guest to continue under his hospitality, the men downstairs discuss the identity of the Swede and the reasons for what appears, to most of them, to constitute irrational behavior in him. Johnnie and the cowboy debate whether the man is a Swede or a Dutchman, a distinction which makes little difference within the ethos of Fort Romper, as both identities label the man as an outsider. Mr. Blanc, on questions of identity, maintains his characteristic noncommittal silence, doubtless in keeping with his quiet determination not to evince his own difference and distance from the locals.

But when the talk turns to psychological motivation, Blanc readily reveals what he already clearly understands (and, as the reader will learn only much later, understands the reasons for): the Swede's seemingly irrational behavior is motivated by fear. He explains cogently, "It seems to me this man has been reading dime novels, and he thinks he's right out in the middle of it—the shootin'—and the

stabbin' and all." The cowboy is taken aback by this perspective: "[S]candalized," he replies, "this ain't Wyoming, ner none of them places. This is Nebrasker," and Johnnie concurs, adding that the Swede should restrain his fears "till he gits *out West*" (383; emphasis in original). While the Fort Romper-aligned characters stress their perceived distance from Western anarchy and lawlessness, the Easterner among them downplays their purported difference from the "true" West, insisting instead, with a subtle ambiguity that is lost on his hearers, that "[i]t isn't different there even—not in these days" (383-84).<sup>6</sup> Scully, too, reinforces the centrality of the East-West divide when he later concurs with the central premise of Blanc's assessment, attributing the Swede's seeming paranoia to the fact that he "was from the East, and he thought this was a tough place. That's all" (384).

These East-West differences polarize the various characters in "The Blue Hotel," and the distinctions drawn between insider and outsider determine what constitutes acceptable behavior in social interactions. One becomes an insider by complying with Fort Romper's value system, whereas outsiders constitute the insider's lawful prey. Thus, when a game of cards is organized between Johnnie and the three newcomers, it is inevitable that the cowboy, whose occupation aligns him with Western values, partners with Johnnie, a Fort Romper insider, and the two take on as opponents the men from the East: Mr. Blanc and the Swedish tailor from New York. The Swede, as an Easterner, feels a natural solidarity with Blanc, to whom he turns repeatedly for support, but his aptly named companion politely refuses to acknowledge their shared perspective. When Johnnie, goaded, fails to concede that anything potentially dangerous might be afoot, the Swede "sent an appealing glance in the direction of the little Easterner," who professes quite disingenuously, "after prolonged and cautious reflection," not to comprehend the Swede's meaning. Crane drives home the significance of this betrayal by citing the New Yorker's reaction: "The Swede made a movement then which announced that he thought he had encountered treachery from the only quarter where he had expected sympathy, if not help. 'Oh, I see you are all against me,'" he cries out in dawning realization (379).

The East-versus-West structure of the conflict in "The Blue Hotel" draws upon the conventions of the Western genre to critique the Midwest for embodying a Wild West mentality of senseless violence. Classic Western fiction is linked inextricably with a sense of

place, so that "The symbolic landscape of the western formula is a field of action that centers upon the point of encounter between civilization and wilderness, East and West, settled society and lawless openness" (Cawelti, *Adventure* 193). Because of its emphasis on rugged individualism, the Western centers on the choices and actions of a single heroic individual who is caught up, in some way, in the clash between settled society and rapacious anarchy, and who, because of his unique ability to reflect in some sense the values inherent on both sides of the conflict, is positioned to act decisively to defeat the forces of chaos and make the world (or at least, this part of it) safe for domesticity and civilization. As John Cawelti puts it, "the western represents a moment when the forces of civilization and wilderness life are in balance, the epic moment at which the old life and the new confront each other and individual action may tip the balance one way or another" (*Adventure* 193).

In Western formula fiction, the handsome stranger, a man of few words but great martial prowess, although initially reluctant to act, eventually must intervene violently to rid the upright, innocent townspeople of some ruthless and chaotic threat to their physical or economic well-being. As Peter Homans explains, the standard Western plot is one "in which evil appears as a series of temptations to be resisted by the hero—most of which he succeeds in avoiding through inner control. When faced with the embodiment of these temptations, his mode of control changes, and he destroys the threat" (82). The applicability of this pattern to Crane's story is obvious: throughout the first half of the story, the Swede repeatedly evinces his desire to leave the fraught milieu of the hotel and repeatedly insists, "I don't want to fight! I don't want to fight!" (380). But under the influence of an unhealthy dose of Scully's whiskey, he responds to Johnnie's challenge with the words, "Yes, fight! I'll show you what kind of man I am! I'll show you who you want to fight!" (387).

In this, too, the Swede's character resembles that of the stereotypical Western hero. The hero's primary concern in such dramas is "to preserve himself with individual dignity and honor in a savage and violent environment" (Cawelti, *Six-Gun* 49). Alone and against all odds, the protagonist fights to uphold his personal code of honor, serving, in the words of Martin Nussbaum, as "a vanishing symbol of individualism in an age of togetherness and conformity" (26). Crane captures this mystique in his description of the erect Swede towering over the prone body of Johnnie, whom he has just bested in a brutal fist

fight: "There was a splendor of isolation in his situation at this time which the Easterner felt once, when, lifting his eyes from the man on the ground, he beheld that mysterious and lonely figure, waiting" (390). While the Easterner, Mr. Blanc, is fully aware that the Swede's accusation against Johnnie is justified, as he insists to the incredulous cowboy sometime later, Blanc lacks the personal valor and heroism that define the Swede's moral vision. Blanc admits, "Johnnie was cheating. I saw him. I know it. I saw him. And I refused to stand up and be a man. I let the Swede fight it out alone" (396).

In other particulars as well, the Swede resembles the quintessential Western hero. Initially, at least, he is uncommunicative. While all three visitors to Scully's Palace Hotel at first reflect quietly, "in the silence of experienced men who tread carefully among new people," (377), the cowboy and the Easterner are eventually drawn into the occasional small talk directed at the visitors by the elderly farmer whose card game they had interrupted. By contrast, "the Swede said nothing," confining his attentions, apparently, to "making furtive estimates of each man in the room" (378). As Cawelti points out, verbal reticence is a recurring feature of the Western hero, and it "reflects his social isolation and his reluctance to commit himself to the action which he knows will invariably lead to another violent confrontation" (*Six-Gun* 61). But the Swede becomes increasingly talkative, dropping ever more direct hints that he understands the danger of the situation he finds himself in—an honest assessment which appears to mystify both the cowboy and Johnnie and to which Mr. Blanc responds with a studied lack of comment.

As the story builds to its apparent climax, it becomes increasingly manifest that all the players in this tawdry drama have a clear awareness of the violent implications of certain proscribed actions. When the Swede, pumped full of alcohol, finally utters "three terrible words: 'You are cheatin'!'" (Crane 386), chaos and the fear of worse ensue. At once, the commonplace little room takes on the character of a torture chamber (386). Scully's newspaper flutters, forgotten, to the ground; the Easterner's face turns ashen; and the cowboy's jaw drops in dumb amazement: these are fightin' words. The relative quiet of the room gives place as a free-for-all instantaneously breaks out:

Johnnie, in rising to hurl himself upon the Swede, had stumbled slightly . . . The loss of the moment allowed time for the arrival of

Scully, and also allowed the cowboy time to give the Swede a great push which sent him staggering back. The men found tongue together, and hoarse shouts of rage, appeal, or fear burst from every throat. The cowboy pushed and jostled feverishly at the Swede, and the Easterner and Scully clung wildly to Johnnie; but through the smoky air, above the swaying bodies of the peace-compellers, the eyes of the two warriors ever sought each other in glances of challenge that were at once hot and steely. (386)

After a moment's reprieve, in which the Swede is given the opportunity to withdraw the accusation but refuses to do so, remaining true to his own moral vision, the fight is determined upon, with the sanction of Scully. As they prepare to take their battle outdoors, "The Easterner was so nervous that he had great difficulty in getting his arms into the sleeves of his new leather coat," and the cowboy, dressing for the cold, does so with trembling hands (387). Only the true denizens of Fort Romper, Scully and Johnnie, display no signs of agitation.

Although one would expect "The Blue Hotel" to climax in the violent confrontation which then ensues between the Swede and Johnnie, their vicious conflict serves only as a prequel and a catalyst for the revelation of the true extent of the town's commitment to savagery. Although the fist fight is described in terms brutal enough—"The two combatants leaped forward and crashed together like bullocks"; "there was a monotony of unchangeable fighting that was an abomination" (389)—the most appalling manifestations of savagery are those that escape from the lips of the noncombatants, namely, the cowboy and Scully. Although the cowboy had initially professed reluctance to encourage the brawl, the battle, once started, fuels the fire in his blood, so that "Suddenly a holocaust of warlike desire caught the cowboy, and he bolted forward with the speed of a bronco. 'Go it, Johnnie! Go it! Kill him! Kill him!'" he enthuses savagely. And Scully, although he presides over the fight with due decorum, expresses his feelings after Johnnie's defeat in the brogue that he slips into in moments of deep emotion: "'I'd loike to take that Swade,' he wailed, 'and hould 'im down on a shtone flure and bate 'im to a jelly wid a shtick!'" The cowboy further reveals his cold savagery, joining his voice with Scully's in a litany of sympathetic emotion: "'I'd like to get him by the neck and . . . hammer [him] until he couldn't tell himself from a dead coyote!'" (392).

Whereas the Swede enters into violence in the manner of the true Western hero—reluctantly and only with sufficient force to accom-

plish his goal—Scully and the cowboy, fellow Westerners in spirit, revel in the excess that typifies the antagonists in western dramas. According to Cawelti, the hero's "controlled and aesthetic mode of killing is particularly important as the supreme mark of differentiation between the hero and the savage. The Indian or outlaw as savage delights in slaughter, entering into combat with a kind of manic glee to fulfill an uncontrolled lust for blood" (*Six-Gun* 60). But the portrait of the townspeople as practitioners and even connoisseurs of violence constitutes the critical juncture at which Crane departs from the storyline of the generic Western, and it serves as well as the cause of the hero's most assured defeat.

In the generic Western, the triumph of civilization over savagery is *de rigueur*. In the cultural moment at which the originally lawless frontier must confront the new, more settled way of life represented by encroaching civilization, "the western hero finds himself placed between the old life and the new with the responsibility for taking those actions that will bring about the final destruction of the old life and the establishment of settled society" (Cawelti, *Adventure* 193-94). The outcome of such battles is always pre-assured: although the Western is set at the decisive moment when the two ways of life come into conflict, the hero's interventions invariably guarantee the triumph of civilization over the ways of lawlessness. As Cawelti explains, "in the Western formula, savagery is implicitly understood to be on the way out," and the Western hero, "insofar as he is a hero," must act "in relation to the victory of civilization over savagery" (*Six-Gun* 36). By undermining these generic conventions, Crane gives his story an unexpected twist and drives home his scathing critique of the mere lip service to conventional mores that he found operative in the Midwest of his day.<sup>7</sup>

The Swede's defeat of Johnnie thus conforms to the expected pattern of the genre: the reticent and yet dangerous stranger intervenes on the side of right and through physical prowess vanquishes evil. Crane wrings his first twist on this narrative pattern, however, by withholding until the end of the story the revelation that the Swede has indeed acted on the side of right and not merely out of paranoia or alcohol-induced bravado. Although violence is always portrayed as necessary to restore the moral order, the Western formula justifies the hero's use of force by a clear-cut distinction between right and wrong: the hero's intervention is clearly necessitated by the actions of the adversary, and thus the adversary, and not the hero, bears the moral

culpability for forcing the conflict to the critical juncture at which violence becomes inevitable for the restoration of right. By withholding from the reader knowledge that the Swede acts from a position of moral rectitude, Crane manipulates point of view so that the reader tends to side with the townspeople against the honest Swede.

Crane's purpose, however, is less to critique Western genre fiction than it is to critique the easy propensity for violence that he found operative within Midwestern culture. While Crane delays the reader's full awareness of the moral stakes at play in the Swede's confrontation at the blue hotel, the stakes in the New York stranger's next and climactic confrontation are made clear at the start. Drunk but exhilarated by his victory, the protagonist finally takes his leave of the Palace Hotel and proceeds to make his way to a saloon. When he tells the bartender of his violent victory, he captures the attention of four men sitting around a table whose moral stature Crane immediately reveals. Here, if not at the blue hotel, the town's corruption is palpable and incontrovertible, and immediately apparent to the reader, although not to the Swede:

The group was of curious formation. Two were prominent local business men; one was the district attorney; and one was a professional gambler of the kind known as "square." But a scrutiny of the group would not have enabled an observer to pick the gambler from the men of more reputable pursuits. He was, in fact, a man so delicate in manner, when among people of fair class; and so judicious in his choice of victims, that in the strictly masculine part of the town's life he had come to be explicitly trusted and admired. (393-94)

Here Crane works his most important twist on the conventions of the Western genre. The formula holds, insofar as the outsider's redemptive violence is always necessitated by the weakness or corruption of whatever form of law may exist in the town, a circumstance here represented by the cozy relationship between the district attorney and the gentleman gambler. But even more insidiously, and, for Crane's critique, more importantly, the presence at the table of two leading citizens signals the moral corruption of Fort Romper, Crane's representative Midwestern town.

The Western formula requires a clear-cut division between the oppressed and the oppressor, the meekly innocent and the self-servingly abusive. As Cawelti explains, "there are three central roles in the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or



outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who . . . possess many qualities and skills of the savages, but are fundamentally committed to the townspeople" (*Six-Gun* 46). The formula requires that the hero exercise force on behalf of the settlers, but Crane renders the townspeople as identical with the outlaws, as the conjunction of lawman, gambler, and ordinary citizen indicates. Thus, the Swede has no chance of ultimate victory, since the very people who should applaud his deliverance are those whom he must morally oppose. When he attempts to bully the gambler into sharing a drink with him, he meets his inevitable death: "There was a great tumult, and then was seen a long blade in the hand of the gambler. It shot forward, and a human body, this citadel of virtue, wisdom, power, was pierced as easily as if it had been a melon. The Swede fell with a cry of supreme astonishment" (Crane 395).

The Swede, through his moral honesty and vigorous action, serves as the catalyst that reveals the moral corruption of the town and thus constitutes what Fort Romper sees as the greatest threat to its well being. The Swede's announcement, in the saloon, of having bested Johnnie in a fight leads the commingled townspeople to eye him with furtive attentiveness (394), directing toward him the very same suspicion with which he had regarded his fellow men in the blue hotel. The Swede's boasting of having beaten a man who embodies the community's predatory values sets the stage for the final and ultimate clash of cultures. Just as the Swede has exposed Johnnie's cheating, so, too, will his assault on the gambler impel the latter "to use the hidden knife, symbol of the entire town's unconscious deceit and violence," according to Joseph Church (105), who makes the following observation about the Swede:

[He]represents that which these people would hide or repress. To try to find acceptance in Fort Romper would be to connive with corruption. The others try to assimilate (read: silence) him, but because he is implacable in his dedication to a violent subtext, they are forced to reveal their own hidden character—the cheating and killing. Refusing assimilation and forcing their hand, the determined stranger facilitates the social critique in "The Blue Hotel." (99-100)

By threatening the town's ethos with exposure, the Swede reveals himself as its most lethal enemy. Midwestern Fort Romper's value system is that of Crane's West, which, as John Feaster explains, is, for Crane, always a place "where the inclination to violence is never

far from erupting to the surface, though as a matter of carefully calculated public policy that particular feature of Western reality is generally suppressed by a not disinterested citizenry" (80).

The Swede's death has often been read as the natural, albeit regrettable result of his own naiveté,<sup>8</sup> but such a reading misses the moral heart of the story. In the aftermath of events, the cowboy expresses sympathy for the poor gambler, who has had to endure the light (but, in the opinion of the cowboy, hardly justifiable) sentence of three years in prison for his murder of the Swede. He opines, "'He [the gambler] don't deserve none of it for killin' who he did'" (396)—as if the Swede were nothing more than a boil to be lanced. He goes on to say that the Swede virtually asked to be murdered: "'Why, when he said that Johnnie was cheatin' and acted like such a jackass? And then in the saloon he fairly walked up to git hurt?'" (396). And most readers have agreed, seeing the legend that rings up atop the cash register at the time of the Swede's murder, "This registers the amount of your purchase" (395), as a sign of the New Yorker's willful foolishness and deserved death.

But it is not the cowboy's moral perspective that Crane's story endorses. Indeed, the cowboy's insistence on the rightfulness of the murder ultimately enrages his companion, the Easterner, who opposes the cowboy's rationalization of the killing with the utmost vehemence. "'You're a fool!' cried the Easterner, viciously. 'You're a bigger jackass than the Swede by a million majority'" (396). After revealing to his companion—and to the reader—that Johnnie was cheating at cards, and after admitting his own failure to rally to the side of the Swede, Blanc goes on to level additional accusations, beginning with the cowboy: "'And you—you were simply puffing around the place and wanting to fight. And then old Scully himself! We are all in it! . . . We, the five of us [Scully, Johnnie, the cowboy, Blanc, and the gambler], have collaborated in the murder of this Swede'" (396). The story concludes with the cowboy, "injured and rebellious," denying responsibility and complicity: "'Well, I didn't do anythin,' did I?'" (396)

In this self-serving protestation of moral innocence, the cowboy puts himself at one with the denizens of Fort Romper, a town "which believes it has established a community as civilized as any in the East," and which, to protect its own image of itself, "necessarily denies its violations and violence" (Church 100). The concluding scene, which many have decried as unnecessary to Crane's narrative,

is, in my reading, essential to comprehending it, as it is only in this final scene that the reader is privileged to witness the extent of the suppression that undergirds Fort Romper's pretensions to respectability. Through a community of conspiracy, this fictional Midwestern town protects the image that allows it to pursue its own chosen brand of economic prosperity: "the denial, the conveniently remaining unaware, of vicious impulses, only enables them to inform the real world all the more insidiously and thus to promote a predatory social arrangement" (Church 101). For this reason, it seems all the more probable that the true significance of the slogan that moralizes the Swede's death, "This registers the amount of your purchase," is not a comment on the moral bankruptcy of the Swede's vision but on the impossibility of successfully pursuing justice in the face of a thoroughly corrupt social system.

Thus Crane critiques the image of the Midwest as merely an extension of a more settled, Eastern way of life, dismissing this perspective as mere window dressing, a public relations myth assiduously maintained and shrewdly purveyed not to foster civilization, but to institutionalize lawlessness. Like much of Crane's fiction, this story found its inspiration in the author's real-life experiences. On a visit to Nebraska as a reporter in 1895, Crane tried to break up a bar-room fight that erupted during a stopover in Lincoln. As Thomas Beer recounts this episode, Crane thrust himself between the two combatants, "a very tall man [who was] pounding a rather small one" (Beer 113). "But thus I offended a local custom," Crane wrote of the encounter. "These men fought each other every night. Their friends expected it and I was a darned nuisance with my Eastern scruples and all that. So first everybody cursed me fully and then they took me off to a judge who told me that I was an imbecile and let me go" (qtd. in Beer 113-14).

Whereas Crane escaped easily, with little more than his dignity damaged and his sensibilities mildly outraged, his fictional protagonist pays the ultimate price for pursuing moral dignity. By constructing a story focused upon the experiences of outsiders in contact with Midwestern society, Crane offers a scathing portrait of cultural values that he has found to differ radically from the sensibilities and expectations of more settled East Coast society. Crane's story opens a window onto a world that he has found to be hostile and alien—ironically, perhaps, as it is a world that Crane elsewhere finds limited

not only to Midwestern boundaries but extending as far as human society may be found.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Strict accuracy requires mentioning that Scully calls the character by his given name, Bill, in a single instance in the story, but for all practical purposes, his role as a cowboy serves as the sole marker of his identity.
- <sup>2</sup>All further references to Crane's "The Blue Hotel" will be identified, where appropriate, simply by page number.
- <sup>3</sup>That the site of such ministrations is a Western hotel is consistent with Bill Brown's analysis of the economic life of Western American at the time this story was written. Brown argues that the Western hotel one hundred years ago was a site "where the (uncivilized) West vertiginously imitates the (civilized) East, while insisting that hotel patrons lose their identity in the process of assimilation" (85). While Blanc and the cowboy accept this baptism into Romper's value system, the Swede stands alone in his refusal to assimilate.
- <sup>4</sup>A further example of Scully's attempts to obscure the town's darker side occurs in his routine elision of the word "Fort" from the town's title. As Joseph Church observes, "Fort Romper conceives of itself as civilized, but the 'Fort' in its name declares that its origins involved a violent appropriation, one that must now be denied or repressed in the name of a proper identity" (101).
- <sup>5</sup>Scully's readiness to endorse violence is all the more disturbing in light of the fact that Crane's story provides ample evidence throughout that Scully is almost certainly aware that Johnnie routinely cheats when playing at cards and thus, not only that the Swede's accusation is justified, but that Scully knows it to be so. The latter's endorsement of a fist-fight to "settle" the debate thus reflects one of the key issues that Crane wishes his story to illustrate: that the Midwest of his day adheres superficially to the cultural values of the more settled and civilized East, but to call attention to the hollowness of its pretensions to respectability is to invoke implacable wrath and to provoke regression to the code of vigilante justice which reflects the truest and deepest values of the area's inhabitants.
- <sup>6</sup>What his hearers imagine him to be saying is that the Wild West is no longer wild but civilized, just like Fort Romper and other Midwestern towns, just like the East. But what Blanc more truly means is that Fort Romper is just as boisterous as the so-called Wild West. His perception of this fact, and of his own personal endangerment should he call attention to it, proscribe his behavior with a self-protective reticence.
- <sup>7</sup>Although the term "Midwest" was first used in 1894 in the *Overland Monthly*, four years before "The Blue Hotel" was published, cultural geographer James Shortridge argues in *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1989) that "Middle West" was the more common term, used first by Timothy Flint, editor of the *Western Monthly Review*, in 1827. By 1898, the year Crane's story was published, "Middle West" was used to refer to the Kansas-Nebraska region in which the story was set and to connote the pastoral virtues with which the region has been associated, coming into wide usage around 1912. The shortened form, "Midwest," began to replace it around 1918 (chapter 2).
- <sup>8</sup>Bruce Grenberg's reading, for example, typifies the trend, although he is more generous than most in his assessment of the Swede's (mis)fortunes, asserting that "though the Swede blunders and labors under some misapprehensions, it is *he*, and not the Easterner nor the cowboy, who correctly perceives the values and practices of Romper. And it is his tragedy,

if I dare apply such a word to the Swede, that his correct perception leads only to death (206; emphasis in original).

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THE MIDWEST, THE ARTIST, AND THE CRITICS:  
EDITH WHARTON'S *HUDSON RIVER BRACKETED*  
AND *THE GODS ARRIVE*

JAYNE E. WATERMAN

In the introduction to an insightful collection of essays on *The Identity of the American Midwest*, Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray emphasize the importance of stories as crucial components in the formation of regional identity. "Thinking about regional identity," they write, necessarily leads us to focus on the stories people tell about themselves . . . . Stories tell us what people care about, who they think they are, and how they think their worlds work and ought to work. Whatever the degree of their tellers' self-consciousness, stories are guides to identity (4). Although Cayton and Gray's premise is centered primarily on the stories Midwesterners tell about themselves, they quickly acknowledge that stories are also "a way to engage other people in conversation" (4). In this sense, there is an important understanding that the monologue of self-identification becomes a dialogue of discovery because, as Cayton and Gray rightly note, "[s]torytelling is inherently social, a process of negotiation between narrator and audience" (4). The result of this negotiated storytelling relationship is the fact that identity can never be fixed. Instead, the "extended conversation," as Cayton and Gray characterize it, means that regional identity is never definitive because in the always contested discourse of conversation, regional identity is constantly evolving and redefined (5).

This essay will examine a uniquely redefined narration of the Midwest region through fiction. Rather than analyzing the self-referential search for regional identity that concerns the research of Cayton and Gray, however, the discussion will build on their general ideas of stories and the story-telling engagement with "other people."

Here, the focus is on another aspect of the "extended conversation": the stories that *others* tell about the Midwestern region. This investigation, then, is concerned with a non-Midwestern writer's view of the Midwest and how this Midwest is constructed, narrated, and received. Essentially, the paper asks what the "outsider" perspective brings to the literary construction of the Midwest. This question is not filtered through a romanticized or vilified version of the "outsider"; instead, it attempts to find a balance between these two polarities by exploring the Midwestern depictions drawn by a well-known author who is, in reputation at least, about as far from the Midwest as you can get.

Edith Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* and its sequel, *The Gods Arrive* are unlikely participants in the conversations about regional identity; an identity prescribed not only geographically but also temporally and culturally. The analysis of these early-twentieth-century novels and the critical responses that they generated are guided by two key questions: What could the Midwest mean to an American expatriate author in Europe usually associated with New York society, and how could these stories move the regional conversation beyond the discourse of well-rehearsed stereotypes? While it is difficult to defend Wharton's seemingly snobbish treatment of her Midwestern terrain and characters at times, there is merit in carefully considering her representations of the region, the conceptual issues they evoke, and the critical reception they received.

*Hudson River Bracketed* is the story of a young Midwestern man, Vance Weston: "the raw product of a middle-western town" (GA 459). From the wonderfully named Pruneville, Nebraska; Hallelujah, Missouri; Advance, and then finally Euphoria, Illinois, Vance symbolizes Wharton's Midwestern artist: a middle-class, small-town, college-educated sensitive soul who tries to discover himself as a writer. Floss Delaney, the upstart daughter of a small-time real estate agent living on the outskirts of Euphoria who tries to "move up" socially and financially by means of men and marriage, is Wharton's Midwestern *parvenu*. The romance between these two characters ends after Vance observes Floss in a secret rendezvous with his grandfather. The emotionally fraught Vance is inspired to write a short story, "One Day," about this betrayal and in desperation (both emotionally and artistically) desires to escape his small Midwestern town. After a prolonged illness and a convalescence that take him to relatives in Paul's Landing, in upstate New York, Vance's literary tal-

ents are again inspired by the discovery of an old aristocratic home, the Willows, its library, and the sophisticated Halo Spear, who will eventually inherit the home and become his lover. Halo fuels Vance's literary ambition, but after failing to achieve any literary success in New York City, Vance returns to a local newspaper job in Euphoria. He continues to pursue his literary ambitions, however, and eventually Halo's husband, Lewis Tarrant, the owner of a literary journal, reads "One Day," declares Vance a genius, and launches his literary career. Although Vance marries his cousin, Laura Lou, his desires for Halo grow, especially after Laura Lou dies of consumption.

*The Gods Arrive* opens with Halo, unable to get a divorce from Lewis, eloping with Vance on a steamship bound for Europe, where they will frequent the bohemian writers' colony of Paris and the salons of London. A chance reunion with the now wealthy Floss Delaney in Europe rekindles Vance's old passions for this Midwestern *parvenu* and strains his relationship with Halo. He returns to America, supposedly to promote his new novel, *Colossus*, but in the meantime Floss marries a rich duke and Halo discovers she is pregnant. Significantly, during this emotionally tumultuous time, Vance returns to his hometown of Euphoria and retreats to the woods of Wisconsin to reflect on his life and works. This Midwestern homecoming eventually leads to his reconciliation with Halo. The novel ends with the prospect of their living together as a family at the Willows.

The summaries of these rather involved stories have been purposefully abridged and selective. For instance, one of the main themes is a satiric look at the vulgarity of modernity, modern novelists, modernist aesthetics, the publishing industry and the literati it supports. These key concerns are intertwined and will be addressed in relation to the question of regional representation, but for this essay the primary focus is on the Midwestern aspects of the novels. This is the Midwest of small towns and their growing suburbs. It is a place where Vance's father settled his family in Mapledale suburb and was able to build "himself a house with a lawn, garage, sleeping-porch, and sun-parlour, which was photographed for the architectural papers and made Mrs. Weston the envy of the Alsop Avenue church sewing-circle" (HRB 4), while, "Mrs. Weston herself discoursed on refrigerators and electric cookers" (HRB 10-11).

Even though the texts quickly move on from their Midwestern settings, the regional locale and its characters, which form the begin-

ning and almost ending of the texts, are linchpins for the narratives. In fact, the Midwestern environments shape the texts in much the same way that Vance claims the Midwest shapes his novels. In *The Gods Arrive*, during his homecoming to Euphoria, Vance is invited to give a speech at the local theatre about his magnum opus, *Colossus*. As he reads an important scene from the book he suddenly realizes:

He had put the whole of himself into that scene—and his self had come out of Euphoria, been conceived and fashioned there, made of the summer heat on endless wheat-fields, the frozen winter skies, the bell of the Roman Catholic church ringing through the stillness, on nights when he couldn't sleep, after the last trolley-rattle had died out; the plants budding along the ditches on the way to Crampton, the fiery shade of the elm-grove down by the river . . . . (GA 380)

Ironically, during this hometown reading and moment of epiphany, Vance has another stark realization: “. . . he had been made out of all this [the Midwest], had come out of all this, and there, in rows before him, sat his native protoplasm . . . [which] wriggled in its seats, and twitched at its collar-buttons, and didn't understand him . . .” (GA 380). The recognition of the Midwest as a literary inspiration is, it seems, unappreciated and unnoticed even by its own. Moreover, Vance's identification with his people is detached; a distance and separation invoked by the description of his audience members, his fellow Midwesterners, as “protoplasm.”

In terms of both historical and contemporary literary criticism, the Midwestern aspects of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* have, likewise, often been distant, ignored, misinterpreted, or, at best, superficially interpreted. Stephanie Lewis Thompson gives an overview of these critical shortfalls in *Influencing America's Tastes*:

Critics today also ignore the initial reception of the two novels. Marcia Phillips McGowan opens her article on *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* with the claim that “it is difficult to find a critic who likes Edith Wharton's final novels” when in fact the contemporary reviews of the novel reveal a number of critics who not only liked the novels but praised them . . . . (106)

Moreover, as Thompson later adds, “many literary critics, feminist and otherwise, find it easier to cast off these late novels as misshapen mistakes” (107). The critics fail to examine Wharton's complex argu-

ments, she adds (108). I argue that although the Midwestern elements in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* are brief they are conceptually profound and deserve to be considered not “cast off.” Yet critical imbalance has tended to draw attention to Wharton's perceived literary shortcomings, especially her regional clichés, at the expense of recognizing her achievements. For example, the comical advice of the “celebrated authoress, Yula Marphy, who was over from Dakin visiting with friends at Euphoria” that Vance forget his high-brow literary ambitions and “come straight back West . . . and write pure manly stories about young fellows prospecting in the Yukon,” plays on Midwestern stereotypes to debunk the highbrows of the East (HRB 269). Unfortunately, the point that Wharton is simply using regional clichés for artistic purposes, not reinforcing them, is often missed.

Wharton's literary portrayal of the Midwest began with *The Custom of the Country* (1913). This novel draws a satiric depiction of Apex City's Midwestern *parvenu*, Undine Spragg, and plots her descent (pun intended) on New York and Paris as a ruthless Midwestern invader who is determined, in her single-minded society ambitions, to find the right aristocratic husband. The Midwestern touches seen in this earlier novel are developed more explicitly in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. Concomitantly, the critical reception of these later Midwestern depictions was also more vociferous. In fact, as much as the fictional stories of the Midwest provide a sense of perceived identity, the tenor of literary criticism and its response to Wharton's Midwestern depictions provide an even more revealing story.

Many contemporary critics of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* galvanized accepted opinions that still persist among critics today, as Thompson's example from Marcia Phillips McGowan's work shows. Much of this scholarly consensus has also aided the distorted view of Wharton's entire *oeuvre* by overlooking and dismissing her later fiction after 1920. This tendency is clearly exemplified by Edmund Wilson's so-called “Justice to Edith Wharton,” republished in *The Wound and the Bow*, which states: “Before Edith Wharton died, the more commonplace work of her later years had had the effect of dulling the reputation of her earlier and more serious work” (159). Wilson had also made earlier claims that Wharton had become too distant to know her own country: “At most, perhaps, we may regret that she should have lived so long

abroad that the pictures of life in America have a tendency to seem either shadowy or synthetic" (qtd. in Tuttleton 435). Wilson's claims seem to undergird his later critique of Wharton's work—her first "Midwestern" piece no less—in "Justice to Edith Wharton": "*The Custom of the Country* opens up the way for [Sinclair] Lewis, who dedicated *Main Street* to Edith Wharton," Wilson disdains, adding that "'Mrs. Wharton has already arrived at a method of doing crude and harsh people with a draftsmanship of crude and harsh'" (202). Wilson's "crude" and "harsh" echoes the "synthetic," and perhaps also the inauthentic because, far from living abroad for too long, Wharton had never in fact visited the Midwest.

Generally, in response to such crude assessments Wharton took an ironic and combative stance. For example, Hermione Lee's impressive biography of Wharton's life provides telling details of Wharton's answer to Eleanor Carroll (of *The Delineator* magazine, which serialized *Hudson River Bracketed*) when she asked Wharton how she could write about Americans so far from home. "I stay four weeks every year at the Hôtel Crillon in Paris . . . And I always listen to everything my American fellow-passengers say when I go up and down in the lift!" Wharton answered with her tongue firmly in her cheek (qtd. in Lee 679-80).<sup>1</sup> Sarcasm aside, in a 1927 essay on "The Great American Novel" for *The Yale Review*, Edith Wharton was serious when she vigorously defined and defended what she believed was the artistic freedom and scope of the novelist's domain. "No subject is foreign to the artist," she claimed, "in which there is something corresponding to a something within himself" (163). Wharton cites examples, from Herman Melville's South Sea cannibals to drawing-rooms and conservatories, to support her theory that "[t]he novelist's—any novelist's—proper field, created by his particular way of apprehending life, is limited only by the bounds of his natural, his instinctive interests" (162). Moreover, she adds, "[t]o the creator the only needful preliminary to successful expression is to have in him the root of the matter to be expressed" (163). In many ways, this call for a novelist's boundless and limitless field, not to mention successful expression, was put into practice with her depictions of the Midwest. And it was in this imaginative sense that the Midwest became her own authentic metaphor.

Despite Wharton's authorial confidence, on January 15, 1930, *The Nation* denounced Wharton's regional endeavors: "No one belittles an author's attempt to extend his scope," the anonymous

reviewer writes of *Hudson River Bracketed* in "Fiction Briefs," "but Mid-Westerners have shown themselves so able to express their neighbors' frustrations that Mrs. Wharton's unsuccessful foray into their fields adds nothing to her laurels" (qtd. in Tuttleton 472). Such comments imply that Wharton is inherently disqualified from writing about the Midwest. Yet, as Wharton's remarks for *The Yale Review* essay insist, artists have always looked for inspiration elsewhere and artistic expression is not bound by arbitrary rules of subject or geography. Clearly, much of the perceived understanding of Wharton's writing and the prejudice that was to fuel such disdain for her Midwestern work was misguided and inaccurate. In fact, "[m]ore often than not," Hilton Anderson writes, "the Americans portrayed by Mrs. Wharton were not her own kind of genteel American . . . but more the vulgar types who could hardly hope to be accepted socially by the . . . aristocracy." Anderson goes on to speculate that "perhaps Mrs. Wharton found the vulgar Americans more interesting as literary types" (17). In this sense, Wharton was not as synonymous with the old aristocracy as her reputation would lead us to think. Rather, Wharton's signature works—*The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *Summer*, (1917), for example—became a limitation that she often could not move beyond because of her literary reputation.

The introduction to *Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews* notes how "reviewers quickly tried to describe her subject as limited to society and manners" (xiii). Louis Bromfield, Wharton's friend, correspondent, and nearby neighbor in France in the later 1920s and early 1930s, also commented on these authorial hazards in a candid interview with Robert Van Gelder in 1942: "Your readers know what they like and want you to keep on giving it to them, your publishers know what the readers want and what you should do about it, and your agent and maybe your wife and your friends. That's the way to go to hell in a handcar" (qtd. in Tuttleton 265-66). Bromfield also later explored the drawbacks of an author's successful reputation in "Calliope and the Critics." He claims that the reading public and, by implication, the literary marketplace, stifle an author in the way they force a novelist "to rewrite what he has successfully written over and over again." "If a romantic writer turns to satire or comedy," he suggests as an example, "he is attacked . . . because he has turned aside from the romanticism of his labelled and ticketed past" (26).

Nor then should Wharton's personal perspective, be it from New York society or the influence of the European elite, limit her competence to address issues beyond that perspective. Yet the critical objections to her Midwestern depictions continued. In his "Notes on Novels" for *New Republic*, Gilbert Seldes writes that "whatever might give freshness and vitality," in *Hudson River Bracketed*, "is spoiled by Mrs. Wharton's obvious unfamiliarity with the setting" (qtd. in Tuttleton 475). Wharton's portrayal of the main character is also critiqued with negatively slanted Midwestern images:

Her ambitious young genius from Illinois is only the husk of a character because his creator, scorning to exaggerate his potentialities or to allow him to become melodramatic about himself, fails equally to plumb the depths of his character, to show the internal play between his dawning self-consciousness and the pathetic experience. (qtd. in Tuttleton 472)

Rather than literary depth and profundity, Seldes chooses to see only the superficial outer shell of a Midwestern character symbolized by the discarded remnants of agriculture and farming.

This negative reaction aimed sharply at the Midwestern elements of Wharton's work continued with the publication of *The Gods Arrive*, as typified by Elmer Davis's piece, "History of an Artist," for the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Davis objected to Wharton's unrealistic portrayal of the Midwest and its inhabitants. "It was a long book, and much of it was the sort of thing that Mrs. Wharton cannot do," Davis complains. "She understands gentlefolk, artists, and servants," his review continues, "but if she knows the lesser breeds without the law she is unable to transfer her comprehension to the reader." Davis's criticism is particularly pronounced in terms of geographically defined class issues: "[S]he writes of the Middle West and its inhabitants as if she had never been west of the Metropolitan Opera House, and had learned about Middle Westerners from a careful study of *Main Street* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*" (qtd. in Tuttleton 493-94).<sup>2</sup> To many, Wharton's Midwest was borrowed, clumsy, inauthentic, and insubstantial, conclusions that revisit the shadowy and synthetic assessment of Wilson's earlier criticism.

Perhaps the most damning articulation of critical disdain for Wharton's treatment of the Midwest belongs to Frederick J. Hoffman and his discussion of the Midwest as metaphor in his survey of American writing for *The Twenties*. "No more extreme distortion of

the metaphor is found in American literature than in the writings of Edith Wharton," Hoffman proclaims, adding that she "was convinced that the barbarians of Apex City and Euphoria were entirely without intelligence or taste" (374). He proceeds to promulgate what he saw as Wharton's clear distaste and repudiation of the region and its people:

In the hero of *Hudson River Bracketed* . . . she presented a simple representation of that hinterland to which only her imagination had given her access. It is not only that she considered the Midwest tedious, unmannerly, and vulgar; she did not know it at all and created a fantasy of "what it seemed," which was more improbable than any parody of an imitation of a Sinclair Lewis novel. (Hoffman 332)

Significantly, when it comes to Wharton's portrayal of the Midwest, the very tools of a writer's craft—imagination, fantasy, and the inspiration derived from another writer (in this case Sinclair Lewis)—are identified as shortcomings by Hoffman.<sup>3</sup> But perhaps the only shortcoming to note is Hoffman's inability to see beyond the regional stereotype and read her Midwestern depictions for their artistic purpose.

Wharton's discussion of the craft of writing in "The Secret Garden" chapter of her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1934), seems to address and dismiss the concerns of critics such as Hoffman: "There can be no greater critical ineptitude than to judge a novel according to what it *ought to have been about*," Wharton contends. And "[t]he bigger the imagination," she posits, "the more powerful the intellectual equipment, the more different subjects will come within the novelist's reach" (939). After supporting her case with examples from the wide "net" of Balzac's novels she outlines "two essential rules" for writing that also seem to undercut the criticism leveled against her regional representations: "[N]ovelists should deal only with what is within his reach, literally or figuratively (in most case the two are synonymous), and the other that the value of a subject depends almost wholly on what the author sees in it, and how deeply he is able to see *into* it" (939). Her Midwestern portrayal is not an improbable failure because she did not see it, instead, according to Wharton, the importance lies in a different "seeing": artistic perception and interpretation. In "Expatriate—Vintage 1927," Bromfield captures a similar sentiment when he extols the advantages of distance and separation from one's subject: "I feel more

American than I have ever felt before, even in those days when I dwelt in the sacred Middle West," he writes after living in Paris for two years; moreover, he notes, "I find that all my senses, my perceptions, have become with regard to America sharpened and more highly sensitive . . . I am familiar with the spectacle from the inside, and now I am seeing it from the outside, which is more illuminating than one might suppose" (228). This inside-outside perspective is an important one to consider for Wharton's Midwestern work.

Certainly, some responses to Wharton's Midwest were more considered and tempered, as the title of Percy Hutchinson's *New York Times Book Review* indicates. In "Mrs. Wharton's Latest Novel Has a Mellow Beauty: In *Hudson River Bracketed* There is Less Irony and a Greater Fund of Human Sympathy," Hutchinson is quick to point out her "unnecessarily clumsy beginning," but his assessment also demonstrates a willingness to listen and look beyond initial, stock reactions: "[I]f Edith Wharton has started with what appears at first glance a hackneyed proposition, the genius from the prairies conquering with its literary power the Philistines of the great city, it is the proposition only that is hackneyed" (qtd. in Tuttleton 467-68).

Another example of moving beyond that "first glance" is found in the contrasting opinions of Bromfield. As a reviewer for the *New York Evening Post Literary Review* in 1925, Bromfield claimed Wharton "neither understands nor wants to understand any save those who have titles or are in some way even vaguely part of old New York" (qtd. in Tuttleton xix). In time, however, Bromfield gained a better appreciation of her work. In a September, 1932 letter to Bromfield Wharton wrote:

I'm so glad you liked poor Chris [a character from *The Gods Arrive*]. It was fun doing him—but need I say that what makes me prouder than anything anyone can ever say of the book, is your finding the taste of your native air at Euphoria. It *was* kind of you to tell me that. (qtd. in Bratton 33)

Here, Wharton's comments allude to the frequent attacks her fictional treatment of the Midwest had received from critics. Significantly, she was buoyed by the commendation from Bromfield (a Midwesterner, a successful author, and a former critic no less) that she had captured a "taste" of his "native air." Wharton had also written an earlier letter to Bromfield, in May of 1932, to say that she was "much excited by the discovery that while you [Bromfield] were creating Claire at

Senlis, I was putting the finishing touches to her twin at St. Brice! You'll see, & I think agree, when I introduce *my* Claire (whose name is Floss) to you next Sept" (qtd. in Bratton 19). By "Claire at Senlis," Wharton was referring to a central Midwestern character in Bromfield's novel of 1932, *A Modern Hero*, and by her "twin sister," Wharton was ascribing parallels to her Midwestern Floss Delaney. Through their stories, then, Wharton and Bromfield were participating in an "extended conversation" about the Midwest, its characters, and its identity.

The same conversation can be found between Wharton and Sinclair Lewis. *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* were not simply modified Lewis (particularly *Babbitt* and *Main Street*, as some critics charged, but her Midwestern depictions were concerned with similar themes. Wharton explored what she saw as the standardization, vulgarity and modernity that had consumed America and used the Midwest as her template to portray these concerns. This was no "husk" of an idea, however, because Wharton was commenting on more than the Midwest. In essence, the Midwest allowed her to examine the concerns she had for her country. In "Fiction Sums Up A Century" in *Literary History of the United States*, Henry S. Canby commends Wharton for being "one of the first of the new critics of American society" (Spiller 1211). Canby's comment solidifies the concluding remarks of a 1930 review of *Hudson River Bracketed* by L.P. Hartley for the *Saturday Review* (England): "Inclusiveness is the note of *Hudson River Bracketed*; it shows what, in Mrs. Wharton's opinion, America is like to-day. A tremendous undertaking, for which we owe her all our thanks" (qtd. in Tuttleton 476). For Wharton, the America of today was modern and unaware of its past, and it was the Midwest that allowed her to communicate these observations and concerns.

Vance's return to a much-changed Euphoria toward the end of *The Gods Arrive* portrays the overriding power and presence of a modernity oblivious to all that is lost in the name of the new. During his slow walk through the center of town, Vance marvels at the "development of the Shunts motor industry, and the consequent growth of the manufacturing suburb at Crampton" (GA 368-69). This modern, Midwestern small-town landscape continues "in the development of the shopping district, the erection of the new Auditorium Theatre, and the cosmopolitan look of cinemas, garages, and florists' and jewellers' windows" (GA 369). When Vance reaches his final



destination, the Elkington House, he has to pause, "to study the renovated façade of the hotel," because, Vance notes, "[e]ven the mouldy old Elkington House has responded by turning part of its ground floor into a plate-glass-fronted lobby" (GA 369). This homecoming scene is the antithesis of the historical romance painted by the description of Vance's first trip to see the Willows with its "hint of a steep roof, a jutting balcony, an aspiring turret" (HRB 57). In fact, the Willows' "façade, thus seen in trembling glimpses, as if it were as fluid as the trees, suggested vastness, fantasy and secrecy," (HRB 57) unlike the new stark exposure of the Elkington House. The juxtaposition between the old and the new, the East and the Midwest, "the staring flatness of a movie 'close up' to a many vistaed universe" is composed to sharpen the perspectives of Wharton's critical commentary on America (HRB 95).

Such pointed examples do not display Wharton's contempt for the Midwest, as many critics felt, however. Her Midwestern portrayals are more subtle and complex. They convey a symptom of her general dismay of American society, its youth, its values, its embrace of modernity, and its loss of the past. Hermione Lee posits that for Wharton texts such as *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* "emerged out of an abiding fascination with the stuff of modern America . . . about the very culture from which she felt herself so alienated" (Lee 629). Certainly, Wharton's Midwest illustrates this vulgar modernity, but that is to communicate alienation with the modern and not alienation with the Midwest. As Wharton wrote to her publisher, Appleton, in her outline for *Hudson River Bracketed*: "I want to try to draw the experiences of an unusually intelligent modern American youth, of average education and situation, on whom the great revelation of the Past, which everything in modern American training tends to exclude, or at least to minimize, rushed in through the million channels of art, of history, and of human beings of another civilization" (qtd. in Goodwyn 123 and Lee 679).

At the same time, the novels present a delicious satire with Wharton's anti-modernist slant, for after the literary movement's early promise, she felt many of the new writers had simply become part of a specious and frivolous literary fad. From the ridicule of the "Pulsifer Prize" (HRB 261) and those new novelists with an "insatiable greed for publicity" (GA 170) to the pretension of the high-browed "little magazines" like *The Hour* and the "pathology" (GA 112) of modern narratives with "microscopic analysis of the minute

in man, as if the highest imaginative art consisted in decomposing him into his constituent atoms" (GA 112), Wharton, through her Midwestern artist, Vance Weston, declares her disappointment with modern writers and the modern world they sought to transcribe. In this sense, Wharton's Midwestern metaphor is far from the distortion and abuse that Hoffman claims. That is not to say her Midwest is not sometimes portrayed as an inferior "type," but that is part of her overall irony and parody of the modern generation. Her Midwest offers a catalyst that reinvigorates the values of the past and the tradition that she is trying to reclaim. Essentially, Wharton's story of the Midwest is an aesthetic solution to the question of cultural expectation, and Vance and Floss are Wharton's vehicles for the expressions of her distress in the face of this new world. This notion of loss is highlighted in Vance's arrival at the great library full of classics at the Willows. The books stir a realization and recognition of "a past so remote from anything of Vance Weston's experiences that it took its place in the pages of history anywhere in the dark Unknown before Euphoria was" (61). "Why wasn't I ever told about the Past before?" Vance wonders in amazement (62).

Lev Raphael, in *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on her Neglected Fiction*, provides one of the few robust reconsiderations of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. He states that "it is a mistake to dismiss Vance's background as crudely done, second-hand Sinclair Lewis, or mere vicious animosity . . . the deprivations go beyond Vance's specific location to . . . emotional realities" (226). Raphael also argues:

In choosing Vance Weston's Midwestern background and showing how he overcame it, I do not believe that Wharton was merely indulging in shrill and derivate criticism . . . Rather, it seems that she was attempting to find an environment that would be as indifferent and even inimical to literature as her own was . . . She needed something emotionally analogous, yet outwardly different from her own background. (225)

Raphael's reasoning goes some way to opening up a more balanced reading of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive*. The key is to go beyond the specifics of Vance's background and view his character as an "Everyman," not just a "Midwestern man," for a rootless generation without traditions: "You see, from the first day I set foot in this house [the Willows] I got that sense of continuity that we folks

have missed out of our lives—out where I live, anyway—and it gave me a different rhythm, a different time-beat” (360). In this way—with her portrait of a Midwestern artist—the Midwest becomes Wharton’s metaphor.

Vance is at once close to and distant from Wharton as an author. Thompson identifies this diametrically opposed composite: Weston is “the vulgar American Wharton abhors, but in the early stages of his career he is also the embodiment of her own aesthetic” (114). Vance also provides Wharton with simultaneous inside and outside perspectives that sharpen the clarity and focus of her writing, much like the simultaneous inside, outside spectacle highlighted by Bromfield in “Expatriate—Vintage 1927.” Vance’s Midwestern perspective inscribes a sense of identity for Wharton because in both texts she explores the sense of one’s self as a writer in relation to the past and in relation to the new, up-and-coming writers. This is Wharton’s fictionalized account of her own “backward glance”; a correlation illustrated in Vance’s discovery of the library at the Willows, which echoes Wharton’s own bibliographic awakenings as a little girl in her father’s library.

The Midwestern depictions in *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* also represent Wharton’s artistic rebellion and liberation. Henry James admired Wharton’s work. As he writes in a letter of 1902 to Mrs. Mary Cadwalader Jones, Wharton’s sister-in-law, “On Edith Wharton I take to her very kindly as regards her diabolical little cleverness, the quantity of intention and intelligence in her style, and her sharp eye for an interesting *kind* of subject” (qtd. in Lubbock 396). However, James’s version of an “interesting *kind* of subject” had precise limitations, because, as the letter continues, he wanted “to get hold of the little lady and pump the pure essence of my wisdom and experience into her. She *must* be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduces her to a back-yard in New York” (qtd. in Lubbock 396). This advice, it seems, was never heeded. As the introductory remarks to the collection of Wharton’s contemporary reviews note, she “never appreciated reviewers or others who tried to circumscribe her imagination with one setting” because her response to James was to write numerous novels set in “pastures” that were far from New York (xiii). Instead of remaining on literary home ground, Wharton challenged herself and her writing. This spirit is reflected in the comments of Frenside, the literary critic in *Hudson River Bracketed* who Halo turns to for advice about Vance’s short

story: “‘Well it is a toss-up. This is early morning “slice-of-life”; out of the boy’s own experience, most likely. Wait and see what happens when he tackles something outside of himself. That’s where the test comes in’” (194).

In this light, I would argue it is questionable to simply dismiss Wharton’s Midwest as a demeaning and debasing depiction. Instead, going against the critical consensus, I propose a more tolerant and open-minded reading of the texts, their Midwestern characters, and their literary functions. In *The Critical Reception of Edith Wharton*, Helen Killoran concludes her discussion of *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* with a positive note: “[M]uch of interest remains to be discovered by the critic willing to venture from the theoretical maps into personally charted territory” (134). It is in this somewhat uncharted “pasture” that I have aimed to discover the merits of considering an “outsider’s” story of the Midwest. Kathleen Neils Conzen explores the essence of stories and regional identity in her essay for Cayton and Gray’s *The Identity of the American Midwest*: “Regional identities are ultimately stories that matter,” she argues, adding that “like other stories, they demand tellers, and listeners who find these stories worth listening to” (92). Wharton’s *Hudson River Bracketed* and *The Gods Arrive* do indeed matter and are worth listening to, and as critics we should be open to and not disdainful of Wharton’s choice to tackle “something outside” of herself by ignoring the advice of Henry James and setting her stories in pastures Midwestern.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rather ironically, Wharton’s comments do in fact speak to the prevalence of Midwestern expatriates in Paris during the twenties and thirties. This phenomenon was observed by Ford Madox Ford and included in Frederick J. Hoffman’s *The Twenties*. “‘The Middle West was seething with literary impulse,’” Ford writes in *It Was the Nightingale*, adding that “It is no exaggeration to say that 80 per cent of the manuscripts in English that I received [for the *transatlantic review*] came from west of Altoona” (qtd. in Hoffman 51). Hoffman points out that Ford is “rather unsure of his geography,” but nonetheless, he confirms the prominence of Midwesterners in Paris at this time, as captured by Wharton’s humorous elevator comment (49).

<sup>2</sup>For a revealing discussion of Wharton, class, and the Midwest, particularly their middlebrow implications, see chapter four, “Edith Wharton’s Argument with Modernism,” in Stephanie Lewis Thompson’s *Influencing America’s Taste: Realism in the Works of Wharton, Cather, & Hurst*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>The literary influence between Wharton and Lewis has been well documented and debated. As perhaps the author of the Midwestern novel, *Main Street*, Lewis’s associations with

Wharton have provoked many responses. Mary Ross's review of Wharton's *Hudson River Bracketed* for *The New York Herald Tribune*, entitled "Babbitt's Son," was one of the first. See also Ellen Phillips DuPree's "Wharton, Lewis, and the Nobel Prize Address" *American Literature*, 20 56: 2 (1984), 262-270; Robert L. Coard's "Edith Wharton's Influence on Sinclair Lewis" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 31.3, 1985, 511-27; and Hermione Lee's comments on Wharton and Lewis's relationship, especially the connection with *Hudson River Bracketed* in *Edith Wharton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), pages 624-25.

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## DEPICTIONS OF THE MIDWEST BY DRUDE KROG JANSON AND OLË RØLVAAG

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In *Cultures of Letters* Richard Brodhead speaks of American regional literature as a form of ethnography, in which "marginality" becomes "a positive authorial advantage" in "place-centered" literature revealing new social, economic, and political knowledge (116-17). I would revise this position by defining every work of literature as a form of ethnography, offering social, religious, economic, and political knowledge. The problem with the designation (or label) of literature as regional is simple: what literature is not regional? The issue becomes one of literary criticism, that is, whether the region in question is central or mainstream to the ideology dominating the literary scene at a particular moment in history. Thus, Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction is place-centered, primarily in New England; Hamlin Garland's, in the Midwest. But the designation of the literature of Garland as regional depends upon the canonical changes made in the 1950s and 1960s when anthologies of American literature from Houghton Mifflin, Macmillan, and Norton focused upon twelve to eighteen primarily northwestern American authors. Fred Pattee's *1919 Century Readings for a Course in American Literature* with its hundreds of writers did not make such a statement. As Jane Tompkins brilliantly describes, what we call "'literature' is not a stable entity, but a category whose outlines and contents" vary depending upon "political and social circumstances" (190-91). The literature in fashion at a particular time is classic and mainstream; what critics define as literary excellence or literary value is not a constant, is not objective or disinterested but "perspectival" (193).

In defining realism, William Dean Howells stated, "no one writer, no one book" could represent America: that was "not possi-

ble [because] our social and political decentralization forbids this." He also declared that "a great number of very good writers are instinctively striving to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts" (*Editor's Study* 98). Thus, one of the early critics of American literature saw fiction as a form of ethnography, or "thick description" (Gilbert Ryle qtd. in Geertz 6), of many subcultures, all contributing to "the [whole] picture America draws of itself" (Tompkins 201). The contribution of the literature of the Midwest to this picture is diverse, the ethnography rich, with "very different peoples bumping into one another," with "centuries of immigrants confronting the unexpected and trying to adjust to a demanding, changing environment" (West 108).

Among those "very different peoples" were two Norwegians—Drude Krog Janson and Olë Edvart Rølvaag—who wrote novels in their original language some twenty-five years apart, novels that reflect their Norwegian heritage on the one hand and the new conditions, myths, and dreams of an emerging nation on the other. Janson's novel, *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* (1887), clearly reflects gender, class, and religious concerns of her own life. Rølvaag's epistolary novel, *The Third Life of Per Smevik* (1912), describes, in letters to Smevik's father and older brother, Andreas, the painful adjustments of an immigrant struggling with the new and strange while yearning for his fatherland, an experience similar to Rølvaag's own. Their protagonists, Astrid Holm and Peder (Andersen) Smevik, do not romanticize the beauty and bounty of territory gradually being settled by Europeans; that is, they do not contribute to the literary pastoral or to concepts of the New World as Eden or Paradise—even though Janson's young heroine, influenced by "America fever" (Billington 295) and a strong tendency toward excessive "feeling and imagination" (Janson 11),<sup>1</sup> dreams of such a world before she actually reaches her home in Minneapolis. Both Holm and Smevik also maintain an ambiguous attitude toward the idea of meaningful opportunities in America.

Some two million Norwegians immigrated to America between 1820 and World War I, the percentage of the Norwegian population that migrated being second only to the percentage of the Irish migrating from Ireland (Wakin 51). Nineteenth-century Norwegian immigration was encouraged both by a commissioner of emigration established in Minnesota (Wakin 49) and by disastrous harvests in Scandinavia for three decades, beginning in 1850 (Wakin 51). Janson

has her protagonist take a train from New York to Minneapolis in 1886, a city that quadrupled its immigrant population between 1880 and 1890, with Swedes and Norwegians representing "more than one half of this increase" (Golab 14). Rølvaag has his protagonist, arriving in South Dakota in 1896, turn to the land, where sixty-four percent of Norwegians settled (Wakin 54). Thus, Astrid Holm and Peder Smevik are representative variations of thousands of Norwegian immigrants described, in general, by commentators and historians as "hard-working, industrious, thrifty, honest, religious, interested in education, physically sturdy. Not spectacular, but solid. Not daring, but durable. Not poetic, but practical" (Wakin 50).

Unlike Holm and Smevik, many of the nineteenth-century Norwegian immigrants did romanticize life in the Midwest in "American letters" written to families and friends at home: they stressed the freedom they had in the New World that they had not had in Norway (Billington 70) and expressed "[t]heir strong religious feelings, their optimistic view of America, and their determination" in firsthand accounts made possible because of the very high rate of literacy in Scandinavia (Wakin 50). One writer exclaimed, "This is a beautiful and fertile country. Prosperity and contentment are almost everywhere. Practically everything needed can be sown or planted here and grows splendidly, producing a yield of many fold without the use of manure" (Wakin 51). Another explained,

Since I love you, Telief, more than all my other brothers and sisters, I feel very sorry that you have to work your youth away in Norway, where it is so difficult to get ahead. There you can't see any results of your labor, while here you can work ahead to success and get to own a good deal of property, even though you did not have a penny to begin with. I wish that you would sell the farm now for what you can get for it and come here as fast as possible. I and all the others with me believe that you would not regret it. (Wakin 50)

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, facing the effect at home of massive emigration—Ray Allen Billington reports some fourteen million Europeans settling in the United States during the 1870s and 1880s (295)—countries like Norway and Sweden gradually began efforts to discourage emigration, opening, for example, "new frontier settlements along their borderlands, clearing forests for occupation, and urging the settlement of unoccupied areas in Lapland—the 'Great Plains of the Northland'" (309).

Astrid Holm arrives in America, then, toward the end of the "mass exodus" (Billington 209), Per Smevik a little later. Both in their teens, Smevik a few years older than Holm, their accounts of the New World share many similarities although their situations on arrival and experiences over several years could not have been more different. Both offer vivid and complex portraits of life in America—one in Minneapolis, the other on the South Dakota prairies—and interrogate the directions they detect in the new culture emerging in the American Midwest, including the vulgarity, ignorance, and parochialism of both the small city and the country. Significantly, Astrid Holm leaves Minneapolis at the end of *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*, that is, as soon as she can physically and psychologically depart. Peder Smevik—although joined by his father and brother, whom he does not encourage to come to America—seems barely reconciled to remaining in South Dakota at the end of *The Third Life*.

Astrid Holm is a young woman coming to Minneapolis because her father, facing bankruptcy and ruin in Norway after the death of her mother, has decided rather suddenly that "America is the right place for me" (19). Thus, she does not make the choice, and her immaturity and emotional nature make it impossible for her fully to grasp what the move will mean or to cope effectively for several years with the changes that occur in her life. After seventeen years in which Holm has heard constant praise for the Norwegian royal family and seen her father as "a well-bred gentleman, the scion of an old patrician family" (32), she hears him stammer one day, with great embarrassment, that he now believes a republic is "the best form of government, absolutely the best form of government"; America is a land of "free institutions," a place where "one is free of all . . . aristocratic nonsense" (19). A dreamer very young for her age and full of spirit, Holm spends the following months in Norway mourning her mother, on the one hand, while, on the other, dreaming of America "with hope and zest for life" (23): "In America she would begin to live again." As she studies English, she envisions a land of freedom, of "endless sun-lit plains where people were happy" (23). Few immigrants could have more vividly dramatized the excitement and possibilities of America than Holm does in the months before she arrives and upon her arrival. As she boards the ship at Liverpool, "youthful strength" streams through her; "energy swelled and rose in her": "She unconsciously stretched out her arms and could have broken out in a loud cry of joy" (24). Although she does register that the immigrants

are "transported like cattle by train to Liverpool" (24) and later to Minneapolis, when she arrives in New York, she is rhapsodic:

What a commotion and what beauty! How open it lay there with its fully outstretched arms so arrogantly confident in its rich splendor. It could easily welcome a large share of the world's rejects, the poor, and the homeless! It was confident of being the entrance to a better life, to human value, and to human rights. Hope and courage for the future would fill even the most forsaken when such an individual was welcomed by all this beauty . . . (26)

Holm stands "quietly, as if taken up in a splendid dream." She and her two brothers have arrived in the "New World" to join their father, who had left months earlier to prepare a life for them (26-27).

From the moment of her arrival in Minneapolis, however, Astrid Holm's life is one of shock, turmoil, and pain. She is, on occasion, a "hopeless, flat, despondent shadow" (34); she considers suicide (38), "infinitely lonely and forlorn in a foreign land" (35). The world that she describes, often with loathing, includes the ugliness of Minneapolis; her family's small, dark flat above her father's new business, a saloon, with the constant odor of alcohol and noise of drunken customers filtering into her home; a world of opportunists and frauds; and a society without culture or education dominated by a small group of cruel, elitist, wealthy Norwegians. Most painfully, she believes that at a time in history when women are beginning to assert themselves (for example, the convention of the Women's Suffrage Association met in Minneapolis in October, 1885), her life is dominated by coarse, limited men; she will not be allowed by her situation to discover and pursue an inner calling, even though she is sure she has one that could give meaning to her life.

In many respects her critique supports the warnings about the New World given by travelers, promoters, letter writers, and even novelists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Billington's study *Land of Savagery/Land of Promise* gathers and summarizes many of the writings of what he calls European "image-makers" (29). These image-makers reminded immigrants regularly that only the industrious and sober can succeed: "For the lazy, good-for-nothing, dissolute and scandalous, this land is of as little value as their Fatherland" (Conway qtd. in Billington 230). They noted the "boorish mannerisms," the neglect of hygiene and etiquette of pioneers (Billington 186-87). They agreed that early settlers "suffered from a

severe case of cultural retardation" although they disagreed upon why: whether the civilized individual was transformed, even brutalized, by the wilderness or whether the lack of leisure made cultural activities impossible (Billington 179-80). Contributing, of course, to the cultural backwardness was the state of education: Tocqueville observed that "educational opportunity in the United States diminished directly in proportion to distance from the seaboard" (405).

Holm's initial impression of Minneapolis is that "God forbid! People could not live here." Approaching the outskirts of the city for the first time, she registers, "How ugly it was—flat and dusty, with a few poorly constructed little houses scattered on the naked prairies" (28). She cannot understand how people can live like this, even as the train moves to more attractive areas.<sup>2</sup> Later she realizes there are a few fine neighborhoods, but she and her father and two brothers live in a dingy, suffocating district, their flat above her father's saloon, in an area where "[e]very third or fourth building" is a saloon, "bustling with customers" (36). As the seasons change, she suffers from "the oppressive, stifling" heat (38)—with "[s]prayed streets . . . a privilege of the wealthy" (36)—or the bitter cold—with steam heat and merrily burning fireplaces for the "rich, elegant" houses (62). Sometimes late at night, when the weather allows, she runs "through the dimly-lit streets in her part of town" to the "more fashionable, better-lit part of the city," where people can "follow their call and live to work and be happy" (37). But even months later when some of the doors of the wealthy and prestigious Norwegians of the city are open to her because she is dating attorney Smith, Holm is disgusted by the snobbery and superficiality of these societal interactions. During her nineteenth and much of her twentieth years, even while dating Smith, she is like a lost soul slinking around "forsaken and lonely without a person in the entire populous city who knew her or could help her in her distress" (37).

Passage after passage of *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* emphasizes the class differences and the general lack of education and culture in the Minneapolis area, offering something of a sociological view of Norwegian areas in one Midwestern city. Julia Hjorth despises the "mob" that is "allowed to rule in this country" (64); Astrid Holm's father, the "riffraff" that has overrun the country (35). Adolf Meyer, who is a center of society for a short period of time, speaks of "the dregs from the Old World," lacking culture, refinement, and education, who are settling in the area (41). Yet these remarks are sim-

ply snobbery, the comments of ego-centered and spoiled individuals: none of these speakers, who consider themselves superior to their Norwegian neighbors, have any interest in education, good conversation, libraries, or the theater.

Every man who enters Astrid Holm's life in the two years she spends in Minneapolis falls into the category of opportunists or frauds: from her own father, whom she comes to loathe and hate, to Adolf Meyer, with his pretensions to class and accomplishment, and the lazy, dishonest Karl Hanson, brother of Maria, the only young woman who is kind to her. Her father hopes Holm's beauty will attract a finer clientele to his saloon. Taking advantage of her naiveté, Meyer attracts her interest by pretending Minneapolis needs a refined, educated young woman like her, a talented actress, to assist in creating a "private theater" with the "mission" of raising the cultural life of the people. Karl and Maria Hanson join in the disastrous effort that becomes an evening of shouting, laughter, foot-stamping, and applause—the actors can barely be heard—and finally a drunken brawl and dance rather than the "educational influence" Meyer had predicted (41). And Karl Hanson eventually emerges as a figure familiar in Minneapolis, one more example of the "confounded overabundance" of "Norwegian scoundrels" in America, according to attorney Smith: "They want to live but they don't want to work" (85). Significantly, when Smith is able to get Hanson out of jail for having cheated a clothing store, he sends him out West (86). But even Smith, who courts Holm and is "clever and witty," "rather good-natured" (80), has a coarseness and rudeness that revolts her; and he cannot understand, much less share, her deep love of the natural world and of reading, music, and the theater.

Part of Astrid Holm's difficulties in dealing with the cultural and class differences in the Minneapolis area are, of course, aggravated by her father's business. The first night she arrives in Minneapolis, she tearfully tucks her two brothers into bed in their small flat permeated with the odor of the saloon downstairs and then stares out the window as one Norwegian after another goes in and out of the saloon. She overhears a drunken customer shouting at her father, "You think you're so much better than us simple laborers, but I would rather get myself drunk every night than be a saloonkeeper—a damned saloonkeeper!" Still unaware that her father's hope is that the presence of his daughter, notable for her beauty and grace, will draw more and more men to the saloon, Astrid Holm mocks herself on that first

night: "We sell liquor, and people come here to get drunk. That is what I have come to America for" (31). She is unaware of how difficult her father's decision has been—given his upper class style of life in Norway, lack of capital, ignorance of English, and unfitness for manual labor—but shares his shame. Her father is grateful, at least, that acquaintances and friends in Norway are unaware of his circumstances and even argues, with his daughter, that in America "one man is as good as any other—no matter what kind of work he does—as long as he makes an honest living" (34). He even tries—unsuccessfully—to pretend to himself that one day he will "move up to the most fashionable part of the city and begin a respectable wine business such as the best men have at home in Kristiania" (35). But both are aware that drinking, especially in the Midwest, is considered "a symbol of more than social disorder; it represented a lack of self-control, a wasting of the individual time and resources so necessary to social progress and economic development" (Cayton 88). Further, drunkenness is believed by many to be "ingrained in the Norwegian character" (140). Thus, the Holms prosper by contributing to the "carnival of overindulgence" described by European image-makers, who "found little amusing in the drunkenness that they described as universal along the frontiers," where "every social occasion" is "an excuse for a drink" (Billington 192). It is no surprise that when Adolf Meyer tries to kiss Astrid Holm and she jumps up and slaps him, he hisses, "You will pay for this, you saloonkeeper's wench" (55) or that members of Norwegian society then accept Meyer's gossip when he says he has stopped courting her because she is a loose woman. After all, she is a saloonkeeper's daughter.

One of the most humiliating events of her period in Minneapolis occurs when Holm plans to deliver a temperance lecture at Carlson's Hall; and Meyer organizes Lundberg, the proprietor of a saloon, and his customers to disrupt the event. In a hall full of "coarse and inflamed faces" (141), Lundberg shouts out, "We Scandinavians have come to say that we don't want this American practice of letting women preach forced on us. They can mind their own business, and we'll take care of ours." Holm calmly, quietly, attempts to deliver her address, but cannot "get a word out" amidst the whistles, "clapping of hands and tramping of feet" (142), with voices yelling, "Down with her! Away with the saloonkeeper's wench!" (143).

Any young woman with Astrid Holm's background in Norway would have found life in Minneapolis as a saloonkeeper's daughter

difficult; but for someone of Holm's immaturity, naiveté, and sensitivity—a young woman described by her mother on her deathbed as too much like her, with "too much feeling and imagination" (11)—the situation is impossible. Janson uses several scenes in which Holm becomes lost in the beauty and sensuousness of ocean, flowers, Lake Minnetonka, ancient forests—embodying nature's mystery, solemnity, eternity—to illustrate her strong contemplative bent and the degree to which she feels alone in and crushed by her crass world. In one scene Smith sends Holm beautiful yellow and red roses that, when alone, she sniffs "ardently": "How beautiful they were, these roses, half open and expanding as they bent the slender stalks. There was a Mediterranean beauty about them. Life's own flaming rich glow was over them. Here was the beauty that she was searching for but could never attain" (98). The moment passes, however, and actually aggravates the present: Holm looks up from the flowers and registers the "dust and dirt and the stench of whisky" (98) that are her life. She "shuddered" (114), "tired and old" (77), desperate, "miserable" (113), "infinitely lonesome" (108), "dead" (118).

Astrid Holm's hatred for life in Minneapolis is also affected by her strong desire for independence, her need to find a way to make a difference in the world, and the many experiences that lead her to feel she has no control over her own life, that she is, in fact, "like a bird trapped in a cage" (23). Her sense of helplessness had actually begun in Norway when, before she realized she had no talent, she thought she felt called to be an actress, and her father had said absolutely not, ironically because such a career was beneath their station. Faced with the quality of life her father has since established for the family in Minneapolis and her father's irritation with her for not adjusting, she wonders if he would have "trampled on all her dreams and hopes" (35), including her self-respect, if she had been a man. When attorney Smith courts her, she becomes very angry that he treats her as chattel, even telling her ten days before their wedding ceremony, that "the pastor will declare you to be my lovely possession" (106) and she will no longer be able to resist his sexual overtures. Holm is revolted by Smith's "coarseness," "his intense, sensual gaze as if he would devour her," even though he is usually kind and attentive, bringing her violets (that he cares nothing about), taking her to the theater and concerts (often when he has no interest). She finds herself "despicable and contemptible" (105), shameful, even a "prostitute" (106), for accepting Smith's attentions only because she knows

no other way to escape the loneliness and despair of her home life and because, with Smith, she is free from the "contempt" of society and treated with "exaggerated . . . politeness" by the more privileged of Minneapolis. Not loving him in the least, her frantic need for self-discovery and self-realization increases. Holm is a floundering crusader for women's independence and rights at a time when a Swedish feminist leader like Fredrika Bremer is improving the situation of women in Minnesota, arguing the physical and intellectual equality of women (Billington 302).

Holm's survival in America is made possible by a composite of forces: her Norwegian heritage, reawakened and redirected by the visit to Minneapolis of Bjornstjerne Bjornson—Norway's "most prominent son," "the world-renowned poet and popular *skald*" (109)—and opportunities that she would not have had in Norway, the "dear fatherland," but did have in the United States. Thus, in the closing chapters of the novel, she becomes something of a hybrid, merging the best of both cultures and transcending both. In his lecture at Market Hall, Bjornson speaks of "equality for all, and the right for all men and women to think for themselves and to create their own destinies" (109). Later, alone with Astrid Holm, listening to her account of her recent years, Bjornson declares she is "too humble," with "too narrow" a perspective, and urges her to read John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer in order to keep herself "informed about everything—about what is stirring around" her, to be "a part of the great, pulsing human life" (119). Arguing that "women's capabilities are equal to men's" (121), Bjornson suggests she become a minister of the American type:

"gentle, loving men and women who proclaim peace on earth, who do not believe that people are little devils created for hell's fire. Instead, they have a glowing faith in the victory of goodness in the world and in perpetual progress. They don't stress faith, but life—the way ministers of a liberal persuasion do." (120)

Hearing these words, Holm feels "as if a thousand spring flowers had blossomed in her"; she no longer feels it is a "burden to be a woman" as she contemplates her future mission, her calling, of serving "the suffering and downtrodden" of America in "a life dedicated to others in serious work and self-sacrifice" (123). Holm leaves Minneapolis for six years of schooling at the Unitarian University in Meadville,

Pennsylvania, and plans to settle in the West as a minister to "a mixed Norwegian and American congregation" (149).

The last chapters of *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* are remarkable for the statements they make about what life in the New World can be. Life is gradually changing in Norway; but in America, according to Bjornson, women can already cease "to regard themselves as subordinates" and demand "full individual freedom," with the "full sense of responsibility" that entails (119). Christianity, more particularly Lutheranism, in Norway is "narrow and egotistical," he explains, with individuals concerned only about their personal salvation as they condemn to hell those who do not accept their theology, but religion in America does not "stress faith, but life" (120): ministers serve the people in "a community of brothers and sisters where injustice and oppression are gone and the stronger individual supports and helps the weaker . . . does not . . . oppress them" (121). Ethics and love have replaced theology.<sup>3</sup> Lastly, in the West Astrid Holm will be joined by Helene Nielsen, who has been "mother, sister, friend" (146) in Holm's last days in Minneapolis and during her years in Pennsylvania, a physician "so pure and noble and so dedicated to self-sacrifice" that she has reconciled Holm "to all the ugliness" of the years in Minneapolis (135). The "caress" of the "lovely [Helene's] hands" and her "sharp brilliant eyes" have taught Holm that "it is better to die than to surrender your human dignity" (150). In "a pact for life" (136), they will go West, joined by Annie, Holm's nanny from Norway, and Harald, her surviving brother: the minister and the physician, each with a calling, each to work for the betterment of others, American and Norwegian.

*The Third Life of Per Smevik* has a very different protagonist from that of *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*; but many of the same issues—the ugliness of their physical surroundings; the lack of educational, cultural, and satisfying social opportunities; and religious orthodoxy—contribute to Smevik's misery and loneliness in South Dakota. Smevik's personal decision to leave Norway, to travel to South Dakota, is, of course, very different from the younger Holm's lack of voice in making such a decision. Smevik is also not a dreamer and never, not even when first making plans to leave Norway, romanticizes America or the experiences he will have there. In his second letter home, September 2, 1896, he reminds his brother that he had "never had any great longing for America" (Rølvaag 4).<sup>4</sup> Smevik travels to South Dakota, where he can stay with his Uncle Hans for



a short time, "to make money" (2); his plan is that, with a "little good luck," he can save one thousand dollars in eight to ten years and return to the Norway he loves (38). Very serious and hard working, Smevik initially plans to follow the pattern of many Norwegian immigrants who, according to a Norwegian commission, were changing the rural districts of Norway:

"The returned Americans put their stamp upon [the districts]. . . . The farmers were not so burdened with debt as before; people live better, eat better, clothe themselves better—thus the population improves itself. All those who come from America . . . bring home with them much practical experience and understanding which redounds to the advantage of the whole region." (Hovde qtd. in Billington 307)<sup>5</sup>

Both Holm and Smevik are "desperately lonesome" (4) in the New World, but the loneliness is somewhat different. Holm has recently lost her mother and lives with her father, two brothers, and loyal Annie; she is alone because of the huge gap that exists between her values and those of her father and the Norwegian community in Minneapolis. Smevik is alone because he is away from his mother, father, brother, and the Norway he loves: the mountains, the fisheries, the life of the sea, not America, are paradise for him (52). Like Holm, however, he describes the immigrant as "handled like a piece of freight," in New York "pushed and shoved and pointed along, sometimes . . . even kicked and pinched forward" (7). In addition, Smevik does not easily make friends among the workingmen, sometimes multinational, sometimes mainly Norwegian, often because, like Holm, his values are different. He also has difficulty communicating: not knowing English, he is surrounded by the "incessant drone of voices without understanding a single word" (4). He especially cannot understand why the Norwegians around him do not simply speak Norwegian instead of sticking in "English words here and there," with such a thick Norwegian accent that the result is neither English nor Norwegian and thus incomprehensible (18).

Except for the sight of New York as he "sailed up the Hudson River at sunrise on [a] sparkling morning" (21), America is a disappointment in every way to Smevik. Traveling from New York to South Dakota by train and getting off at Clarksfield in August 1896, he faces what he finds to be an unbelievable landscape; soon after he writes to his brother that "it was flat as the flattest floor in our house at home. I could see no houses anywhere, only endless fields and

meadows. Some of the fields were freshly plowed; others seemed to have just been cut" (10). Smevik's view is not unusual: European image-makers emphasized the flatness, emptiness, desolation, and monotony of the prairies. Charles Dickens described the prairie as "not only 'lonely and wild, but oppressive in its monotony'" (qtd. in Billington 92). Six months later Smevik's view of the area around Clarksfield, South Dakota, remains unchanged: he explains to his father that there is "less to write about as time goes on because I have described everything in such great detail already. And there is nothing out here but flat plains and fields, and myriads of milk cows and pigs. After a while one gets tired of writing about them" (46).

Smevik's comments on the weather echo those of promoters who described "extremes of heat and cold that would test the endurance of a Superman" (Billington 92). Smevik emphasizes the heat, described by some image-makers as "smelting-furnace hot, with a relentless sun beating from copper-hued skies, withering the grass and cracking the earth with its rays" (Billington 92). Smevik finds the heat stifling in Clarksfield in September 1896; comments on the heat in this "odd country" again in April 1897; and explains in August 1897 that "the climate is so heavy and oppressive that it is impossible to move about even if I have time off; all my strength and energy seem paralyzed" (53). His mood—"unhappy and dissatisfied" (53)—is more often a reflection of his difficulty in adjusting to the terrain and the weather than to the unpleasant, unmanly work of a hired hand (71).

The distance between farmhouses contributes to Smevik's misery because it is very difficult for people to get together. During this period educated immigrants often reported that the dearth of close neighbors who were their cultural equals—no one "to chat with on passing events"—created monotony and painful isolation (Billington 178). Smevik tells his father that he is concluding his Christmas Eve letter in 1896 because he is concerned that it "will get too sad and depressing and then Mother will cry when you read it to her" (39). For Smevik, there is nothing to enjoy at Christmas: "There is no public library, so no books to be borrowed; no hills, no ice for skating, only the bare prairie" (38). He explains that there will be "some Christmas dances," but he has promised his mother not to dance; and he would be uncomfortable anyway because he knows so little English and even the Norwegians insist upon speaking only English, presumably because they consider the language "so much more elegant" (38). Smevik is particularly perplexed because the

many Norwegian young people in the area consider "too common and old-fashioned" what he considers "a wholesome good time" of conversation, stories, and jokes. They seek the "smarter and high-toned" (54), that is, a few of the guys getting together on a Sunday night to "tell the most vulgar stories you can imagine" or to "guzzle" a keg of beer, "which doesn't improve the stories any" (53).

In an August 1897 letter to his brother, he further details his dissatisfaction with the social and cultural life of the area:

I can't understand these people here, least of all the young people. I just don't seem to comprehend them. Very little, if anything, of what we in Smeviken thought was fun seems to interest the fellows here. Do you remember how we used to gather on the mountainside on Sunday afternoons and evenings and amuse ourselves? Do you remember all the stories and folktales we told, and how much fun it was? Do you remember how our songs rang out over field and forest? And all the wrestling matches? And the pranks we played? (53)

But none of these activities exist in South Dakota; a Christmas 1888 visit to a Norwegian family from Trondheim is "one of the most boring afternoons" he has ever spent, with Jens's pigs discussed at least four times (63). To Smevik, America is a "dead world" (53), definitely not "the promised land" (52). Even among the "plenty of pretty girls" (62), he has yet to see one that interests him. Instead he is starved for news from home "about absolutely every single thing" (41). He cannot imagine "how anyone can lure people to America" and has definitely changed his mind about "life's greatest joy." At one time he had thought it was "saving up money"—that was why he had come to America—but now he understands that "life's greatest joy . . . is to be satisfied with what you have" (63). The more he sees of the "drudgery" of American the more convinced he becomes that his later realization is right (64).

Increasing some of Smevik's difficulties in South Dakota are his values and his Lutheran faith. He prays before meals when others do not; he does not attend dances for young people; he believes that fighting, even wrestling, must be done "in a Christian manner" (34). His father inquires frequently about Lutheranism in America, and Smevik describes four Norwegian Lutheran synods in the area where he lives, all "in constant strife with one another" about one doctrine or another although he shows little interest in the details. He does, however, become aware that religion in South Dakota is very differ-

ent from that in Norway. He writes with wonder that the pastors are "men of the people," "kind and obliging," even "as common and democratic as a fisherman from Nordland" (22); moreover, the "congregation is the master and the pastor the servant" (67). This relationship between the congregation and the pastor is very different from what Smevik had experienced in Norway where the pastor is the authority, but he explains to his father that it actually leads to just as much strife, simply a different kind. In other words, there are disadvantages to a free church in America and to a state church in Norway (67). Smevik also finds the church he attends disappointing: "a small wooden building" without the "air of solemnity" found in the "venerable old stone church" his family attends in Norway (23). And he is amazed at the pride and vanity of the congregation: the "down right scandalous" extravagance of dress, what he would expect of the "finest rich folks at home," and the "elegant and polished" harnesses and buggies, since apparently none of the people walk to church (23).

Other cultural differences that surprise Smevik are the speed of movement in America—"everything moves like lightning" (7)—as well as the long hours of strenuous work and the lack of leisure, unlike the pace and pattern of life in Norway. European image-makers warned immigrants to America about "labor from dawn to dusk," leisure as nonexistent, no matter how wealthy or successful the immigrant might become (Billington 212); and Smevik, of course, is still just a hired hand or, as he declares, a slave (71). America is a "Land of Opportunity" for the hard worker, but not necessarily a "Land of Abundance" (Billington 236). Even Uncle Hans does not obtain his own place until he has been in America for eleven years (71). Smevik also finds the familiarity between people offensive, from the arbitrary twisting of individuals' names into nicknames to a lack of respect for authority or accomplishment. His own nickname becomes Pete, "pure and simple," with his reflection to his family being, "I can't say I like it, but what can a person do?" (28).

On a very different subject, Smevik comments in his first letter home upon the respect shown women in this "strange" America. He is astonished that men, not women, do the chores, for example, milking the cows, shoveling manure, and taking care of the pigs, even on Sundays. His immediate reaction is that he "simply will not do" such work; he will not be a "*chore boy*" and become the "laughing stock" of Norway, where no "grown man" would consider being a "dairy

maid" (2). But Smevik soon finds himself assisting his Uncle Hans, a hired man running another man's farm: milking as many as seventeen cows, feeding and watering eighty-five pigs and seven horses. (He begs his father and brother not to let their friends at home know about this new development in his life.) Gradually, however, Smevik finds himself affected by how well women are treated in America; and, over time, his "conscience really hurts" him at "how considerate the men here are to the women" compared to how inconsiderate they are in Norway. Sometimes he believes the care is excessive, treating women like "nuggets of gold" (27); but he urges his brother to "be good to Mother . . . carry in wood and water for her when you are home" (17). Surrounded by the young women of the Norwegian community, he may not be aware in his early years in America of the reason European image-makers offer for the attitude toward women: both the "unbalanced ratio between men and women—five to one in the western states in the 1830s, twenty to one in the Far West a generation later" (Billington 258)—and the roles assigned women as "the advance agents of civilization, guaranteed by their mere presence to temper the roughness of an all-male society" and as homemakers giving birth to new "little Americans" (Billington 259-60).

Like *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter, The Third Life of Per Smevik* concludes with significant changes in the protagonist's life, made possible only because Smevik is in America. Over a five-year period, the worker who at first described himself as inferior, "green and dumb" (47), with "stupid pride" (32), becomes proficient at farming even though he continues to see himself as a hired man and a slave (71). He realizes that at heart he is a "sea dog" (28), who should be "sailing northward along the channel in a driving wind," not "wading in cow dung" (37). But more importantly—after having lived in what he has experienced as an educational and a cultural vacuum for several years—Smevik recognizes, at twenty-three, how important reading and learning are to him. In Norway his father had always insisted that Smevik did not have the ability to pursue higher education; and he and Smevik exchange angry letters in 1898 when Smevik decides to enter the Norwegian-American Academy, a church-related school, with teachers who are enthusiastic about "the high ideals of life" (98). Smevik, however, reminds his father that "Bjornson and Jonas Lie were terrible dumbbells in school—yes, real dunces" and they have become "fine men." He commits himself to the great effort he believes is always necessary when the goal is great (82); struggles

to support himself with odd jobs; and studies incredible hours, both enjoying the life and feeling like an equal in a world where rank depends upon "talents or a good mind" (96-7). Joyfully he writes his father in 1900 that "either most of the pupils at the school are impossibly dumb or else your son Per has a good head after all" (95). During the period of 1900-1901, Smevik graduates from the Academy and plans for college, teaching during the summer at a Lutheran school and conducting services, reading sermons, at a Lutheran church without a pastor. During this same period, facing the death of Smevik's mother and failed fishing in Norway, his father and brother discuss coming to America. Smevik realizes that he will be remaining in America—since he plans to be a teacher and American education would not be acceptable in Norway—but makes it very clear that he is not urging his father and brother to come to the New World. His letter to his brother of May 15, 1901,—the second-to-the-last letter in the novel and by far the longest—is surely one of the most remarkable statements ever written about the acute pain of losing a fatherland and the rootless nature of immigrant life of the immigrant in a new land (126).

Like Holm, then, Smevik defines his future through education, education that would not have been possible for either in Norway. Like Holm, he experiences the cultural and moral inadequacies of Midwestern America; and both plan a life of service for Americans and immigrants, Smevik as a teacher in the Midwest, Holm as a minister working with Americans and Norwegians in the West. Both would probably agree with Kristofer Janson that "drunkenness and immoral customs," as well as a lack of graciousness, can endanger or limit success for Norwegian immigrants (Draxten 27). It is significant structurally that in novels with few lengthy episodes, Janson includes two incidents involving drunkenness—at the "little theater" and at Holm's temperance speech—Rølvaag, one, when the chairman of one church council distributes beer to men of two different congregations in order to prevent their attendance at a social event planned to encourage reconciliation between the two congregations. Both Holm and Smevik also recognize how vital religion is for the Norwegian immigrant—although Smevik continues as a Lutheran and Holm becomes a Unitarian. Smevik describes the Lutheran church as "like a mother," following in the "footsteps of the pioneer," following him "through struggle and suffering into the wilderness, into the forest, and out over the endless prairie." Even when torn apart by theological dissension,

Smevik argues, the church cares for the pioneer, taking him "by the hand," asking "him to straighten his back, rest a moment and look upward" (105). The great difference between the two Norwegian protagonists in Midwestern America is the minor role of the fatherland in Holm's life and the central role of the fatherland in Smevik's life. When his father and brother consider joining him in America, Smevik carefully analyzes nationalism, more particularly the identity, tensions, and conflicts of the immigrant. For Smevik, America may be his country,<sup>6</sup> but it is not his fatherland. Like other immigrants, he sees himself as adopted (118). He agrees that immigrants work hard and slowly prosper in America, but speculates about whether, if they had worked equally hard in Norway, if they had "expended as much energy and labor" (120), used their time as carefully, they might not have also prospered in Norway. In other words, is it the dreams and images of America that have made the difference? Perhaps not, he reflects. There have been variables in America: immigrants have mingled with other nationalities and thus "received new thoughts"; they have had greater "civil and religious" freedom; and they have enjoyed a "rich variety of opportunities" (121).

But, Smevik emphasizes, the losses for Norwegian immigrants in America are great. An incredible loss is that of the "mighty and magnificent" natural world, the "sublime beauty" of Norway (123). The incalculable loss, however, is of a fatherland, the "spiritual contact with our own people and our own nation" (125), a contact and a people that are forever lost and can never be regained, or attained in another country (127). "[R]ootless," "alienated" (126), immigrants forever remain between nations: "we are neither the one nor the other, we are both at the same time" (128):

When we severed our ties with our Fatherland, we became not only strangers among strangers, but we were cut off from our own nation and became strangers to our own people. Our pulse no longer throbs in rhythm with the hearts of our own kindred. We have become strangers; strangers to those we left, and strangers to those we came to. The Fatherland to which we had centuries of inherited rights, we have given away, and we of the first generation can never get another.

Cruelly, immigrants' "souls can no longer burn with genuine national enthusiasm" (126).

Howells asked that fiction "portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and passions in the measure we all know"

(*Study* 81). Janson and Rølvaag offer such real people. Howells argued that the size and "social and political decentralization" of the nation makes it necessary for writers in all parts of the country to make "each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts" (*Study* 98), for "the language of life" to "include all accents rather than exclude any" (*Study* 170). Janson and Rølvaag introduce people throughout the entire country to Norwegian immigrants in Minneapolis and South Dakota. Most significantly, Howells asked that the author delve into the depths of individual consciousness:

To put it paradoxically, our life is too large for our art to be broad. In despair at the immense variety of the material offered it by American Civilization, American fiction must specialize, and turning from the superabundance of character it must burrow far down in a soul or two. (*Review* 135, qtd. in *Øverland Home* 209)

In *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter* and *The Third Life of Per Smevik*, Janson and Rølvaag immerse readers in the ethnology of two individual Norwegian-Americans—in "the webs of significance" (Geertz 5) of their lives, more particularly, their heritages, beliefs, experiences, and dreams—thus effectively contributing glimpses into the variegated whole of American civilization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the early 1900s Norwegian-Americans like Johannes B. Wist and Waldemar Ager argued passionately about the definition of Norwegian-American literature. Both agreed that Norwegians were "a people 'in transition from one nation to another'"; but Wist believed there was no such entity as a Norwegian-American literature: it was simply the literature of Norwegians who happened to be writing in America (*Øverland Home* 193-94). Ager insisted there must be a Norwegian-American literature, one that ensures that "'our saga will . . . be written in a way to indicate that we have left independent cultural traces which mirror our own lives, our own struggles'" (qtd. in Lovoll 47). Thus, for Ager, the culture of Norwegian Americans was unique: its literature embodies cultural meanings that are not those of Norway or of America.

This kind of dialogue reflects the complexity and contradictions of human beings and the diversity of their thinking. But Janson's and Rølvaag's novels do not affect me as Norwegian texts that just happen to have been written in America (Wist). They offer ethnographic "local knowledge," "local history" (Biersack 74) of a very special

kind—"cultural mediation" (Biersack 83)—as Norwegian-American immigrants struggle for identity and meaning in Midwestern America.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Janson, Drude Krog. *A Saloonkeeper's Daughter*. 1887. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. All future references to the text will include only a page number within parentheses.
- <sup>2</sup>In *Kristofer Janson in America*, Nina Draxten offers details of the "thirty-three square miles" of Minneapolis (52), with one large Norwegian "colony," a second "interspersed with other nationalities," and a third less well known but large enough to have its own church. She identifies five Norwegian-Lutheran synods and four additional Norwegian churches: two Lutheran, one Methodist, and one Baptist (53).
- <sup>3</sup>Draxten also offers a detailed discussion of difficulties among Norwegian-Lutheran churches in the late 1800s and of Kristofer Janson's work with Scandinavian Unitarians in the Upper Midwest.
- <sup>4</sup>Rølvaag, Olè. *The Third Life of Per Smevik: A Novel*. 1912. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. (The novel was first published under the pseudonym Paal Morck.) All future references to the text will include only a page number within parentheses.
- <sup>5</sup>Caroline Golab notes that "immigrants were people who had left their homelands with no intention of returning, either because they did not wish to return or because there was nothing to return to." Thus, with his intention of earning money and then returning to his beloved Norway, Smevik would be categorized not as an immigrant but as one of the "migrant-laborers," eighty percent of whom were "young unmarried men, eighteen to forty years of age" (48).
- <sup>6</sup>From the mid-1870s through the 1920s, the Norwegian "homemaking mythology," largely created by Rasmus Bjorn Anderson and supported by Rølvaag, was popular in the upper Midwest. In this mythology, Norwegian-Americans (in a pattern initiated by other immigrant groups as well) played a decisive role in the founding of America: Norwegians discovered America (Leif Erikson); they were the most prestigious founders of America (seventeenth-century Puritans having come from the areas of England settled by the Norwegian Vikings); they helped to define American democracy (Norman descendants of the Norwegian Vikings having written the Magna Carta); and Norwegian-Americans played a significant part in saving the Union during the Civil War (*Øverland Minds* 144-73).

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## “FLYOVER COUNTRY”: NEIL GAIMAN’S EXTRAORDINARY PERCEPTIONS OF THE MIDWEST

SARA KOSIBA

Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2001) bridges much of America’s past with the possibilities to be found in the country’s future. The novel is founded on the premise that the old gods immigrants brought with them when they migrated to the United States are still present in the world, lingering only in memory and struggling for recognition, in opposition to the new gods that Americans have come to worship, such as the gods of media, television, and technology. Gaiman examines this contrast between America’s past and present in a way that entertains and also inspires reflection. What is in many ways most notable about this novel is that Gaiman, for all his insight into American culture, is a British native who moved to the United States with his family as recently as 1992 (Anderson). While many critics have contended over the years that literature that truly captures aspects of American life is most accurate or authentic only when written by a native, Gaiman’s fresh perspective on the culture illuminates many valuable and unique aspects of American culture and regional identity that are often overlooked by average Americans.

The Midwest is one region of the United States that benefits significantly from the insights an outsider like Gaiman offers in *American Gods*. Examining the region through the eyes of this “British transplant to Wisconsin” gives the region a new sense of vitality (Smith 13F). Through Gaiman’s use of landscape, the Midwest becomes a fascinating place of eccentricities and a valuable component of American identity and culture. Much of the time, regionalism seems to be taken either for granted or dismissed in contemporary culture. With homogenizing forces such as the increased

use of technology and globalization flattening much of the cultural difference in American life and also in the world, many would contend that regional variations are no longer all that extreme or significant. What Gaiman describes about the lingering influence of ancestral gods, despite the contemporary cultural shift away from them in the novel, also applies to regionalism. The significance of regions may seem outdated, just like the lives of the ancient gods; however, they still represent ideas and concepts relevant to the contemporary world. Although much of American culture has become quite mainstream, Gaiman’s perceptions of the Midwest revitalize the region and demonstrate that it defies many regional stereotypes and still maintains a distinctive sense of identity that contributes to a more authentic and heterogeneous portrait of American society.

Many current writers and inhabitants of the Midwest overlook the region’s unique and endearing qualities. In “Where Now ‘Midwestern Literature’?” David Pichaske highlights the recent surge in publications related to the Midwest and examines how the region can still be defined in the context of contemporary literature. Pichaske notes that the characteristics of Midwestern literature are more often determined by the work of writers from the past. Contemporary writers are colored by their exposure to other landscapes and a continually expanding regional and national culture:

Writers who spend more time in front of a video screen than on the gravel roads of Lincoln County, who read the *New Yorker* and *APR* more carefully than *The Midwest Quarterly* or *Great River Review*, who spend much of their time ‘at a conference in New York,’ who live their lives insulated physically by glass and concrete walls and mentally by the words and theories of the academy, who never quite forgive Marshall, Minnesota, for being merely Marshall, Minnesota, are especially separated from place. (Pichaske 113)

While writers throughout American literary history have often looked beyond their immediate surroundings for inspiration or subject matter, Pichaske cites many of the current problems that continue to affect Midwestern writers and interrupt their close connection to or association with place. He notes that authenticity is slipping in many current Midwestern literary publications, citing short stories and poems about the region often written by outsiders or writers newly associated with the region which misrepresent or err in presenting details about the place that they are describing. Pichaske

rather bleakly states toward the end of his article that “I suspect that a venerable and historically useful tradition is in danger of extinction or co-option. Extinction is lamentable, but co-option is reprehensible” (116). The fate of Midwestern literature, and regional literatures across the nation and the globe, is determined by these alternatives. Are regions dying out in the face of homogenizing globalization or being corrupted by the use or misuse of their characteristics by non-native or insensitive writers in the pursuit of a convenient subject? Pichaske does not come to a definite conclusion; however, questions like these seem to be of utmost concern in looking at contemporary regional literature.

Neil Gaiman’s goal in writing *American Gods* was to create places and landscapes that were as authentic as possible. His status as a recent transplant to the region made him a more likely candidate to view the region with fresh eyes and without the cultural associations and baggage that so many Americans would bring with them in perceiving a place. Rather than deal strictly with cultural stereotypes or ground his writing exclusively in information gleaned from books, Gaiman derived the details of his novel from a great deal of personal exploration and his own observations. He stated in an interview around the time the novel was published, “Friends on the east and west coasts have said, ‘So why did you set it in flyover country?’ When I first came here everything was new and magical and strange. And I tried to get as much of that into *American Gods* as I could . . . I wanted to put in things that are uniquely American and uniquely strange, such as the House on the Rock. And now I hear, ‘So you made that place up. You must have made up all that stuff.’ No! If anything, I downplayed it. It’s all real” (qtd. in Smith 13F). While the novel is a work of fiction and obviously takes certain liberties because of its genre, *American Gods* spends a great deal of time discussing the ordinary as much as it spends time in the realm of fantasy and the extraordinary.

While *American Gods* does include contrasts of overall American landscape and traditions, much of the novel takes place in various Midwestern locations. Right from the first chapter, when Shadow is released from prison and returns to Eagle Point, Indiana, to bury his wife, the central characters in *American Gods* are often based in or continually return to the Midwest. In most instances, it is a rather ordinary Midwest. Shadow and his employer, the mysterious and cryptic Mr. Wednesday, spend their time traveling the coun-

tryside by car, stopping in local diners to eat and staying at hotels just off the interstate highways they travel. At other moments in the novel, Midwestern locations become places of depth and mystery, like the House on the Rock in Wisconsin or the Center of America Monument in Kansas. While many locals would take Gaiman’s insights about the region for granted, the fact that he takes the time to include these places in his novel and often has his characters caught up in the wonder or possibility of the region’s eccentricities makes him an ideal outsider to show us another side to the Midwest. The contrasts between British and American society make the differences more distinct and strange to Gaiman, and in his observations and analysis readers can see the Midwest through new eyes.

Gaiman never overlooks the small details as he writes about the Midwest. Many times these are passing references, perhaps insignificant in some ways to the development of the plot, but specific enough to be recognized by locals or to evoke a truer portrait of the region Shadow and Wednesday are traveling through. At one point in the novel, Shadow has freed himself from his captors (agents of the new gods) and is wandering lost in southern Wisconsin. Upon finding a road and eventually a town, Shadow observes a Culver’s Frozen Custard Butterburgers sign and stops there for some food and to ask directions (Gaiman 159). Culver’s Restaurants are common in Wisconsin and the upper Midwest, famous for their Butterburgers and frozen custard.<sup>1</sup> By invoking a chain of restaurants so readily familiar in Wisconsin and the surrounding states, Gaiman makes the landscape of his novel more tangible and stays true to the region’s characteristics. This is a reference that native Midwesterners would easily recognize from personal experiences eating at the restaurant or by viewing the signs as they have traveled about the region.

This authorial loyalty to regionally distinct details is also apparent later in the novel when Shadow begins to settle into the northern Wisconsin town of Lakeside. The local sheriff takes him to Mabel’s, a local restaurant located in the town square. Mabel’s is a location famous for its pasties and Shadow, while unfamiliar with the food, orders one to try: “[I]n a few minutes Mabel returned with a plate with what looked like a folded-over pie on it. The lower half was wrapped in a paper napkin. Shadow picked it up with the napkin and bit into it: it was warm and filled with meat, potatoes, carrots, onions” (Gaiman 267). Shadow shares his approval of the pasty with Mabel, who comments, “‘They’re a yoopie thing . . . Mostly you need to be

at least up Ironwood way to get one. The Cornish men who came over to work in the iron mines brought them over" (Gaiman 267). Shadow is unfamiliar with the term "yoopie" which Mabel explains as meaning the UP, or Upper Peninsula of Michigan, a term that would be common to locals from that part of the Midwest. Gaiman's incorporation of distinct regional terminology and local food references give the reader an authentic image of these areas of Wisconsin and the Midwest. Language, accents, and food are part of what make the different regions of the United States interesting and reflect the diversity of the country as a whole. Incorporating those aspects into his novel, rather than portraying the Midwest with some bland American characteristics, pays tribute to those differences and acknowledges their uniqueness.

Gaiman's emphasis on detail extends beyond specific references to observations about the general landscape as well. Shadow's travels take him to Cairo, Illinois, where he lies low over the Christmas holidays and stays with Mr. Ibis and Mr. Jacquel, two associates of Wednesday's. On the drive there, Shadow passes through many small Illinois towns. Gaiman describes the details of the drive: "Each town he passed through had an extra sign up beside the sign telling him that he was now entering Our Town (pop. 720). The extra sign announced that the town's under-14s team was the third runner-up in the interstate basketball tournament, or that the town was the home of the Illinois girls' under-16s wrestling semifinalist" (161-62). While the Midwest may not be the only place in the country where local towns advertise their pride so openly, the signs that Gaiman describes are a common sight when driving on the region's rural highways. Through this small detail, Gaiman places his readers on a Midwestern road, allowing them, looking through Shadow's eyes, to experience the landscape from the perspective they would have if they themselves were driving the car. Moreover, Gaiman continues to refer to this detail several times throughout Shadow's drive, further emphasizing its significance: "The road curved: Another Town (pop. 300), home of the runner-up to the state under-12s speed skating championship" (Gaiman 171). Gaiman continues to note the names and some of the populations of small towns as Shadow continues down to Cairo. This particular expression of small-town pride is also at odds with what one would find upon driving through the British towns and cities of Gaiman's native England.

Gaiman evokes many details that also encompass traditional aspects of Midwestern history in *American Gods*. Immigration accounted for a large part of the Midwestern population growth and influenced much of the region's cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> Wednesday notes this influence early in the novel when he expresses his preference for certain types of women: "'The best thing about the states we're heading for, said Wednesday, 'Minnesota, Wisconsin, all around here, is they have the kind of women I liked when I was younger. Pale-skinned and blue eyed, hair so fair it's almost white, wine-colored lips, and round, full breasts with the veins running through them like a good cheese'" (72). Wednesday's lecherousness and unfortunate allusions to cheese aside, his comments highlight the Scandinavian characteristics of light blond hair, fair skin, and other features found in so many immigrants and children of immigrants in the Midwest. One of Wednesday's fellow gods, Czernobog, also has connections to Midwestern history. Chicago is a city infamous for its slaughterhouses and stockyards of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most famously depicted in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Czernobog used to work in one of those slaughterhouses, as he tells Shadow, "I get a job in the meat business. On the kill floor. When the steer comes up the ramp, I was a knocker. You know why we are called knockers? Is because we take the sledgehammer and knock the cow down with it. Bam! It takes strength in the arms" (76-77, italics in original). While the violence of Czernobog's job suits the violence of his past history as one of the old gods, his life in Chicago is also closely aligned with the city's own history.<sup>3</sup> Chicago becomes a location with a culture and significance of its own, rather than just a location through which the characters are merely passing.

Besides occasional references to history and culture, Gaiman instills Lakeside, Wisconsin, with a history and image very common to towns in the upper Midwest. Gaiman notes in his introductory "Caveat, and Warning for Travelers" that he has "obscured the location" of many places in the novel, including the fictional town of Lakeside; however, he notes that he has not taken as many liberties with his fictional locations as readers might think (ix). This idea holds true in looking at the description of Lakeside. Hinzelmann, a local resident with an antique car named Tessie, offers Shadow a ride to his apartment upon his arrival and proceeds to give him a small tour along the way:



Main Street, which they were on, was a pretty street, even at night, and it looked old-fashioned in the best sense of the word—as if, for a hundred years, people had been caring for that street and they had not been in a hurry to lose anything they liked.

Hinzelmann pointed out the town's two restaurants as they passed them (a German restaurant and what he described as 'part Greek, part Norwegian, and a popover on every plate'); he pointed out the bakery and the bookstore. . . . He slowed Tessie as they passed the library so Shadow could get a good look at it. Antique gaslights flickered over the doorway—Hinzelmann proudly called Shadow's attention to them. 'Built in the 1870s by John Henning, local lumber baron.' (Gaiman 252)

Immigrant populations and the strong influence of the lumber industry in the heavily forested Northwoods of Wisconsin gave rise to many of the area's towns and cities. Gaiman's portrayal of Lakeside could apply to almost any northern Wisconsin town. These allusions help to further articulate the characteristics of the region and ground *American Gods* in a reality based on authenticity and not merely a generic, stereotyped setting. For a non-Midwesterner such as Gaiman, this attention to detail demonstrates an interest in the area and its unique qualities that is not often found in a writer from outside the region, particularly one from outside the United States.

The sensitivity to the Midwest expressed by Neil Gaiman pays tribute to the region for what it was, what it is, and what it might continue to be. While many natives rarely embrace the region's eccentricities or note the changes to the area and its traditions due to progress or the passing of time, Gaiman highlights many of these contrasts in *American Gods*. The fact that a non-native writer takes the time to observe and record many of these distinctions says much about what Americans themselves may overlook. Inhabitants of many of these Midwestern cities and towns become used to driving past signs for the House on the Rock and, as a result, tend to view the site with complacency or fail to view their local Culvers's as anything more than another chain restaurant. However, to an outsider, these places seem magical or distinctive for their very quality of being different or unique from other places. The Midwest, an often stereotyped "flyover" region, is still a place of vibrant history and life in Gaiman's novel. The region's past, present, and future all play a significant part in defining the Midwest and suggesting its future role in American society.

The Midwest of the past as well as the present is represented in *American Gods*. Wednesday and Shadow travel across Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, and into South Dakota in their pursuit of Whiskey Jack. They find him living in a mobile home on an Indian reservation in South Dakota. Despite his existence as a character in the novel, Whiskey Jack, like many of the god characters, is based on ethnic mythology, in this case Native American legend.<sup>4</sup> This duality between legend and reality is further emphasized by Whiskey Jack's companion, John Chapman, whom Wednesday calls "Apple Johnny" or Johnny Applesseed (Gaiman 350). Wednesday and Whiskey Jack proceed to discuss the role that images or icons play in American culture, citing a common figure associated with the Midwest, Paul Bunyan, a giant lumberjack who traveled about the Minnesota and Wisconsin woods with Babe the Blue Ox. John Chapman brings up the name as they talk about the lack of interest people currently have in myths and gods, and in response to his comments, "Shadow had never heard two such innocuous words made to sound so damning" (Gaiman 352). Wednesday tries to clarify the situation for Shadow:

"It's like the idiots who figure that the hummingbirds worry about their weight or tooth decay or some such nonsense, maybe they just want to spare the hummingbirds the evils of sugar," explained Wednesday. "So they fill the hummingbird feeders with fucking NutraSweet. The birds come to the feeders and they drink it. Then they die, because their food contains no calories even though their little tummies are full. That's Paul Bunyan for you. Nobody ever told Paul Bunyan stories. Nobody ever believed in Paul Bunyan. He came staggering out of a New York ad agency in 1910 and filled the nation's myth stomach with empty calories." (Gaiman 352)

In the framework of the novel, the distinction between "real" gods—those indigenous to the culture—and figures like Paul Bunyan is important because gods and mythical figures like Wednesday, Whiskey Jack, and Apple Johnny are fighting for their existence and their relevance in the contemporary world. The "real" gods feel that they are more authentic and closer to the culture and, therefore, have more of a right to exist. While this distinction is important to the plot, Gaiman's reference to Paul Bunyan also reveals some of the cultural expectations and stereotypes associated with the Midwest. Whether they are authentic or manufactured, legendary figures such as Paul

Bunyan and Apple Johnny participate in defining the region's past and shaping the cultural construction of the Midwest.

These past influences continue to affect present perceptions as well. The struggle between old and new gods in Gaiman's novel also embodies the search for an old and new identity for the Midwest, negotiating regional associations of the past and present. The search is specific to the Midwest in this context, but is also indicative of the regional or local desire for an accurate definition of place in regions across the world. How much of a region's past influences or affects its future? At times, that past takes on cartoonish or even exaggerated qualities. Whiskey Jack talks about the lingering influence of Paul Bunyan's image in the Midwest: "I like Paul Bunyan," said Whiskey Jack. "I went on his ride at the Mall of America, few years back. You see big old Paul Bunyan at the top, then you come crashing down. Splash! He's okay by me. I don't mind that he never existed'" (Gaiman 352-53). The Mall of America, built in Bloomington, Minnesota in 1992, contains four floors of shopping and entertainment arranged around a central amusement park on the ground floor. The Mall is a symbol of contemporary American culture and a result of the increasing consumerism that has given rise to the "gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and beeper and neon" that old gods like Wednesday and Whiskey Jack are competing against for attention and existence (Gaiman 137-38). Located in the amusement park at the center of the Mall of America was Paul Bunyan's Log Chute ride, taking mallgoers along a track that mimicked an old lumber mill, complete with images of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.<sup>5</sup> Whiskey Jack's comments in many ways mirror the apathy of contemporary Americans: they do not care about the origin or authenticity of the cultural images and associations around them as long as they are entertained. As the Midwest changes and evolves as a region, the survival of much of its history and culture depends on the outcome of the same types of battles as those between the old and new gods. Created by a desire for entertainment rather than authenticity, Bunyan exemplifies this kind of conflict and demonstrates how American history and traditions have been adapted to appeal to a larger audience and to the demands of a contemporary culture.

While the fantasy genre does provide Gaiman with the ability to take certain liberties with his plot and characters, he never diminishes

the difficulty of reconciling the divide between America's cultural past and present. In the novel, the battle between the old and new gods ends in a draw. The characters find that they have been manipulated by Wednesday, who is revealed to be the Norse god Odin. He has been selfishly conspiring with Loki to cause the gods to battle so that the two can draw power from the blood, chaos, and sacrifice. Without a clear victory or triumph against each other, past and present gods still face the struggle of having to find their place in the world. Shadow comments at the end of the novel, "I think I would rather be a man than a god. We don't need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It's what we do" (Gaiman 539). Gods and mythologies are at the mercy of belief. As cultures change and shift so do those beliefs, and Shadow implies that human beings adapt much better to those changes and shifts. There is no easy reconciliation between past and present.

The lack of a clear resolution at the end of the novel suggests that there is, in fact, no easy solution to this cultural divide and that the point of this struggle is to reflect on the ideas and concepts themselves. While *American Gods* is not definitively about regions and place, Gaiman addresses many of the same ideas and concerns as many regional writers and scholars through his representations of place. Earlier in the novel, Wednesday and Shadow have a conversation as they travel from Wisconsin to California:

"It's almost hard to believe that this is in the same country as Lakeside," [Shadow] said.

Wednesday glared at him. Then he said, "It's not. San Francisco isn't in the same country as Lakeside anymore than New Orleans is in the same country as New York or Miami is in the same country as Minneapolis."

"Is that so?" said Shadow, mildly.

"Indeed it is. They may share certain cultural signifiers—money, a federal government, entertainment—it's the same *land*, obviously—but the only things that give it the illusion of being one country are the greenback, *The Tonight Show*, and McDonalds." (Gaiman 306)

While the collective grouping of states known as the United States of America can claim the same government, the same basic laws, and a cohesive national identity, many of the spaces within the country are governed much more by their own social and cultural traditions and

customs. This sense of categorization has existed as long as American and regional literatures have been discussed. Noted author and regionalist Mary Austin highlighted this distinction as early as 1932, stating that readers and writers should be focused on "competently knowing, not one vast pale figure of America, but several Americas, in many subtle and significant variations" (98). Although written several decades later, *American Gods* proves a contemporary example of how Austin's words still resonate. Wednesday's comments to Shadow endorse the ideas of Austin and other regionalists. To believe that the country is a homogenous place is to ignore all the individual distinctions and differences that make all the regions of the country and the people in them unique. The new gods that Wednesday and Shadow are facing are representative of this homogenizing force, but the experiences the two main characters have demonstrate the power, importance, and value in seeing landscapes and locations for what they are individually.

Recent scholars of regionalism have continued to note the social or cultural move away from local communities and cultures.<sup>7</sup> In light of the homogenizing effects of globalization, fewer individuals in contemporary culture note the local differences around them in the way that Wednesday does in *American Gods*. Despite continual appeals to note regional distinctiveness, more and more Americans tend to desire and perceive only the similarities. Joseph A. Amato and Anthony Amato argue for the increasing importance of local culture, particularly the distinctiveness of Minnesota, in light of this shifting American cultural identity:

The increasing importance of Minnesota coincides with larger transformations. As localities lose their boundaries, individuals are ever more removed from necessity and concrete community. They live more by mind than body. They become increasingly distant from actual places while television, the Internet, careers, education, vacations, and second homes connect them to multiple distant points in society at large. Their autonomy, as a grove of experience, memory, and meaning, is breached. Various forms of media homogenize ideas, feelings, and language, and place no longer defines mind or morals. (75-76)

This kind of cultural change makes ideas and concepts of the local all the more important, according to Amato and Amato, in that a region like Minnesota, a place as much as a concept, can help define

one's identity in light of this overall homogenization. Many individuals lament the loss of personality and individuality as globalization and technology smooth out the differences in cultures around the world, while others are concerned with being able to find a Starbucks on every corner to take comfort in always having the same cup of morning coffee. This struggle between the regional and the global, between uniqueness and convenience, is not new to American national or cultural identity. Writers, artists, cultural theorists, and others have continually noted the importance of place for the individual. That the issue continues to be raised and discussed suggests that even with the ability to travel to and electronically access other places and cultures with increasing ease, we still crave a connection with a community or an association with a place to help define our identity and our place in the world. Region and place do matter in determining individual identity, despite the continually changing world landscape.

For these reasons, *American Gods* becomes a valuable book because it represents the Midwest as a place that still maintains a distinctive culture, one worthy of more examination and analysis. In an area of the United States that is often described as rather ordinary, Wednesday and Shadow encounter elements of the region that inspire wonder and, ultimately, enjoyment. While Gaiman's novel focuses more on an overall "American" sense of identity (as suggested by its title), throughout the book that overall American image is constructed through smaller elements, such as cities, towns, people, and even roadside attractions. The United States is a big country with a diverse population and history; therefore, assuming that everything in the country falls under the same general definition fails to recognize all the interesting and unique elements that make up the United States as a whole. For a non-American, to tackle a subject this intricate is an ambitious task. However, Gaiman's perspective as an outsider looking in appears to lend a greater eye for detail and a greater appreciation for difference than many insider native writers might bring to the task. Through his eyes, American readers and those around the world can perceive regions like the Midwest, and the United States as a whole, as far more complex and extraordinary, inspiring them to examine their own surroundings and the places they visit with a greater appreciation for the differences and not just the similarities.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>The first Culver's was started in Sauk City, Wisconsin in 1984 and began being franchised in 1990. Today, Culver's Restaurants are most heavily concentrated in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan, with scattered locations in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Arizona, Kansas, Missouri, Kentucky, Ohio, and Texas. (www.culvers.com)
- <sup>2</sup>Philip Greasley notes this Midwestern diversity in his introduction to *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, Volume I (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), when he states that "[e]ven after early settlement was complete, waves of subsequent immigration and intraregional migration began and still continue, bringing new populations to the Midwest, changing ethnic and racial balances, and introducing new customs and cultural orientations" (2).
- <sup>3</sup>Czernobog (or Chernobog) is the Slavic god of the dead, known as the "black god."
- <sup>4</sup>Whiskey Jack, also known as Wisakedjak or Wisa'ka. Found in Cree, Ojibwa, Fox, Shawnee, and Algonquin stories in various names or images, he is known as the creator of the earth and everything on it as well as a trickster. (Definition compiled from two sources: Leach, Maria, ed. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of American Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*. Vol 2. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950 and Leach, Marjorie. *Guide to the Gods*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1992)
- <sup>5</sup>Currently, the amusement park at the Mall of America has been renamed the Nickelodeon Universe and the Paul Bunyan ride has taken on a more generic "Log Chute" name with the change in the park's theme.
- <sup>6</sup>Odin is the chief god in the Norse pantheon (Wodensday, the day dedicated to worshipping Odin, later translates into Wednesday). Loki is also a figure in Norse mythology, known for trickery and mischief (Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. New York: Penguin, 1969.)
- <sup>7</sup>Recent texts to look at regionalism in light of globalization or other aspects that broaden the idea of locality include Philip Josephs's *American Literary Regionalism in a Global Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007) and Martyn Bone's *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2005).
- <sup>8</sup>In February of 2008, a poll was taken among readers of Neil Gaiman's web journal to determine the book they would most recommend to their friends in introducing them to Gaiman's work. *American Gods* emerged as a clear favorite. In an innovative move, Gaiman and his publisher HarperCollins made the novel available for free on his website (www.neilgaiman.com) for a number of weeks in honor of the website's seventh anniversary. This action resulted in an increased opportunity for readers to encounter his novel and, also, its Midwestern elements.

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