

NOSTALGIC FRONTIERS:  
VIOLENCE ACROSS THE MIDWEST IN POPULAR FILM

by

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ABSTRACT  
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In “Nostalgic Frontiers: Violence Across the Midwest in Popular Film,” I analyze the temporality and politics of nostalgia while providing a critical history of Midwestern representations in popular culture from the turn of the twentieth century through the first decade of the new millennium. A general line of inquiry informs this project: how do narratives set in the Midwest imagine, reify, and reproduce Midwestern identity, and what are the repercussions of such regional imagery circulating in American culture? Throughout this project, I identify shifting cultural perceptions of the Midwest at particular historical moments. In relation to these regional considerations, I analyze two modes of nostalgia: as a spatial element that is mapped onto the Midwest’s landscape and as a cultural force that regulates Midwesterners with violence. I developed the concept of “nostalgic violence” in order to theorize violent attempts to reshape the present in relation to idealized images of the past in Midwestern narratives. Overall, with “Nostalgic Frontiers,” I work to more fully integrate nostalgia and regional study into the diverse field of media studies by assessing how ideological and historical factors are filtered through cinema, thus shaping our understanding of the Midwest.

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For Liz, who is with me even from a distance.

For my parents, who have supported me in every possible way.

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## Introduction

In 1996, an article in a small weekly newspaper announced a startling find: “‘Midwest’ Discovered Between East, West Coasts.” The publication, of course, was *The Onion*, a satirical newspaper founded in Madison, Wisconsin during the late 1980s. Since its inception, *The Onion* consistently has offered a sharp critique of contemporary American culture, with a particular attentiveness to how its region of origin, the Midwest, is widely perceived. Revised and republished several times since its first appearance, the “discovery” article engages with the popular conception of the Midwest as “flyover country,” that is, as a vacant, nondescript space – both geographically and culturally – between the two coasts.

While reporting on the Midwest’s “wild lands full of corn and wheat,” the article knowingly reproduces regional stereotypes, such as that of elitist coastal inhabitants and their uncultured counterparts who occupy the center of the nation. The anonymously penned piece dutifully recounts, “Though the Midwest is still largely unexplored, early reports depict a region as backwards as it is vast,” and a member of the fictitious “exploratory team” explains, “The Midwestern Aborigines are ruddy, generally heavy-set folk, clad in plain non-designer costumery . . . And though coarse and unattractive, these simple people were rather friendly, offering us plain native fare such as ‘Hotdish’ and ‘Casserole.’” In the 1997 revision of this article, a fake “Los Angeles-based anthropologist” details the Midwest’s inherent cultural deficiency by observing, “Many of the basic aspects of a civilized culture appear to be entirely absent . . . There is no theater to speak of, and their knowledge of posh restaurants is sketchy at best. Further,

their agricentric lives seem to prevent them from pursuing high fashion to any degree, and, as a result, their mode of dress is largely restricted to sweatpants and sweatshirts. . . .”

Aside from the high degree of self-awareness informing *The Onion*'s satirical portrait of the Midwest's "crude and provincial" inhabitants, such less-than-flattering depictions of the region were hardly confined to the late twentieth century. For example, in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Sherwood Anderson begins his collection of stories with "The Book of the Grotesque," a short piece in which a sleepless writer has "a dream that was not a dream" about the occupants of the titular town. The unnamed writer (potentially Anderson himself) labels these Midwesterners as "grotesques," although he qualifies, "The grotesques were not all horrible. Some were amusing, some almost beautiful. . . ." (23). A more contemporary depiction of outlandish Midwesterners regularly appears in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-), a television series that follows the life of public worker Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) and her fellow local government employees in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana. Whenever the genial cast is forced to interact with the townspeople at public meetings, chaos and discomfort ensues, largely due to the Pawnee constituents' typically inscrutable behavior and bawdy non sequiturs. From at least as early as Mark Twain's accounts of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn's exploits in the latter half of the nineteenth century to the daily trials of Leslie Knope in the twenty-first century, the Midwest has been constructed as a space of simultaneous attraction and repulsion within American popular culture.

"Nostalgic Frontiers: Violence Across the Midwest in Popular Film" provides a history of Midwestern representations in popular culture from the turn of the twentieth

century through the first decade of the new millennium. A general line of inquiry informs this project: how do films such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) and *A History of Violence* (2005) imagine, reify, and reproduce Midwestern identity, and what are the repercussions of such regional imagery circulating in American culture? Among other conclusions, nostalgia and violence have proven to be defining elements of the Midwest's identity, and the two terms operate in an almost dialectical manner, reframing how the region has been understood for more than one hundred years. Accordingly, nostalgia itself is as much the subject of this project as Midwestern cultural representations. Throughout "Nostalgic Frontiers," I address two primary modes of nostalgia within Midwestern narratives: as a spatialized element that is mapped onto the Midwest's very landscape and as a cultural force that regulates Midwesterners' behaviors and identities. Despite the specificity of the Midwest and nostalgia as fields of study, in a broader sense, "Nostalgic Frontiers" is a study of past-ness, or how the weight of both cultural and individual memory is brought to bear on the present.

Across each chapter, a recurring goal of this project is to resituate texts – and the ways in which they have been interpreted or ascribed meanings – within a regional context that is linked to nostalgia. I seek to elevate both the "Midwest" and "nostalgia" as additional entry points for framing and interpreting texts among more established analytic categories within media studies. Overall, "Nostalgic Frontiers" aims to revise the regional "discovery" narrative detailed in *The Onion* article by sketching out a chronology or, to emphasize continuity across Midwestern texts, a lineage of the complex ways in which the region has been depicted in popular film, as well as in selected literary and historical works. Rather than an awareness of Midwestern identity constituting a "discovery," this

project represents a recovery – or a rediscovery – of key cultural objects that shaped perceptions of the region and that continue to inform its meaning in American culture.

### **The Midwest: Blank Identity, Nebulous Territory**

One major assumption underlying “Nostalgic Frontiers” is the notion that, by virtue of setting fictional narratives within the Midwest, then a given text is participating, intentionally or not, in a long tradition of contesting and complicating regional identity. Consequently, this project’s textual objects were chosen because they reflect and engage with Midwestern representational conventions, either by working against common regional stereotypes or by further reifying essentialized images of the Midwest (or, as is often the case, doing both at the same time). The seemingly self-evident task of even identifying a text as Midwestern is not the straightforward endeavor that it might appear to be.

Although inextricably attached to nostalgia, the Midwest’s identity has fluctuated over time, due to the region frequently being defined in a shifting and nebulous manner. For some observers, the “Midwest” is merely a geographic territory, while for others, the term designates a cultural category (certain types of people, practices, values, etc.). Technically, the United States Census Bureau classifies the Midwest as one of the four American regions, and it is composed of twelve states: North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. Texts were selected for this project because their narratives took place in one

of these twelve states. Confirming that a narrative is located within the Midwest, though, is only the beginning of assessing a text's regional engagement.

Regarding the term "region," in *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society* (1976), Raymond Williams writes, "There is an evident tension within the word, as between a distinct area and a definite part. Each sense has survived, but it is the latter which carries an important history. Everything depends, in the latter sense, on the term of the relation: a part of what?" (264). This definition introduces a valuable consideration for determining the parameters of a region: in terms of both geographic space and cultural traits, a region is both "a part of" a larger whole, as well as simply "apart." A region thus comes to be defined by its difference from the larger whole of which it is a component. Michel de Certeau expands the range of how a territory is defined by theorizing the relationship between storytelling and space in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). For de Certeau, stories function as "a spatial practice," and "they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories" (115). Moreover, de Certeau writes, "A narrative activity. . . . is continually concerned with marking out boundaries" (125). Beyond mere geographical boundaries, narratives work to delineate cultural parameters of a territory, such as the Midwest.

In the introduction chapter of the anthology, *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (2001), historians Andrew Cayton and Susan Gray bridge the passages from Williams and de Certeau that are referenced above. Cayton and Gray explain that "regional identity is a form of storytelling . . . regionality is about how people locate themselves intellectually and emotionally within complicated landscapes

and networks of social relations” (4). This suggests that, more than simply being a collection of states clumped together on a map, the Midwest is the daily material lives of its inhabitants *and* the narratives produced in an attempt to make sense of the region (which circulate through mediums including cinema and literature). What, then, are some of the stories told about the Midwest or the ways in which Midwesterners “locate themselves” within the region?

“The Camel,” a second season episode of *Parks and Recreation*, is an excellent example of the challenges involved in attempts to construct a coherent narrative of the Midwest. At the start of the episode, each department of the local government is tasked with creating a design for a new mural in the City Hall building after “The Spirit of Pawnee” painting is defaced. Throughout the series, the numerous murals (said to have been designed by government employees in the 1930s) are a recurring gag that depict highly troublesome occurrences and regressive attitudes from the town’s past. In this instance, “The Spirit of Pawnee” features overtly racist caricatures of Chinese, Irish, and Native American individuals, and a train bears down on two members of the latter group. As Leslie Knope observes about the image, “We . . . need better, less-offensive history.”

Over the course of the episode, Leslie and her coworkers struggle to define “The Spirit of Pawnee” in the twenty-first century, and they each produce bizarre potential replacements for the problematic mural: Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari) pays an art student to produce a painting, which is an abstract blend of random shapes and colors; Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones) crafts a poorly-drawn picture of a park, complete with pictures of animals cut from magazines; Donna Meagle (Retta Sirleaf) makes a collage inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, but with “famous people” born in Indiana

replacing the original figures (Donna admits struggling to find thirteen notable individuals from the state, which led her to substitute “a NASCAR” for a human being); Jerry Gergich (Jim O’Heir) produces a pointillist image in which “each dot is a photo of a citizen of the town”; intern April Ludgate (Aubrey Plaza) designs a multimedia installation made from garbage, replete with video monitors of knee surgery and an oversized hamster wheel in which a man would run, scream, and be fed raw meat; finally, Leslie presents a photograph of the town’s worst disaster, a fire at the Pawnee Bread Factory in 1922 that killed several people. Together, these competing murals exemplify the uncertainty of the Midwest’s identity. Is a Midwestern community reducible to its most tragic moments or most visibly successful inhabitants? Is the Midwest defined by the refuse created by its occupants or by the aggregate lives of those individuals? *Parks and Recreation* further affirms the indeterminate nature of Midwestern identity through the characters’ solution for their conflicting murals. Leslie suggests that they cut out “the best parts of all of [their] designs” in order to create an unwieldy mosaic reflecting their disparate attempts to capture the meaning of Pawnee.

Such debates about regional identity remain explicit in numerous studies of the Midwest. In *Caught in the Middle: America’s Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (2008), Richard Longworth disregards the “official” twelve-state definition of the region and writes, “The Midwest presents a blurry landscape, a squishy concept, an area with no real boundaries. It doesn’t begin or end so much as it oozes into the East on one end and the Great Plains on the other. In the north, it looks like Canada. In the south, it sounds like Arkansas” (17). As such, Longworth describes the Midwest as “a region with no regional feel” (21), and he later asserts, “Most Midwestern states don’t really hang together –

politically, economically, or socially” (222). Cayton and Gray similarly observe that “the Midwest lacks the kind of geographic coherence, historical issues, and cultural touchstones that have informed regional identity in the American South, West, and New England” (1). Despite the Midwest’s apparent incoherence – or perhaps because of it – Cayton and Gray write that the space “is generally considered both the most American and the most amorphous of regions” (1). In another piece, “The Anti-Region: Place and Identity in the History of the American Midwest” (2001), Cayton goes so far as to suggest that the Midwest “so thoroughly embodied the fictions of the *national* discourse that there was. . . . no urgent need for regionality in the Midwest” (157 emphasis in original). For Cayton, “the Midwest’s reputation has to do with empty normalcy” (142). David Radavich also touches on the region’s blank image in his contribution to *In the Middle of the Middle West: Literary Nonfiction from the Heartland* (2003). Radavich writes, “The Midwest has a reputation of being the ‘not’ place – not the impassioned South, not the establishment East, not the romanticized West. It seems to fall between, an absence that stays the rest of the country, that holds other regions together like a gluing block in carpentry” (186).

Together, these descriptions – “blurry landscape,” “anti-region,” “empty normalcy,” “‘not’ place,” “an absence” – configure the Midwest as a regional *tabula rasa*, a realm without any distinctive characteristics beyond being staid and utterly unremarkable. As such, this perceived lack of distinctive Midwestern qualities establish the region as having a malleable meaning in American culture. Like a regional version of a black hole, the Midwest’s blankness absorbs culture and values from elsewhere while obscuring its own constitutive properties, which results in the contested meanings of

Midwestern identity on display in the *Parks and Recreation* episode. Furthermore, by virtue of (supposedly) having few or no defining traits, the Midwest as a concept is susceptible to being appropriated in support of extra-regional ideological and political programs; that is, the Midwest's meaning in American culture changes at particular historical moments as attitudes about the region fluctuate in response to broader national circumstances. To some degree, then, the region may represent whatever someone wants it to represent, from being culturally backwards to serving as the most idealized of American spaces. In this way, the Midwest's ill-defined identity situates it as a contested space.

The status of several Midwestern states (particularly Ohio) as key "swing states" in several of the presidential elections since 2000 bears out the notion that the Midwest resists cultural cohesion or homogenous values, while exposing a persistent tendency within the media to impose a unified meaning on the region or at least on individual states. For example, in *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), Thomas Frank discusses the reductive media coverage of the 2000 election. Through the visual image of a "red" and "blue" state electoral map, large geographic portions of the United States were identified solely as Republican or Democrat, regardless of how close the polls may have been (16). Frank writes,

From this one piece of evidence, the electoral map, the pundits simply veered off into authoritative-sounding cultural proclamation. Just by looking at the map, they reasoned, we could easily tell that George W. Bush was the choice of the plain people, the grassroots Americans who inhabited the place we know as the "heartland," a region of humility,

guilelessness, and, above all, stout yeoman *righteousness*. The Democrats, on the other hand, were the party of the elite. Just by looking at the map we could see that liberals were sophisticated, wealthy, and materialistic. While the big cities blued themselves shamelessly, the *land* knew what it was about and went Republican, by a margin in square miles of four to one. . . . The red-state narrative brought majoritarian legitimacy to a president who had actually lost the popular vote. It also allowed conservatives to present their views as the philosophy of a region that Americans – even sophisticated urban ones – traditionally venerate as the repository of national virtue, a place of plain speaking and straight shooting. (16 emphasis in original)

The electoral map depicted a vast swath of red cutting across the country, encompassing much of the Midwest and became a new defining image of the region. As a widely-circulated text, the electoral map served to enclose and mark off ideological territories in the public consciousness. Even as the region of “national virtue” was shaded red by the media, though, the Illinois Senate served as the launching point for the career of Bush’s Democratic presidential successor, Barack Obama. The close results of these recent presidential elections in the Midwest provide a broad illustration of the inherent heterogeneity of Midwestern culture, despite the region’s meaning being contorted in order to support essentialist narratives perpetuated by the popular media.

As evident in the passages from Frank, Cayton and Gray, Longworth, and others, the issue of authenticity clings to narratives about the Midwest, from works of fiction to ostensibly empirical accounts, such as the election coverage. The recurring ascription of

authenticity to the region is of great significance for this project because it conjures up nostalgic connotations that confine the Midwest within a peculiar temporal state; the Midwest's supposed identity consistently is rendered as anachronistic because the region exemplifies idealized (i.e., "authentic") American traits and values that no longer are detectible elsewhere – if they ever existed at all. "Nostalgic Frontiers" traces the historical trajectory of the Midwest being perceived as the nation's space of nostalgia through identifying and analyzing changing iterations of the region's nostalgic character across the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Surveying the primary texts that inform this undertaking will provide necessary context for the chapters that follow.

### **The Midwest and Nostalgia: Key Texts**

Four texts are a major influence on the organization, methodology, and arguments of "Nostalgic Frontiers": Victoria Johnson's *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (2008); James Shortridge's *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989); *The Frontier in American History* (1920), a collection of writings by Frederick Jackson Turner; Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). In addition, several passages addressing nostalgia in Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993) complement and expand on Boym's theorization of the term. References to each of these books appear in nearly every chapter of this project, so it is instructive to outline the primary concerns addressed by these authors.

In “The Persistence of Geographic Myth in a Convergent Media Era” (2010), Victoria Johnson challenges scholars “to raise regional mythology . . . to a shared level of attention, within media studies, to those categories of identity and capital relations with which it crucially intersects and critically informs (including race, class, gender, sexuality, and generation)” (59). Johnson provides a unique and compelling example of this region-oriented form of media scholarship in *Heartland TV*. Throughout her book, Johnson examines how popular perceptions of the Midwest<sup>1</sup> have been shaped through television over the course of the twentieth century.

Early in *Heartland TV*, Johnson discusses fluctuating attitudes about the “Heartland myth” that defines the Midwest:

Positively embraced as the locus of solid dependability, cultural populism, and producerist, “plain folks” independence, the Midwest as Heartland, in this iteration, symbolizes the ideal nation (in other words, “We the People” are, ideally, midwesterners [sic]). Conversely, the Midwest Heartland also functions as an object of derision – condemned for its perceived naiveté and lack of mobility as a site of hopelessly rooted, outdated American past life and values, entrenched political and social conservatism, and bastion of the “mass,” undifferentiated, un-hip people

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson uses the terms “Heartland” and “Midwest” interchangeably, although the former term encompasses a somewhat larger and less precise area than the latter term. As noted earlier in this introduction, the United States Census Bureau defines the Midwest as twelve states: Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas. For Johnson, the “Heartland” also includes states such as Oklahoma, while I limit my own work to texts whose narratives are set within one of the Midwestern states as defined by the Census Bureau. Such alternating definitions reflect the general lack of consistency regarding the usage and meaning of the word, “Midwest.”

and perspectives – and in this iteration, the Midwest becomes the “other” against which the ideal nation is defined by relief (“We the People” are *not* midwestern [sic], in principle). (5 emphasis in original)

Of particular note is Johnson’s assertion that Midwesterners have a “lack of mobility” and perpetuate the “past life and values” that no longer exist elsewhere in the country.

With these observations, Johnson touches on how the Midwest long has been considered to be a space whose centrality grants it a sort of elliptical status, at once separated from the rest of the nation by physical terrain and by the anachronistic quality of its culture. This perspective indicates that the Midwest is not simply old-fashioned in terms of its inhabitants’ tastes and values; rather, the regional landscape itself contains the past by virtue of being a geographic and temporal bubble.

Throughout *The Middle West*, Shortridge similarly traces how America’s past came to be understood as spatialized and located within the Midwest’s borders, while also providing an invaluable history of “what the label Middle West originally meant to Americans and how this meaning has changed over time” (1). According to Shortridge, “Middle West came into its own as a major regional term about 1912” (24), which meant that the term – and its more common variant, Midwest – gained popular usage as a shared referent to the twelve states of the region. Just as the central region was being recognized as a discrete entity, Shortridge reveals that a reductive notion of the Midwest’s identity already was being formulated. After 1900 or so, the Midwest became defined as a “pastoral ideal – a haven midway between the corruptions of urban civilization and the dangerous, untamed wilderness” (27). Shortridge attributes the spread of this perception to “[a] natural tendency for an Eastern-dominated popular press to report about Middle-

western events that differed from life in the East. . . .” (56). Emphasizing the Midwest’s “difference” necessitated reconciling the region’s thriving cities, such as Chicago and Detroit, with this pastoral image. By the 1920s, Shortridge explains, “For journalists, the easiest solution was simply to consider those cities as outside the context of regional labels” (56). Even later in the century, Shortridge writes that the “racial conflict and industrial collapse” of Midwestern cities in the 1960s and beyond ultimately prompted the American public “to rework its collective cognitive map of Middle-western location. Ohio and Michigan now were partially excluded, and the regional core shifted to the Great Plains states” (68). Over the course of the twentieth century, then, media outlets effectively altered the popular definition of the Midwest by reducing it to a pastoral, non-urban space and established the region as one that encompasses a nebulous, undefined territory. Both of these perceptions persist into the twenty-first century, as evident in Johnson’s arguments throughout *Heartland TV* and the texts that will be addressed throughout this project.

In addition to historical background on regional terminology and its referents, Shortridge’s major contribution to this project is a provocative spatial metaphor that he assigns to the Midwest. Shortridge suggests that nostalgia began to inform “a new perspective on the region” in the 1950s, and “small towns and traditional farms, indeed the entire Middle-western culture, began to be labeled quaint” (67). According to Shortridge, this viewpoint gained such traction in the American popular imagination over the ensuing decades that nostalgia became

perhaps the dominant image that outsiders held about the region. From this perspective, the Middle West had become a museum of sorts. No up-and-

coming citizen wanted to live there, but it had importance as a repository for traditional values. The Middle West was a nice place to visit occasionally and to reflect upon one's heritage. It was America's collective "hometown," a place with good air, picturesque farm buildings, and unpretentious "simple" people. (67-68)

This conceptualization of the Midwest as museum for American culture necessitates that the region display spatial and temporal dynamics that correspond to the forever-displaced desires generated through nostalgia. That is, by operating as a space of nostalgia, this version of the Midwest exists outside of a linear temporal flow and is unaffected by changes elsewhere, such as the development of new technologies or increasingly progressive social mores. In the persistent formation of the Midwest as a nostalgic museum, past and present are collapsed within the enclosed boundaries of the region, as depicted in numerous Midwestern narratives.

The nostalgic character of the Midwest regularly is repeated in both academic texts and popular culture, but nostalgia typically is conceptualized in a highly general manner – if any discussion of the term is even broached at all – and little explanation is provided regarding how it functions in a regional context.<sup>2</sup> Throughout “Nostalgic

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Longworth broadly claims, “In the Midwest, nostalgia comes easily. All Midwesterners lament the passing of a golden era that, even if it never shone as brightly as we remember it, remains vivid in our minds. But nostalgia is the flip side of denial. The Midwest's collective myth and memory keep it from dealing with the problems at hand” (15). Any such statement about the entire Midwestern population clearly is hyperbolic, and Longworth adds some specificity later in his book by writing that a formerly “industrial middle class” now is nostalgic for the era in which such forms of labor still were widely available prior to the 1970s and 1980s (31-32). Echoing Shortridge, Longworth also writes, “There's a real nostalgia among Midwesterners of a certain age for the rituals and quality of life in rural America” (88). Although Longworth attributes this nostalgia to a group of aged Midwesterners, his spurious assertion again

Frontiers,” I use the term “nostalgia” to refer to a preoccupation with idealized imagery of the past and a related desire to reenact or somehow to relive that past which has been lost or potentially is entirely fabricated. Stewart and Boym’s work on nostalgia has been instrumental to developing both my general definition of the concept and the more complex modes of nostalgia that I identify and theorize in each chapter of this project.

Boym begins her comprehensive study of nostalgia by providing an etymological definition of the term: “Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (xiii emphasis in original). Nostalgia may develop because of being separated from home, but, crucially, it also may be a yearning for an invented version of the past. Furthermore, the nostalgic subject’s relationship to time is of great significance, and early in *The Future of Nostalgia*, Boym addresses the distinctive spatial and temporal dynamics of nostalgia:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

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ignores the fact that the Midwest contains urban spaces with heterogeneous populations; moreover, Longworth reaffirms the perception of the rural Midwest’s homogeneity and essentially elides the daily experiences of individuals who do not conform to the region’s traditional small town image, such as people who are not white, heterosexual, and so on.

In this passage, Boym indicates that a nostalgic subject desires that the past become spatialized, which has major ramifications on the conceptualization of the Midwest as a “museum” for American culture. The ongoing association of the Midwest and nostalgia configures the region as an atemporal space, a territory whose anachronistic status situates its culture outside of the modern “progress” experienced elsewhere. Hence, in Midwestern narratives such as *The Straight Story* (1999), the region’s physical landscape is rendered as a space in which the past is made visible, accessible, and navigable.

Boym is concerned with “not solely the inner space of an individual psyche but the interrelationship between individual and collective remembrance” (41). Consequently, she proposes that “two kinds of nostalgia characterize one’s relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, to one’s self-perception: restorative and reflective” (41). Regarding these categories, Boym explains,

Two kinds of nostalgia are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. . . . Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time. (41)

Boym’s two categories of nostalgia are aligned loosely with ideological positions. For Boym, reflective nostalgia has a contemplative and humanist orientation because it is “concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and

human finitude” (49). Reflective nostalgia accepts that the past cannot be reoccupied, and so it “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space” (49). On the other hand, restorative nostalgia contains a reactionary impulse and seeks to establish an “invented tradition” that “builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting script for individual longing” (42). Restorative nostalgia’s unifying “script,” however, “knows two main narrative plots – the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory, characteristic of the most extreme cases of contemporary nationalism fed on right-wing popular culture” (43). As such, restorative nostalgia features an underlying desire to overwrite actual historical occurrence by erasing difference and trauma in favor of forging a deceptively cohesive version of the past. From the perspective of the restorative nostalgic, “the past is not a duration<sup>3</sup> but a perfect snapshot” (49).

This project does not feature a taxonomical application of Boym’s theories to depictions of the Midwest; that is, each Midwestern text is not classified within one of the nostalgia categories detailed above. Instead, I work to expose ideological gaps within the superficial uniformity of many regional representations. In this way, a given text might contain elements of both reflective and restorative nostalgia. Hence, Boym’s concepts inform my study of Midwestern narratives, but she does not provide a rigid formula into which I merely slot films and novels. Stewart’s writings on nostalgia similarly influence my work in a broad manner, rather than serving as an all-encompassing theoretical paradigm.

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<sup>3</sup> Boym only includes brief mentions of Henri Bergson in *The Future of Nostalgia*, but her use of the term “duration” invariably recalls the French philosopher’s concept of “pure duration.” In Chapter Six, I provide a reading of David Lynch’s *The Straight Story* (1999) that draws upon Bergson’s work.

Stewart addresses nostalgia for only a few pages in *On Longing*, but she succinctly theorizes the nostalgic subject's use of narrative and perception of authenticity in relation to temporality. As opposed to Boym's distinctions between reflective and restorative iterations of the concept, Stewart writes, "Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity" (23). Here, Stewart argues that, although nostalgia ostensibly seeks an "authentic" experience or identity, the narratives and ideals it constructs reveal the very impossibility of that project. By being "enamored of distance" (145), the nostalgic individual simply reproduces the distance between past ideal and present unsatisfactory circumstances over and over again. To explain this conundrum, Stewart writes, "By the narrative process of nostalgic reconstruction the present is denied and the past takes on an authenticity of being, an authenticity which, ironically, it can achieve only through narrative" (23). Overtly nostalgic narratives – such as Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), which I consider in Chapter Six – depict the present as merely an "inauthentic" version of the idealized past. In an attempt to invert the linear progression of time, the nostalgic subject invents idealized narratives about the past, yet these narratives merely reaffirm the temporal chasm between desired past and disparaged present.

For Stewart any nostalgic longing and its accompanying narratives of temporal authenticity are inherently political. She writes,

Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to

history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. . . . the realization of re-union imagined by the nostalgic is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire. (23)

In this passage, Stewart's conception of nostalgia resembles Boym's reactionary restorative nostalgia because, through the process of being transformed into narrative, nostalgia wholly invents a version of the past that is reductive and exclusive. As discussed throughout this project, narratives about the Midwest frequently lapse into an essentialist mode in which highly limited depictions of the region falsely are presented as "authentic" and borderline utopian versions of America's past. Stewart writes, "Narrative is 'about' closure; the boundaries of events form the ideological basis for the interpretation of their significance" (22), and this assertion finds a clear analogue in how the Midwest has been represented in American culture. The texts considered in this project each establish parameters of meaning and cultural norms for the region and – by virtue of the Midwest's dubious status as the supposedly "most" American space – for the United States itself.

Turner is a major figure regarding the production of nostalgia-inflected regional identity in American culture. *The Frontier in American History* is a collection of thirteen essays by Turner, and the Midwest continually is given prominent attention in his quasi-historical narratives of the past. From Turner's most famous and influential piece, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" – first presented publicly at "the

meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, July 12, 1893” (39) – to “Middle Western Pioneer Democracy” – which was delivered at a building dedication for the State Historical Society of Minnesota in 1918 (298) – the historian sets about redefining the meaning of the United States’ western expansion, as well as the regions that were established in the wake of this steady growth across the continent.

Despite many historians challenging the veracity of Turner’s work, his views about the frontier and American regions have endured and continue to inform popular perceptions of the Midwest. Rather than accept Turner’s work as empirical history, I reread him as a nostalgia writer who crafts the type of ideological nostalgic narratives defined by Stewart. Significantly, Turner’s writings about regional identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were concurrent with the term “Midwest” gaining popular usage and a common understanding in American discourse. Because of this temporal overlap, Turner provides an ideal starting point for my study of Midwestern representations. As a figure heavily invested in mythologizing<sup>4</sup> American (and regional)

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<sup>4</sup> In *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985), the second installment in a massive three-part study of frontier mythology in American culture, Richard Slotkin provides an insightful critique of Turner that supports my reading of the frontier theorist as a nostalgia writer. Slotkin writes, “Frontier Myth and its ideology are founded on the desire to avoid recognition of the perilous consequences of capitalist development in the New World, and they represent a displacement of social conflict into the world of myth” (47). Earlier in his book, Slotkin outlines how myth damages history by asserting, “What is lost when history is translated into myth is *the essential premise of history – the distinction of past and present itself*. The past is made metaphorically equivalent to the present; and the present appears simply as a repetition of persistently recurring structures identified with the past” (24 emphasis added). Although Slotkin never uses the term, “nostalgia,” his critique essentially suggests that conflating mythology and history produces the temporal goal of nostalgia: to collapse the past and the present into a moment of idealized simultaneity. Turner’s mythological account of the frontier and his idealized definitions of the Midwest together perform the nostalgic task of bringing the past into the present.

culture, Turner thus played a major role in crafting early understandings of the Midwest, particularly in developing its still unshakeable status as the nation's space of nostalgia.

### **Midwestern Narratives and Nostalgic Problematics**

“Nostalgic Frontiers” examines Midwestern narratives – primarily on film – produced or set within periods of turmoil in American culture. I identify shifting iterations and objects of Midwestern nostalgia at these different historical moments, which provides an organizing structure for each chapter. The first three chapters examine the nostalgic problematics of Midwestern identity during the turn of the twentieth century, the Great Depression and World War II era, and the 1970s. The last three chapters feature an extended consideration of the years surrounding the dawn of the twenty-first century, a moment of renewed turmoil that prompted widespread consternation regarding the Midwest's rapidly declining economic and cultural status.

Chapter One, “A Nation ‘Thrown Back Upon Itself’: Origins of the Midwest as the Space of Nostalgia,” focuses on the turn of the twentieth century, the period in which the Midwest's identity became linked to nostalgia even as awareness of the region was only just developing in American culture. The key textual objects for this chapter are selected writings by Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), and Vincente Minnelli's musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Although this latter film was not produced at the turn of the century, its narrative is set in 1903 and 1904; as such, the film compliments the older texts by providing insights into how the early twentieth century Midwest was perceived in popular culture nearly fifty years later.

The central concern of this chapter involves rereading Turner as a nostalgia writer in order to reveal how his writings helped to establish the Midwest as the nation's space of nostalgia. This chapter suggests that Turner's theories about western expansion (and its eventual completion) provide a spatial analogue to the temporal paradigm of nostalgia. *Sister Carrie* and *Meet Me in St. Louis* both present narratives full of anxiety regarding spatial and temporal dislocation, as well as nostalgia for a sense of stability that characters believe to be located in the Midwest.

Chapter Two, "'Stay Here Till We Rot!': Midwestern Anti-Modernity and Spatial Constriction, 1929-1944," examines Turner's conception of the Midwest and the compressed United States during the Great Depression and World War II era. Turner predicted that, due to the inability of the United States to expand further across the continent, American culture would stagnate. In the 1930s and 1940s, his belief appeared to have some merit, as the Midwest suffered a declining image in the midst of worldwide turmoil. This chapter's primary textual objects are: *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929), a sociological study of Muncie, Indiana by Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd that resembles Turner's work in terms of its lasting influence and troubling methodology; Preston Sturges's satirical film, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944); Richard Wright's forceful novel, *Native Son* (1940). Each of these texts presents the Midwest as an enclosed space that produces damaged and deviant inhabitants, particularly through the region being associated with oppressive gender and racial norms. Sturges and Wright's narratives each feature protagonists who desperately yearn to escape their restrictive Midwestern environments, but cannot. Moreover, these texts

present the Midwest as a space that is resolutely anti-modern and whose anachronistic culture is exempt from the transformations of modernity occurring elsewhere.

Chapter Three, “‘Neither Here Nor There’: Blank Identities and Nostalgic Landscapes in 1970s Midwestern Films,” traces how Terrence Malick’s *Badlands* (1973), Werner Herzog’s *Stroszek* (1977) and John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) each depict the Midwest as a nebulous space that pauses temporal progress, with disastrous consequences for the region’s inhabitants. As identified by James Shortridge, from the middle of the twentieth century forward, the Midwest’s increasingly popular image was that of a nostalgia museum for lost or outdated American culture. This chapter analyzes narratives that abstract the Midwest’s physical territory into a realm in which the nostalgic desire for simultaneity is realized through a debilitating collapse of distance between the past and present. For the blank Midwesterners occupying this atemporal landscape, a distinctly violent form of nostalgia develops, which subsumes their damaged personas beneath performative actions. Whether a native Midwesterner (as in *Badlands* and *Halloween*) or a transplant (as in *Stroszek*), to dwell within this regional nostalgia museum results in a fundamental loss of identity that produces a general and insatiable desire for the past.

Chapter Four, “The Millennial Midwest: Nostalgic Violence in the Twenty-First Century,” expands upon the previous chapter’s discussion of performativity and violence by examining such elements in two films released around the dawn of the new millennium: Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999) and David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* (2005). These two films exemplify how numerous Midwestern narratives from this era serve as a counterpoint to the often utopic rhetoric emerging from

discourses about new media. The supposed "death of distance" is unavailable to Midwestern characters, whose communities remain extremely provincial and isolated. Consequently, geographic proximity and intimate social networks retain a substantial influence on the identities of the region's inhabitants. In this chapter, I also introduce my concept of "nostalgic violence," which I use in reference to any violent act committed in an attempt to manipulate the surface appearance of a particular space and its inhabitants – in these films, the Midwest and Midwesterners. Nostalgic violence regulates the visible performances of individuals so that the present might *appear* as the nostalgic subject *imagines* the desired past to be.

Chapter Five, "‘I Used to Live Here’: Locating Sincerity and Midwestern Disillusionment," analyzes Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt* (2002) and Jason Reitman's *Up in the Air* (2009), two films that portray disillusionment with the Midwest's increasingly degraded image in the twenty-first century. I begin the chapter by considering the short-lived proclamations about the "end of irony" that circulated throughout the media in the immediate wake of 9/11. The supposed divide between "ironic" and "sincere" entertainments actually mirrored longstanding perceptions of regional stereotypes, and this debate served to reignite cultural rivalries among American regions. Soon after this national trauma, though, the "sincere" Midwest quickly regained its status as anachronistic and out-of-touch, especially once the region's identity became associated with the generic "Main Street" victimized by the predatory east coast "Wall Street" during the economic crisis in the latter part of the decade. *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air* respond to this context by depicting aging Midwesterners experiencing existential crises. The films' two protagonists each embark on nostalgic tours of sites

with personal significance in order to forge new identities, but both men ultimately are left with a profound sense of meaninglessness that stems from the region's decline. Their shared despair reflects that of the region as a whole, a space in which past potentialities now appear to be foreclosed.

Chapter Six, "Paranoid Frontiers and Nostalgic Restorations," continues to survey the contentious manner in which the Midwest was depicted in popular film around the turn of the twenty-first century. In particular, this chapter expands on the arguments of the previous two chapters by identifying two additional types of Midwestern millennial narratives: those that feature paranoid and delusional protagonists who fear challenges to the region's traditional image and those in which characters relentlessly probe the past in order to transcend the present that is considered to be devoid of meaning. I classify Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008) and Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* (2011) within the "Paranoid Frontiers" category, while Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999) are the objects of study for the "Nostalgic Restorations" category. Beyond the regional context of these latter two films, I also consider the aesthetics of nostalgia: that is, how cinema as a medium represents nostalgia on a formal level, rather than only as a thematic element. In the case of these two films, I suggest that the dissolve edit produces brief instances of spatial and temporal simultaneity, which is a basic desire of nostalgic subjects.

A brief conclusion, "Disappearances and Rediscoveries," provides some broad reflections on the complex relationship between the Midwest and nostalgia through a concise discussion of excerpts from three texts: Michael Lesy's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), and a 2011 article from *The*

*Onion* titled, “30 Years Of Man’s Life Disappear In Mysterious ‘Kansas Rectangle.’”

Each of these texts projects spatial and temporal abstractions onto the Midwestern landscape itself. As such, they serve as an apt summation of how “Nostalgic Frontiers” reveals nostalgia’s changing presence and function within Midwestern narratives.

Together, these chapters form a new history of regional representation, one that is attentive to recurring conventions, thematic elements, and ideological concerns across a body of Midwestern films and literature from the late nineteenth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Within the texts considered in “Nostalgic Frontiers,” the Midwest’s identity in American culture comes into focus as one of contested meanings that are produced by the social constraints of performativity, the threat of regulatory violence, and the inescapable pull of nostalgic longing. Rather than the staid realm it is reputed to be, the Midwest is revealed as a dynamic construct upon which the complexities of cultural identity are contested. Against a backdrop stretching from the closing of the Western frontier to the development of virtual environments online, the Midwest continually has been imagined as an anachronistic, past-oriented space in which the heavy influence of nostalgia is inextricable from the region’s identity.

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## Chapter One:

### A Nation “Thrown Back Upon Itself”: Origins of the Midwest as a Space of Nostalgia

In “To Be a Native Middle-Westerner” (1999), Indiana-born Kurt Vonnegut reflects on the identity of his home region and writes, “What geography can give all Middle Westerners, along with the fresh water and topsoil, if they let it, is awe for an Edenic continent stretching forever in all directions.” Vonnegut reasons that Midwesterners are uniquely capable of perceiving and appreciating what he glowingly describes as the prelapsarian nature of the American continent. From this perspective, the Midwest’s centrality ensures that the region is a surrounded territory that is isolated, but that also serves as a transitional space in relation to other regions; accordingly, the perimeter of the Midwest may be understood as a circular frontier of sorts through which Midwesterners forever contemplate neighboring locales. Vonnegut’s sentiments about the Midwest hardly are unique. In fact, by situating the Midwest as an in-between space that reveals and heightens the enviable qualities of bordering regions, Vonnegut – intentionally or not – recalls the reductive conception of the Midwest as an absent, blank space that merely serves to define other regions by relief. Nostalgia is the key factor in shaping the Midwest’s identity in American culture, and Vonnegut’s statement echoes the way in which Frederick Jackson Turner nostalgically linked the Midwest and the vanishing Western frontiers roughly a century earlier.

Turner’s writings on the frontier and the Midwest are crucial foundational texts for my study of Midwestern identity in popular culture, and later chapters will consider the lingering influence of Turner on regional representations even in the twenty-first

century. This chapter identifies the nostalgic impulse within Turner's theories and establishes the turn of the twentieth century as the point at which the Midwest was firmly established as the nation's space of nostalgia. One assumption underlying this chapter is that, rather than being a historian, Turner actually was a nostalgia writer: that is, a figure who projected his own desires onto the spaces and historical developments that he detailed.

Early in this chapter, I examine two significant nostalgic elements in Turner's work. First, his model of the United States' Western expansion features a spatial trajectory that corresponds with the temporal dynamics of nostalgia. In this way, Turner inscribes a historical occurrence with nostalgic overtones, a development that has lasting repercussions on the popular identity of the Midwest. Second, once Turner suggests that there are no remaining frontier spaces, he sets about defining the Midwest as a territory that preserves the idealized qualities he once detected in the frontier. The Midwest thus comes to serve as a nostalgic reminder of the possibilities that Turner believes were available for American pioneers, but that now only exist in the past. Consequently, the Midwest is shouldered with the burden of reflecting the United States' lost potential for further continental growth through the region's supposed embodiment of the idealized traits of settlers within frontier spaces. Turner's work, then, is a major contributing factor in binding the Midwest's identity to nostalgia.

Following this analysis of Turner, I turn to two texts from popular culture that illustrate many of his concerns with movement, nostalgia, and regional identity: Theodore Dreiser's novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900), and Vincente Minnelli's musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). Although this film was produced near the middle of the century,

its narrative unfolds in 1903 and 1904. I suggest that this setting reveals lingering cultural perceptions of the Midwest's status during the early years of the twentieth century. Major tensions in both *Sister Carrie* and *Meet Me in St. Louis* hinge on traumatic moves eastward from the Midwest to New York City. Through various narrative complications, Dreiser and Minnelli engage with Turner's claim that the Western frontier was closed and that the nation was being forced to turn inward. In *Sister Carrie*, nostalgia is shown to be a debilitating disorder that consumes individuals through a delusional contemplation of the past. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, nostalgic desire is presented more ideally, as a stabilizing element within families and society in general. Together, these two texts reaffirm Turner's configuration of the Midwest as a space of nostalgia, while further reifying the region's nostalgic identity within American culture.

### **Frederick Jackson Turner**

Within the thirteen essays collected in *The Frontier in American History* (1920), Turner presents his influential theories on the Western frontier, while also stressing the importance of regions (or "sections,"<sup>5</sup> a term which he often uses synonymously) in

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, in a 1909 address about the Ohio Valley, Turner states:

In short, the real federal aspect of the nation, if we penetrate beneath constitutional forms to the deeper currents of social, economic and political life, will be found to lie in the relation of sections and nation, rather than in the relation of States and nation. . . . But even if the States disappeared altogether as effective factors in our national life, the sections might, in my opinion, gain from that very disappearance a strength and activity that would prove effective limitations upon the nationalizing process. (137-138)

Here, Turner links the nation's "real" character to the very existence of regional differentiation. This belief that authenticity may be located within precise spatial

shaping American culture. From the famous piece, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” – first presented publicly at “the meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, July 12, 1893” (39) – to “Middle Western Pioneer Democracy” – which was delivered at a building dedication for the State Historical Society of Minnesota in 1918 (298) – the mythologizing historian develops nostalgic narratives about the frontier and regional identity. In Turner’s initial frontier essay, he strives to link American history and the nation’s general development to western expansion or, as he puts it, “the colonization of the Great West” (13). This ability to steadily progress across the continent produced multiple frontier spaces,<sup>6</sup> each of which granted a “perennial rebirth” to its occupants and to “American social development” in general (14). Throughout his writings, Turner laments the closing of the frontier, and this nostalgic impulse retains a strong influence within American culture, despite the broad and often fictive nature of his claims.

Historian John Mack Faragher begins the afterword of *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays* (1994) by admitting a sense of befuddlement upon reading a report that Turner’s

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coordinates points towards Turner’s nostalgic tendencies. As detailed in the Introduction of this project, Susan Stewart links a nostalgic desire for “authenticity” to the production of narratives that merely reproduce the distance between a past ideal and the inadequate present (23). Turner’s work clearly fits Stewart’s conception of nostalgic narratives – which, she notes, are “always ideological” (23) – and his discussion of the frontier and the Midwest further expose a strong current of nostalgia within what are purportedly empirical histories.

<sup>6</sup> Turner does not define the frontier as one single space; instead, the frontier is a set of conditions detectable in many spaces. Turner describes “a continually advancing frontier line” (14) that creates multiple frontier spaces succeeding one another whenever the “line” of American settlement moves westward. Because Turner theorizes that each progressive frontier features the same rejuvenating qualities, he discusses these shared characteristics in singular terms. As such, “the frontier” actually refers to numerous frontiers located in different spaces at different moments.

theories about the American West were being refuted by several historians in the early 1990s (225-226). Faragher's surprise stems not from Turner being challenged, but because news of "Turner's fall from grace strikes me as a headline from the past" (226); that is, Faragher believes it is well-established that, *of course*, Turner's viewpoints are erroneous. For Faragher, such a perspective on the frontier theorist should not have been notable in the 1990s or even the middle of the twentieth century for a serious historian. Yet, as Jon Gjerde observes in "Middleness and the Middle West" (2001), "the long shadow cast by the work of Frederick Jackson Turner continues to inform the discussion [concerning region]. Prior to the invention of the Middle West, Americans folded the states that would become Middle Western into the broad West" (181). Although Turner's views have been attacked for a variety of reasons – including his idealized descriptions of pioneer life, his racist distinctions between "civilization" and "wilderness," and even his primary argument about the frontier actually being "closed" in the late nineteenth century<sup>7</sup> – the "long shadow" of these writings lingers partly because Turner transforms the loss of the material conditions enabling Western expansion into a nostalgic abstraction attached to regional identity.

In the text of Turner's famous 1893 frontier presentation, he writes that "the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people," and

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<sup>7</sup> Faragher writes that the "argument for the closing of the frontier has not held up well," as the maps upon which Turner based his theories turned out to be "less a work of science than of the imagination. A century later, the West has yet to fill up" (6). More public land in the West was claimed after 1890 than before that year, the "frontier line" reappeared on census maps in 1900 and 1910, and there remained Western counties in the late twentieth century that fit Turner's criteria of "unsettled" (6). When corresponding with a colleague, Turner himself later qualified his theories by admitting, "Of course the frontier did not come to an end 'with a bang' in 1890," although he maintained that "the importance of the frontier movement as a large factor in American history did reach its close about that time" (qtd. in Faragher 6-7).

that through experiencing the frontier environment, “immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (27). Over the nearly three decades of writing that is collected in *The Frontier in American History*, Turner keeps returning to this initial conceptualization of the frontier – and the regions forged through the frontier experience, particularly the Midwest – as an Americanization factory of sorts, taking in misshaped individuals and churning out idealized and uniform citizens. The primacy of the frontier’s role in American culture prompts Turner to write “The Problem of the West” only three years after delivering the famous frontier thesis. In this 1896 piece, Turner predicts that cultural turmoil will result from the United States’ lack of additional physical spaces for further expansion. Much like the term “frontier,” Turner uses “West” to refer to a set of conditions, rather than a precise geographic territory, and these conditions are located at the furthest western perimeter of American settlements at particular historical moments. Once a frontier is populated and “older institutions and ideas” begin to infiltrate that space, Turner suggests, “The wilderness disappears, the ‘West’ proper passes on to a new frontier, and in the former area, a new society has emerged from its contact with the backwoods. . . . Decade after decade, West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on, has left its traces behind it, and has reacted on the East” (174)

Two key aspects of the developments that Turner outlines are the dynamic of mutually influencing regional territories and the circular nature of that influence: settlers from the East are reshaped by the frontier, which is altered by the influx of Eastern institutions, and then these new “Westerners” both expand into other frontiers and revise the Eastern society from which they came in an somewhat dialectical fashion. As Turner

states, “The history of our political institutions, our democracy . . . is a history of the evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment, a history of the origin of new political species” (174). For Turner, the major problem is that this process is dependent on “new” territories in order to promote continual adaptation, growth, and revision of social and political institutions.

Because Turner believes that the “dominant fact in American life has been expansion,” and such movement no longer is possible, he argues that “all this push and energy is turning into channels of agitation. Failures in one area can no longer be made good by taking up land on a new frontier. . . .” (185). Turner concludes:

This, then, is the real situation: a people composed of heterogeneous materials, with diverse and conflicting ideals and social interests, having passed from the task of filling up the vacant spaces of the continent, is *now thrown back upon itself*, and is seeking an equilibrium. The diverse elements are being fused into national unity. The forces of reorganization are turbulent and the nation seems like a witches’ kettle. (186 emphasis added)

Setting aside Turner’s problematic mention of a “vacant” continent (this racist elision of all Native American societies pervades Turner’s work), this passage provides crucial insights regarding the frontier theorist’s nostalgic inclinations. Rather than the romantic vision of America as a melting pot, Turner uses the sinister image of a “witches’ kettle” to describe the newly constricted and suffocating nation. From Turner’s perspective, after centuries of expansion, the American people finally have delimited the outermost boundaries of their nation, and that limit is revealed to be the concave edges of a heated

cauldron, one that produces internal tensions due to a lack of additional space. Hence, the United States is “now thrown back upon itself” in a movement with tumultuous repercussions.

The passage quoted above merits further attention for two reasons. First, in reframing Turner as a nostalgia writer, his preoccupation with movement, boundaries, and idealized past states corresponds to ways in which theorists Susan Stewart and Svetlana Boym suggest that nostalgia functions. To use Stewart’s conceptualization of nostalgia, Turner crafts ideological narratives about the nation’s most “authentic” status being located solely within the formerly shifting and now lost conditions of the frontier. In Boym’s terms, Turner may superficially appear to be engaging in “reflective nostalgia” – contemplating the loss of the desired past – but his work veers more towards “restorative nostalgia” in that he seeks to reestablish expired frontier conditions within the Midwest. Turner’s claim that the United States is “now thrown back upon itself” thus functions as a spatial equivalent to the temporal operation of nostalgia.

For the nostalgic subject, time is experienced in a linear fashion until a point at which progress ceases, and desire doubles back on itself in a looping spiral. No version of the present or the future may be deemed as satisfactory as the idealized, distant, and possibly fictive past. Turner reveals himself as a nostalgic figure throughout his writings by continually expressing dissatisfaction with the present, while mythologizing an idyllic past located only in the highly specific conditions of the frontier. Even more importantly, Turner’s discussion of Western expansion is a spatialized version of the nostalgic temporal paradigm. According to Turner, settlers moved steadily – and linearly – across the West until met by the Pacific Ocean, and this traumatic moment propelled American

culture “back upon itself.” Just as with nostalgic desire, Turner describes linear progress until an abrupt inward turn, only he has projected it onto American culture as a whole, rather than simply afflicting an individual.

The second reason why the above passage is so crucial for my project is because of where the Midwest is situated within Turner’s nostalgic model of the United States looping backwards. A cartographic depiction of the nation being “thrown back upon itself” would involve folding a map of the United States in half. Such a visualization reveals that the Midwest functions as the fulcrum of this nostalgic turn inward, as the point at which the nation begins to coil back into itself. In this way, Turner locates what is typically an abstract aspect of nostalgia – the temporal period for which the nostalgic subject longs – within a precise physical space: the Midwest. Moreover, Turner’s efforts to establish the Midwest as the nation’s space of nostalgia extend beyond this mapped spatial return. In Turner’s writings, each frontier begat its successive frontier until no additional spaces remained on the continent; the Midwest’s significance in relation to this frontier lineage is that the region was the last Western frontier from which there remained seemingly limitless additional frontiers. When the territories that became the Midwest still were a frontier, a great expanse of “vacant” (to use Turner’s problematic description) space existed beyond them. The object of Turner’s nostalgia, then, is the historical moment that he believes contained the potential for continued expansion and movement westward, i.e., the period in which the Midwest itself was a frontier. By virtue of being in the middle of the United States, the Midwest retains some primal element of what Turner considers to be the key quality of the frontier: the potential for continual expansion and movement. Hence, the Midwest is the space in which the continent still may be perceived

as “stretching forever in all directions,” to repeat Vonnegut’s phrasing, and that unique characteristic enables the region to serve as a site of nostalgic contemplation.

By the early twentieth century, Turner further affirmed the nostalgic character of the Midwest by transferring almost wholesale his idealized Western frontier traits onto the United States’ central region in his writings. Significantly, Turner’s efforts to define the region overlap with the period in which usage of the term “Midwest” became common, as detailed by James Shortridge in *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989). Shortridge suggests that public recognition of a distinctly Midwestern identity solidified around 1912 and reflected “an expansion of the perceived importance of that region to American society” (27). In addition, Shortridge adds that, over the first two decades of the twentieth century, a “flattering image of the Middle West as a mature rural paradise filled with wholesome, progressive people” circulated and came to define the region (35-36). Such regional perceptions dovetail with the essentialized Midwestern traits that Turner outlined around the turn of the twentieth century.

In a 1901 essay simply titled, “The Middle West,” Turner writes,

The ideals of the Middle West began in the log huts set in the midst of the forest a century ago. While his horizon was still bounded by the clearing that his ax had made, the pioneer dreamed of continental conquests. The vastness of the wilderness kindled his imagination. His vision saw beyond the dank swamp at the edge of the great lake to the lofty buildings and the jostling multitudes of a mighty city. . . . The men and women who made the Middle West were idealists, and they had the power of will to make their dreams come true. (132)

This passage establishes a narrative of regional progress from frontier conditions to the “mighty city” – presumably Chicago, given its location on Lake Michigan and its nineteenth century skyscrapers – that replaced such wilderness. To further emphasize the connection between the frontier and the Midwest, Turner adds that Midwesterners embodied “the pioneer’s traits – individual activity, inventiveness, and competition for the prizes of the rich province that awaited exploitation under freedom and equality of opportunity. . . . it was ‘every one for himself’” (132).

Turner’s praise for the Midwest is even more excessive in a subsequent passage: “Almost every family was a self-sufficing unit, and liberty and equality flourished in the frontier periods of the Middle West as perhaps never before in history. . . . Both native settler and European immigrant saw in this free and competitive movement of the frontier the chance to break the bondage of social rank, and to rise to a higher plane of existence” (132-133). Setting aside the patently false claim about fully self-sufficient frontier families,<sup>8</sup> Turner’s hyperbolic descriptions of the Midwest assign symbolic value to both

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992), historian Stephanie Coontz observes that the frontier family and the “1950s suburban family” typically are “held up as models of traditional American independence. . . . In fact, these two family types probably tie for the honor of being the most heavily subsidized in American history. . . .” (73). Significantly, both of these family types have been associated with the Midwest at various points in history. Regarding Western settlers, Coontz writes, “In reality, prairie farmers and other pioneer families owed their existence to massive federal land grants, government-funded military mobilizations that dispossessed hundreds of Native American societies and confiscated half of Mexico, and state-sponsored economic investment in the new lands” (73). Coontz elaborates, “Even after [the] generous, government-funded head start, pioneer families did not normally become self-sufficient. The stereotypical solitary Western family, isolated from its neighbors and constantly on the move, did exist, but it was also generally a failure. Economic success in nineteenth-century America, on the frontier as well as in the urban centers, was more frequently linked to persistence and involvement in a

the region's inhabitants and its geographic territory. For Turner, the Midwest's physical environment itself is imbued with idealistic qualities because the region bears the traces of its "frontier stage" (133), such as supposedly self-sufficient families and individualistic settlers. As such, Turner writes, "The ideals of equality, freedom of opportunity, faith in the common man are deep rooted in all the Middle West" (133). Furthermore, Turner perceives "a vigor and a mental activity among the common people" of the Midwest that reveals a sort of predestination for greatness (134). Turner consistently seeks to cordon off the supposedly "average" white settler from any larger support apparatus so that this figure might be elevated to an aggrandized status. Throughout his work, Turner's "common man" is depicted as anything but common, and such exceptionalism is necessary to support the outsized ideals that are hung on this mythic figure.

Almost two decades after "The Middle West" essay was published, Turner continued valorizing the Midwest with "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy." In this 1918 speech, Turner describes the individuals who settled the Midwest as "social idealists" who "based their ideals on trust in the common man and the readiness to make adjustments, not on the rule of a benevolent despot or a controlling class" (289-290). These "self-sufficing pioneers" were "devoted to the ideal of equality" and "objected to . . . arbitrary obstacles, artificial limitations upon the freedom of each member of this frontier folk to work out his own career without fear or favor. What they instinctively opposed was the crystallization of difference, the monopolization of opportunity and the fixing of that monopoly by government or social customs" (284-285). For Turner, these "slashers of the forest" (284) yearned for what could be labeled as a modern day

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community than to family self-reliance or the restless "pioneering spirit." (74).

libertarian fantasy: a space of equal economic opportunity free from regulation and dependent solely on an individual's work ethic.

A curious contradiction develops within the pioneer values outlined by Turner. The "crystallization of difference" supposedly is worked against by nineteenth century Midwesterners, while a dedication to individualism doggedly is embraced. In fairness to Turner, he explains that at least part of the opposition to difference refers to economics and a desire among settlers to avoid "hopeless inequality, or rule of class" (285). But this economic justification only provides a partial explanation of how difference is opposed. Overall, the underlying ideal that emerges through this particular statement and Turner's work in general is the importance of a lack of differentiation amongst people. Essentially, Turner's ideal Midwestern settlers are a collection of individualistic individuals who share identical values, aspirations, lifestyles, and skin color. As evident throughout this project, the qualities that Turner perceives in Midwesterners have stuck to the Midwest's image since the early twentieth century when, significantly, Turner first attributed them to the region and the term "Midwest" gained common usage in American culture.

The uniform ideals that Turner perceives in Midwestern settlers were not necessarily brought to the region by those individuals. Throughout "Middle Western Pioneer Democracy," Turner continues to suggest that it was the actual physical environment that shaped and fostered such values. Upon entering the Midwest, Turner writes, "The winds of the prairies swept away almost at once a mass of old habits and prepossessions" (289). This anthropomorphism of the landscape recalls – or predicts, as it

were – how the Midwest frequently is configured as an absent space.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Turner proposes that there is a resetting mechanism inherent in the physical terrain, a reductive impulse that continually restores the Midwest to a blank state and naturally irons out difference among its inhabitants.

These equalizing properties are illustrated further through Turner describing the Midwest's continual influx of peoples “with many different cultures, sectional and European; what is significant is that these elements did not remain as separate strata underneath an established ruling order, as was the case particularly in New England. All were accepted and intermingling components of a forming society, plastic and absorptive” (291). Through this “intermingling,” Turner claims that the “society of pioneers learned to drop their old national animosities” (291), and he summarizes this development in typical grandiose fashion:

Thus the Middle-West was teaching the lesson of national cross-fertilization instead of national enmities, the possibility of a newer and richer civilization, not by preserving unmodified or isolated the old component elements, but by breaking down the line-fences, by merging the individual life in the common product – a new product, which held the promise of world brotherhood. (292)

Here, the Midwest is configured as an American utopia, one that is possible due to the region's erasure of difference. The fantasy advanced by Turner is not one in which

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<sup>9</sup> In *Main Street* (1920), Sinclair Lewis similarly ascribes qualities to the Midwestern landscape, but in a far less idealized manner than Turner. Protagonist Carol Kennicott, a dissatisfied transplant to the Midwestern town of Gopher Prairie, remarks that in “the prairie – all my thoughts go flying off into the big space” (171). In this brief instance, Carol indicates that the regional environment produces a loss of identity, rather than enabling individuals to achieve self-actualization.

individuals and groups of different classes, ethnicities, and values truly intermingle, but one in which the Midwest's physical environment softens and eradicates difference until a singular "common product" emerges.

The supposedly unique temporal and spatial conditions of the frontier produce its exceptional status in Turner's view. Regardless of the veracity of Turner's theories, he compulsively returns to a supposedly "lost" state of existence located only in the time and space of the frontier. This vanished pioneer life is imbued with an authenticity lacking in the present, and Turner mourns that imagined version of the past by inventing idealistic narratives about "civilization," race, individualism, labor, and the family. Across such narratives, Turner crafts a model of Western expansion that functions as a spatial version of nostalgia's temporal dynamic: linear progress to a point and then a looping return. Finally, in a flagrantly nostalgic gesture, Turner transfers his idealized frontier qualities onto the Midwest, which was acquiring an identity in American culture just at the time of his writing. Hence, the Midwest came to be known as the nation's space of nostalgia, a homogenizing environment that is disparaged and celebrated for being a linear time-defying embodiment of the past.

### *Sister Carrie*

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) offers a complimentary illustration of the concerns with region, movement, family, and nostalgia that dominate Turner's writings. In fact, the narrative of *Sister Carrie* exemplifies Turner's contemporaneous nightmare vision of a nation "thrown back upon itself" with each American urban space existing as

a “witches’ kettle” of unrest. Throughout the novel, Dreiser presents city environments as fragmenting individuals and turning people against one another, partly through perpetual competition for degrading and mechanized jobs. In Chicago, factory girls perform rote work that barely permits subsistence living, while in New York, thousands are said to be unemployed, and others face exploitative working conditions. At the same time, an elevated leisure class indulges in the niceties of urban living. For the purposes of my study of the Midwest and nostalgia, the character arc of middle-aged George Hurstwood situates him as the key figure in the novel; by the end of the narrative, the Chicago native is exiled in New York City and nostalgically longs for his past life in the Midwest. Crucially, this consuming sense of nostalgia takes hold when Hurstwood flees Chicago and is forced eastward, rather than simply disappearing into a Western frontier that no longer exists.

With *Sister Carrie*, Indiana-born Dreiser presents the story of Caroline Meeber, a naïve eighteen-year-old from Columbia City, Wisconsin, who eventually becomes a star on Broadway. When the narrative begins in 1889, Carrie moves to Chicago and meets Charles Drouet, a young traveling salesman who soon begins paying for Carrie’s apartment, wardrobe, and food. Carrie subsequently has an affair with Drouet’s married friend, Hurstwood, who manages a successful bar in Chicago. After Hurstwood’s wife discovers the affair, he moves out and, without prior intent, abruptly steals 10,000 dollars from the bar’s safe. Hurstwood and Carrie elope to the east and settle in New York City. Over the course of several years, Hurstwood’s fortunes decline steadily, while Carrie achieves fame and financial success as a theatre star. With their respective statuses

moving in opposite directions, Carrie leaves Hurstwood, who is absorbed into the ranks of the city's homeless population and ultimately commits suicide.

In "Dreiser's Universe of Imbalance in *Sister Carrie*" (2002), Jeff Jaeckle describes the novel's "universe" as "a system of perpetually changing processes of evolution and dissolution, which give rise to inscrutable disjunctures not only within the universe itself but between various human beings and between human beings and the universe" (6). Jaeckle's analysis of the novel draws on the work of proto-evolutionary theorist and philosopher Herbert Spencer, who was a major influence on Dreiser's personal beliefs (4-5). Jaeckle explains that "Spencer's universe [is] characterized by a perpetual struggle between 'evolution' and 'dissolution.' According to Spencer, motion and change virtually constitute the bulk of existence – motion signals a difference in place, while change indicates a shift in direction. . . . at almost all times, there exist varying degrees of evolution and dissolution" (5). The key terms that Jaeckle highlights in Spencer's work – evolution and dissolution – may be adapted in relation to Turner's frontier theories, which also feature a preoccupation with the evolutionary potential in movement and an accompanying prediction of individual and social entropy resulting from stasis. In the late nineteenth century, Turner suggested that the supposedly bountiful opportunities of the West were expired; consequently, once Hurstwood needs to escape Chicago, he is "thrown back" to the East, a trauma that eventually destroys the native Midwesterner.

Hurstwood's theft and the accompanying fallout are the most important developments in the novel, in terms of how *Sister Carrie* engages with the Midwest, nostalgia, and Turner's theories. Following the impulsive theft, Hurstwood's thoughts

immediately turn to flight, but he curiously does not consider fleeing to the West. Rather, Hurstwood “was thinking if he could only get [to Detroit] and cross the river into Canada, he could take his time about getting to Montreal” (223) and then proceed to New York. Hurstwood believes that in New York, “it was easy to hide. He knew enough about that city to know that its mysteries and possibilities of mystification were infinite” (238). Moreover, Dreiser writes, “Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York. . . . The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view – remain unseen. In other words, Hurstwood was nothing” (245). Much as Turner does with frontier spaces, in these passages, Dreiser attaches issues of visibility, opportunity, and identity to a physical environment: crowded New York City, rather than the open West.

The fantasy of anonymity in New York City, however, rapidly fades into the reality of unequal opportunity within the city. Hurstwood and Carrie struggle financially, which prompts Hurstwood “to see as one sees a city with a wall about it. Men were posted at the gates. You could not get in. Those inside did not care to come out to see who you were. They were so merry inside there that all those outside were forgotten, and he was on the outside” (275). In contrast to the once (supposedly) wide-open Western territories, the space of the city functions as a claustrophobic cluster of impenetrable fortresses whose entrances are guarded by a rigid class structure. Indeed, throughout *Sister Carrie*, the populations of urban spaces are presented as being split cleanly between haves and have-nots, with little chance for upward mobility. Carrie’s rise clearly

is an exception, but Dreiser ends his novel with Carrie feeling discontent and sorrowful, despite her financial success on the stage.<sup>10</sup>

Carrie's prosperity takes several years to achieve, during which time she and Hurstwood struggle to subsist and to come to terms with the disparity between their lifestyles in New York City and in Chicago. Upon the fugitive couple's initial arrival on the east coast, Dreiser writes that "as [Hurstwood] faced the city, cut off from his friends, despoiled of his modest fortune, and even his name, [he was] forced to begin the battle for place and comfort all over again" (246). This passage connects *Sister Carrie*'s spatial narrative progression to Turner's claim that the nation was "now thrown back upon itself." Here, Dreiser echoes Turner's view that each new frontier reset civilization for Western settlers, but *Sister Carrie* inverts the dynamic of the frontier bringing civilization to wilderness by showing that the urban East has regressed to unforgiving survivalist conditions. At the turn of the twentieth century, Dreiser depicts the long-settled and urban East as presenting daily challenges because of desperate competition for the few jobs available and the reification of class divisions. As such, the frontier myth of the self-sufficient man proves to be entirely unsustainable in a harsh city that necessitates social

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<sup>10</sup> In "Class, Culture, and Capital in *Sister Carrie*" (2005), Nina Markov suggests that Carrie's unhappiness stems, in part, from the fact that her material wealth does not provide her with the cultivated high culture tastes and symbolic wealth of the more established upper class. Interestingly, Markov reads an almost self-reflexive element into Carrie's in-between class status by observing that "her experience parallels Dreiser's in many ways" (17). Markov explains, "In attempting to gain entry into New York's elite literary establishment, Dreiser encountered the symbolic barriers that [love interest and cultural authority Robert] Ames unconsciously erects before Carrie, a classism all the more effective because it masquerades as moral and aesthetic superiority. . . ." (22). Another possible layer to this classism is the Midwestern origin of Dreiser and the fictional Carrie; the region has a long history of being considered the paragon of "low" cultural tastes. As I discuss in Chapter Five, filmmaker Alexander Payne similarly is perceived as an individual whose Midwestern roots are detectable in the very form and content of the films that he writes and directs.

connections and a minimal financial baseline simply to find employment. With the frontier being “closed,” though, Hurstwood attempts to forge a new identity in the face of such adversity and eventually is destroyed by this urban maelstrom.

In “Looking Around to See Who I Am: Dreiser’s Territory of the Self” (1977), Philip Fisher discusses the relationship between environment and identity – particularly within urban spaces – in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925). Despite focusing on this later novel, Fisher’s basic claims about Dreiser’s presentation of selfhood prove to be relevant to the identity transformation experienced by Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*. Fisher writes,

In the city man’s world confronts him as his own product and in the end his life confronts him, in verdict, as his own product too. . . . Under modern conditions, the conditions no longer of nature, the self is now outside the body, around the body at a distance that, once felt, creates a desire for the possession or appropriation of an assembled self in material, external form. This desire with its inversion, flight, becomes visible in the two categories of possession of what is distant – sexual desire and money.  
(730-731)

Certainly, there is some straightforward correspondence and causality among Hurstwood’s sexual desire for Carrie, his accompanying need for money, and his flight to New York City. The true “distance” in *Sister Carrie*, however, is a temporal chasm that opens between Hurstwood’s present and past states once he embarks for the east coast. Fisher observes that the unnatural city environment cleaves one’s “self” from the physical constraints of the body, thus creating a “distance” between the two. Such a perception of

distance regarding present circumstances and identity clearly recalls the nostalgic belief in temporal and spatial separation from what is “authentic.”

What Hurstwood finds in New York City is a self-contained cauldron of discontent, a locale with clear class distinctions – unlike Turner’s idyllic class-free frontier spaces – that ultimately dehumanizes and destroys him. Soon after Carrie leaves Hurstwood, he achieves the absolute anonymity he had sought when moving to the eastern metropolis by sinking into the “cold, shrunken, disgruntled mass” of the impoverished population (414). Reduced to begging for food and shelter, Hurstwood is left as a broken and tragically nostalgic figure, desperately yearning for his past life in Chicago. In fact, from the moment that Hurstwood first leaves Chicago, Dreiser depicts him as fraught with nostalgia for the last moments before his life was irreversibly changed. As early in Hurstwood’s exile as the train ride to Detroit, he reflects on being “shut out from Chicago – from his easy, comfortable state” and promptly “began to think that he would try and restore himself to his old state” (231). This emphasis on restoring Hurstwood’s “old state” almost literally corresponds to Svetlana Boym’s notion of “restorative nostalgia,” which finds the nostalgic subject actively seeking to return to an idealized past, rather than merely reflecting on what has been lost (41). For Boym, this type of nostalgic individual considers the present to be a deviation from a “lost home” that still might be regained (41); in essence, it is a denial of culpability for the flawed present, and Hurstwood remains in this state for the remainder of the novel.

Dreiser continually emphasizes this cleavage from the past and writes that, while in Montreal, Hurstwood “forgot that he had severed himself from the past as by a sword, and that if he did manage to in some way reunite himself with it, the jagged line of

separation and reunion would always show” (241). Hurstwood’s brief memory lapse calls attention to the unattainable goal of nostalgia: to eradicate the distance between the utterly irreconcilable past and present. Despite – or perhaps because of – the impossibility of Hurstwood being restored to his preferred status in Chicago, he begins to suffer from nostalgic delusions near the end of the novel. Following Hurstwood’s two-day tenure as a scab driver during a Brooklyn streetcar operator’s strike, which he quits after being assaulted by a mob, he pathetically is reduced to reenacting nostalgic memories in moments of delirium. For instance, after the traumatic Brooklyn experience, Hurstwood sits in his apartment, “gazing downward, and gradually thought he heard the old voices and the clink of glasses. . . . All at once he looked up. The room was so still it seemed ghostlike” (358). By nostalgically retreating into memory, Hurstwood futilely attempts to restore his idealized past existence in Chicago.

Fantasies of the past continue to intrude into Hurstwood’s present, particularly after he takes up residence in a budget lodging-house, where

his preference was to close his eyes and dream of other days, a habit which grew upon him. It was not sleep at first, but a mental hearkening back to scenes and incidents in his Chicago life. As the present became darker, the past grew brighter, and all that concerned it stood in relief.

He was unconscious of just how much this habit had hold of him until one day he found his lips repeating an old answer he had made to one of his friends. They were in Fitzgerald and Moy’s. It was as if he stood in the door of his elegant little office, talking. . . .

The movement of his lips aroused him. He wondered whether he had really spoken. The next time he noticed anything of the sort he really did talk. (382)

As the personal and financial failures mount, Hurstwood's nostalgic fantasies infiltrate his daily life in an increasingly overwhelming manner. The debilitating nostalgia brought on by Hurstwood's flight from the Midwest prevents him from achieving any contentment in the present or even mustering the energy to pursue a new job. Instead, Hurstwood reframes the present as the result of a system that has been rigged against him, and, in his increasingly deranged state, he comes to deny the various personal failures that have accumulated since leaving Chicago. This delusional retreat inward is a nostalgic refutation of temporal progress since the moment that he stole the money and irreversibly changed his life.

Hurstwood's growing inability to distinguish between the desired past and dissatisfactory present reaches its apex during a later scene in which he occupies an even more confused and irrational state of mind. As Hurstwood stumbles down Broadway, on a theatre marquee, he sees "blazing, in incandescent fire, Carrie's name," as well as "a large, gilt-framed poster-board, on which was a fine lithograph of Carrie, life-size" (410). Because Hurstwood's "mind was not exactly clear," he addresses the image as if it actually is Carrie and says, "That's you. . . . Wasn't good enough for you, was I? Huh!" (410). Dreiser writes that Hurstwood "lingered, trying to think logically. This was no longer possible with him" (410). This scene represents something of a climactic moment

for Dreiser's concerns with environment and nostalgia.<sup>11</sup> Strangely, Hurstwood perceives the two-dimensional replica of Carrie as if she physically is present, and such a surface-level engagement with his environment further reveals the extent of his nostalgic derangement. As a result of Hurstwood's extreme nostalgic state, he experiences the present as if it is a set of images, just as he relives the past through delusions. In Hurstwood's mind, the past and present have become equivalent. Yet, in this scene, Hurstwood is confronted with proof that his imagistic perception of the present is false; he actually exists as a degraded version of his better self that is located elsewhere and else-when: in Chicago several years ago. Hence, this scene functions as a final refutation of Hurstwood's nostalgic reverie. Hurstwood is forced to acknowledge the temporal separation of past and present because Carrie's contemporary success cannot occupy the same moment as Hurstwood's previous contentment in Chicago. Carrie's image thus reaffirms Hurstwood's failed status in the present, which disrupts his nostalgic conflation of the past and the present. Ultimately, this encounter serves as the final catalyst that pushes Hurstwood to commit suicide.

The character of Hurstwood represents the most extreme possible outcome of Turner's dire prediction about a nation "thrown back upon itself." After Hurstwood's

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<sup>11</sup> In "From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs: Urban Spaces and Urban Subjects in *Sister Carrie* and *Manhattan Transfer*" (2006), Paula Geyh discusses this scene in relation to issues of class and describes the way in which Hurstwood's "misidentification heightens his own sense of lack, evokes in him a desire for what she's 'got' – wealth, fame, social acceptance – all symbolized by that sign. . . ." (424). Geyh adds, "Having lost the real Carrie, Hurstwood is reduced to negotiating with her sign. While his confusion signals the depth of his disorientation and despair, it also points to how, in many ways, Carrie's real identity is now not much more than this sign. . . ." (424). With these observations, Geyh highlights the reduction of identity that occurs in New York City for both Hurstwood and Carrie. For Geyh, these two characters steadily are stripped of complexity until they exist merely as signs representing categories such as age, class, gender, and culture.

actions cause him to lose his family and career in the Midwest, he flees to the urban East (instead of entering the mythic Western frontier, which supposedly no longer has vacant space) and swiftly is destroyed. Moreover, this movement eastward also effects a delusional turn inward, as Hurstwood transforms from charming socialite to depressive nostalgic. This nostalgic devolution brings the most destruction to bear on Hurstwood, as his yearning for the past proves to be so overwhelming that ending his own life becomes the only satisfactory activity in the present.

### ***Meet Me in St. Louis***

In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989), Gilles Deleuze celebrates Vincente Minnelli's musicals for revealing that "dance does not simply give a fluid world to images, but that there are as many worlds as images. . . . The plurality of worlds is Minnelli's first discovery, his very great position in cinema" (62-63). Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) features a distinctive type of plurality, one that involves intersecting temporalities. Taking place from the summer of 1903 to the spring of 1904 – around the time of Turner's rise to prominence and the publication of *Sister Carrie* – much of the tension in *Meet Me in St. Louis* stems from the members of the Smith family seeking to preserve their most ideal temporal "world," to adapt Deleuze's term, by nostalgically suspending the progression of time. In this way, the musical works to transform the Midwest of the early twentieth century into a fantastical space of nostalgia featuring wondrous sites, familial harmony, and optimism for a future that simply is a continuation of the ideal present.

The nostalgic character of *Meet Me in St. Louis* is made overt through the four title cards that break the film into seasonal acts. These cards all feature a sepia-toned photograph of the Smith's home with a decorative floral border and designate the settings as Summer 1903, Autumn 1903, Winter 1903, or Spring 1904. Whenever these cards appear, the camera zooms in on the photograph, and the image dissolves<sup>12</sup> into a colorized establishing shot full of movement. Minnelli thus creates the illusion that the camera literally is entering the photograph in order to animate and recreate the past, which exemplifies Boym's discussion of how restorative nostalgia renders history as "a perfect snapshot" (49). Throughout *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Minnelli presents the past as brighter and more vivid than is possible in historical documents and mere photographs from the era; thus, the "authentic" past is replaced by an improved cinematic version, one that is colorful and glamorous.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the Technicolor imagery of *Meet Me in St. Louis* being quite distinct from Turner's writings, both Minnelli and the frontier theorist offer nostalgic regional mythologies linked to spatial movement and temporal progress. Reading *Meet Me in St. Louis* as a mythological text is supported by Rick Altman's discussion of the musical genre in his comprehensive book, *The American Film Musical* (1987). In this study,

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<sup>12</sup> I present a lengthier consideration of the nostalgic properties of the dissolve when discussing *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) and *The Straight Story* (David Lynch, 1999) in Chapter Six.

<sup>13</sup> In "Vincente Minnelli's Style in Microcosm: The Establishing Sequence of 'Meet Me in St. Louis'" (1983), Beth Genne writes, "Minnelli's aim was not simply to be historically accurate. Rather, his goal was to create pictures that were aesthetically satisfying as well" (252). Such vibrant images fit a nostalgic understanding of the past as being superior to the drab present. In "Color at the Center: Minnelli's Technicolor Style in *Meet Me in St. Louis*," Scott Higgins directly comments on these seasonal title card and writes, "Minnelli explained that he intended these illustrations, resembling turn-of-the-century greeting cards, to help set the film's nostalgic tone" (458).

Altman frames the musical as “a cultural problem-solving device” that engages with society’s

fundamental paradox: both terms of the oppositions on which [society] is built (order/liberty, progress/stability, work/entertainment, and so forth) are seen as desirable, yet the terms are perceived as mutually exclusive. Every society possesses texts which obscure this paradox, prevent it from appearing threatening, and thus assure the society’s stability. The musical is one of the most important types of text to serve this function in American life. By reconciling terms previously seen as mutually exclusive, the musical succeeds in reducing an unsatisfactory paradox to a more workable configuration, a concordance of opposites. Traditionally, this is the function which society assigns to myth. (27)

Although Altman suggests that “the American courtship ritual” is the primary stabilizing myth in musicals (27), *Meet Me in St. Louis* instead asserts the primacy of the family unit. Certainly, eldest daughters Rose (Lucille Bremer) and Esther (Judy Garland) have romantic entanglements in the film, but these relationships ultimately revolve around a nostalgic preoccupation with geographic stasis – that is, maintaining spatial proximity to the Smiths’ home in St. Louis – and slowing temporal progress in order to preserve the family’s idealized present lifestyle. Like Turner’s fixation on the vanished frontiers, *Meet Me in St. Louis* designates a particular space and time as the Smith family’s most desired object of nostalgia: their shared state of sustained anticipation throughout 1903 for the opening of the 1904 World’s Fair.

Excitement for the World Fair's impending arrival, though, is tempered by the family's ongoing fear of spatial and temporal dislocation resulting from father Alonzo (Leon Ames) being offered a promotion in New York City. This tension between anticipation and dread for the future looms over all of the film's proceedings and, I argue, confirm Alonzo as the musical's central figure in terms of narrative complication. Alonzo does little except to introduce the major problem of migrating eastward and then abruptly to resolve it, but this is a key source of tension in the film. The possibility of moving is an acceleration of the already-changing dynamics within the Smith household, which are partly due to the eldest daughters approaching adulthood. Given these burgeoning domestic fissures, the narrative indicates that Alonzo's primary responsibility as family patriarch should be to provide as much stability as possible, a function that he finally embraces by film's end. Minnelli takes great measures to emphasize Alonzo's status as outsider within the family, and the film's climax – the scene in which the father announces that the family will stay in St. Louis – emphasizes that Alonzo is fully integrated into the collective mindset of his own family. Until this scene, Alonzo continually is set apart, both within the dialogue and through Minnelli's meticulous shot compositions.

The first onscreen appearances of the film's main characters reflect Alonzo's lack of synchronicity with the other members of the Smith clan. *Meet Me in St. Louis* opens with Minnelli providing a remarkable introduction to both the family and the conventions of the integrated musical<sup>14</sup> via the camera meandering through the Smith household,

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<sup>14</sup> Genne concisely defines the “integrated musical” as “a narrative theatrical or film form in which a story is told *through* song and dance as well as dialogue” (247 emphasis in original). Genne also provides a classic reading of the film's opening sequence through

which is presented as a space of domestic bliss and song. Even with a mild disagreement regarding the flavoring of ketchup being made by mother Anna Smith (Mary Astor) and maid Katie (Marjorie Main), the Smiths are depicted as a harmonious unit during this introductory sequence. Adult son Lon Jr. (Henry H. Daniels Jr.) enters the kitchen and briefly hums a few notes from “Meet Me in St. Louis.” Lon Jr. is followed by second youngest daughter Agnes (Joan Carroll), who begins singing the film’s title song as she wanders upstairs. There, Agnes encounters Grandpa (Harry Davenport), who also is singing the same song while shaving. Grandpa then dances through the hallway and overhears Esther arriving outside on a horse-drawn carriage with several friends, all of whom are singing “Meet Me in St. Louis.” Oldest daughter Rose soon arrives home and discusses her and Esther’s romantic designs on Warren Sheffield (Robert Sully) and John Truett (Tom Drake), respectively, the latter of which is literally the boy next door.

Both Alonzo and the brash youngest daughter Tootie<sup>15</sup> (Margaret O’Brien) notably are absent from this sequence, which also initiates a humorous conspiracy to keep

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which “the St. Louis of the film becomes a city transformed by Minnelli – a city that is shaped and dynamized by the director’s moving camera and a city in which music is the primary vehicle for the expression of its citizens’ emotions” (251).

<sup>15</sup> During this introductory sequence, Tootie is revealed to be riding along with the ice delivery man. Tootie has a delightfully morbid sensibility that reappears throughout the film, and these tendencies appear to set her apart from the more staid desires of the other members of the Smith family. For instance, in a much-analyzed Halloween celebration later in the film, Tootie explicitly embraces being declared the “most horrible” child in the neighborhood. In *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* (1993), James Naremore assesses this scene by writing that “Halloween momentarily inverts the patriarchal and heterosexual values of the film, confusing genders and setting domestic property afire. . . . Tootie wears a floppy business suit, wire-rimmed glasses, and a rat’s nose with long gray whiskers dangling from the nostrils; she is supposed to represent a ‘horrible ghost,’ but she looks more like . . . a parody of her father” (85). Despite Tootie’s wild streak and participation in a temporary disruption of the film’s normative ideology, Naremore notes that “Tootie is seldom a rebel against convention. Her favorite city is St. Louis, and in some respects she is the most conservative character of them all” (82). As such, the film’s

Alonzo from knowing that Warren is expected to call Rose from New York City early in the evening. As Grandpa wryly observes, “[Alonzo is] not supposed to know. It’s enough that we’re letting him work hard everyday to support the whole flock of us. He can’t have everything.” When Alonzo finally returns home (and is shown onscreen for the first time), he interrupts Rose and Esther singing “Meet Me in St. Louis” and grumpily declares, “For heaven’s sake, stop that screeching. That song. The fair won’t open for seven months. That’s all everybody sings about or talks about. I wish everybody would meet at the fair and leave me alone.” Alonzo’s presence disrupts the harmony within the Smith home and ends the mirthful domesticity. As patriarch, Alonzo has the authority to uproot the family, yet he otherwise is marginalized and excluded by the other members of the household in their daily dramas. For example, upon discovering that he was the last person to be aware of Rose’s potential marriage proposal, Alonzo exasperatingly wonders aloud, “Just when was I voted out of this family?” Beyond Alonzo’s exclusion from domestic drama, he is further set apart by his gruff attitude about the potential relocation to the east coast.

On Halloween night, Alonzo declares his intentions to move the Smiths to New York City. Through the earlier introductory sequence, the patriarch already is shown to be out-of-synch with his family, but Minnelli takes great care to emphasize this distanced status during Alonzo’s unsettling proclamation. For the duration of this scene, Alonzo most often is shown alone in a medium shot, separated from other family members in an unbalanced frame, or occupying a different plane of action. As the family gathers for cake and ice cream in the dining room, Alonzo sits alone at the head of the table and is

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true most “horrible” figure remains Alonzo, whose values diverge from his family until the climactic scene.

flanked on his left side by Anna, Rose, and Esther, with Katie, Tootie, Grandpa, and Agnes grouped across the table. Throughout the ensuing conversation, the family is horrified by the prospect of moving, and Alonzo's bafflement at their response continually is reaffirmed by his visual separation within the frame. For example, one medium shot within this sequence features Alonzo listening to the family's protestations. The blocking places a seated Alonzo at the far left of the frame with empty space in the middle, while Anna is seated on the right of the frame with Rose and Esther standing behind her. As the shot progresses, Alonzo rises and asserts, "It's all settled. We're moving to New York." He then turns and retreats to the background of the shot, where he states, "I've got the future to think about. The future for all of us. I've got to worry about where the money is coming from, with Ron in Princeton and Rose going to college." Alonzo's dialogue creates emotional distance between himself and the family, and this distance carefully is repeated by Minnelli's careful shot composition. His concern with the long-term future also contrasts with the family's fixation on the present and the near-future arrival of the World's Fair.

The scene continues with Alonzo cutting a cake while the family critiques New York. Rose dramatically claims that in New York, "Rich people have houses. People like us live in flats, hundreds of flats in one building." Framed in a medium shot with Agnes, Grandpa, and Katie, Tootie dejectedly states, "I'd rather be poor if we could only stay here," and Minnelli then cuts to a medium shot across the table of a seated Esther looking up at Alonzo and lamenting that they will be moving "Just when St. Louis was going to be the center of attraction of the entire universe." Every family member either declines to have a piece of cake or accepts a piece without eating it, and they subsequently vacate the

table except for Alonzo and Anna, who are left in a medium close-up with the cake between them. Alonzo then stands, walks to the living room, and sarcastically asks Anna, “Aren’t you afraid to stay here alone with a criminal? Well, that’s what I’m being treated like. After all, I’m trying to earn more money to give my grateful family everything they deserve. That’s worse than murder. I’m wrecking everybody’s life.” Minnelli’s shot compositions throughout this scene continually group members of the Smith family together, but isolate Alonzo in the frame.

Although Alonzo explains that his preoccupation with the future emerges from a concern for the collective well-being of the Smiths, the other family members’ negative reactions reflect a different engagement with space and time. Alonzo has a long-term conception of the future as progressing indefinitely and requiring careful planning; conversely, the other family members can only envision a short-term future that does not extend beyond the arrival of the World’s Fair. This nostalgic engagement with time informs the behavior of every family member (except for Alonzo), as they seem to believe that time will halt once the greatly anticipated World’s Fair arrives in St. Louis. Similarly, everyone but Alonzo associates familial unity and sociality with the space of the Midwest itself. The East is feared as a site of ongoing economic trials and perpetual challenges to the stability of the family. *Meet Me in St. Louis* thus serves as something of a nostalgic reaction to the degrading character arc of the eastbound Hurstwood in Dreiser’s pessimistic *Sister Carrie*; rather than risk destruction on the seemingly savage east coast, the Smiths seek to preserve the present dynamics of their idyllic Midwestern lifestyle.

Altman observes a gendered quality within the film's attitudes about regions, and he writes, "*Meet Me in St. Louis* identifies all the happy-go-lucky women folk with the Midwest, while their ambitious men yearn for college or a job in the East" (48). Obviously, this categorical split omits Grandpa, but Altman presumably links him to the feminized Midwest because of his advanced age. Within Altman's taxonomy, then, the desiring Midwest – the nation's space of nostalgia – is feminine. In "Self and Society: Vincente Minnelli and Musical Formula" (1982), J. P. Telotte offers an alternate explanation for the rift between Alonzo and the Smiths based on the musical genre's "two distinct impulses: one affirming the group or celebrating society, and another acknowledging a necessity for *self-expression*" (181 emphasis in original). Telotte writes that Alonzo's announcement "comments upon two possibilities facing the family – either to follow the individual's desires and abandon the world in which they are so comfortably immersed, or to remain and participate in that celebration of cultural harmony promised by the fair" (185). To make the film fit these categories of narrative "impulse," Telotte disregards Alonzo's claim that he is doing what he believes is best for his family. Despite this oversight, however, Telotte's reading of *Meet Me in St. Louis* again establishes a dichotomy between St. Louis and New York City. Whereas Altman feminizes the former and masculinizes the latter space, Telotte assigns collective harmony to the Midwest and individualism to the east coast. Such a classification reflects Dreiser's depiction of the East as a volatile urban wilderness in which every individual must fend for one's self.

The contrast between St. Louis and New York City returns during the climactic sequence in which Alonzo is persuaded to keep the Smiths in their Midwestern home. On Christmas Eve, the Smith home is packed up in preparation for the impending move, and

Esther delivers her iconic performance of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”<sup>16</sup> Full of emotion, Tootie then races outside the house to smash a family of “snow people” that had been built earlier in the film, and Esther attempts to console the child by saying “New York is a wonderful town. Look, everybody dreams about going there. But we’re luckier than lots of families because we’re really going.” After witnessing this exchange from an upstairs window, Alonzo walks downstairs and pauses on the staircase to check his pocket watch. Just at this moment, he looks up and gazes at the grandfather clock that has been covered with packing material. The image of a stopped clock suggests nostalgic desire to halt time or to return to the past, and Alonzo’s contemplation of this object functions as the final catalyst that prompts him to embrace his family’s nostalgic mindset.

Upon seeing his children’s despair and passing a symbol of paused time on the staircase, Alonzo abandons his future-oriented mentality in favor of the looping temporality of nostalgia. The Smith patriarch calls all of the family members into the living room and proclaims,

I’ve got a few words to say. We’re not moving to New York. And I don’t want to hear a word about it. We’re going to stay right here. We’re going to stay here till we rot. . . . New York hasn’t got a copyright on opportunity. Why, St. Louis is headed for a boom that’ll make your head swim. This is a great town. The trouble with you people is, you don’t

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<sup>16</sup> The lyrics to this melancholy song reiterate the nostalgic character of the film in several lines that suggest a relationship between contingency and happiness by highlighting spatial and temporal distance. For instance, the song’s final verse reads, “*Someday* soon/We all will be together/*If* the Fates allow/*Until then*/We’ll have to muddle through somehow/So have yourself a merry little Christmas *now*” (emphasis added). These sentiments indicate that the uncertainty of the future necessitates a preservation of – and appreciation for – the present, an attitude that the Smith family embraces throughout *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

appreciate it because it's right here under your noses. The grass is always greener in somebody else's yard.

To this point in the film, Alonzo's discordance with his family consistently had been depicted via his isolation in the frame, including being the only figure in a shot, being set apart by the blocking, or situated on a different plane of action. During this scene, for the first time in the film, Minnelli features Alonzo in the same frame and on the same plane as the entire Smith family. This visual solidarity reaffirms the stability that the Smiths will enjoy because of Alonzo's cancellation of the move, and he now shares the family's nostalgic fondness for St. Louis and their present state.

Alonzo's speech about future opportunities in St. Louis, however, must have seemed curious to the film's initial wartime audiences. Regarding Alonzo's earlier enthusiasm for moving to New York City, Naremore writes, "He is . . . wrong about where one can find progress or modernity, which lie in the new west" (74). While possibly true, the Smith family is not heading to the West; rather, they are staying in the Midwest until they "rot." By the time that *Meet Me in St. Louis* was released, the nation had experienced World War I and was in the midst of escaping the Great Depression while entering into another massive global conflict. Together, these events conspired to reduce the popular assessment of the Midwest in American culture. Shortridge observes that "the longer-term impact of [the Great Depression and World War II] on the region's image was negative. Both crises led to increased portrayals of the Middle West as a rural place. . . ." (62). Accordingly, Alonzo's claims about rotting and economic booms take on an ironic quality when considered in relation to the Midwest's status in 1944.

The historical circumstances during which *Meet Me in St. Louis* was released are particularly relevant in relation to the film's conclusion, particularly because of the contrast between the temporal context of audience members and the Smith family. For audiences who lived through the continuous turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century, *Meet Me in St. Louis* offers an appealing fantasy: that a desired moment may be occupied indefinitely, rather than expiring when the uncertain future consumes it. The commitment to nostalgically preserving such a moment is evident in the final scene of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Throughout the narrative, the future oscillates between being a source of dread (due to the potential New York move) and excitement, yet the desired World's Fair remains conspicuous in its absence for the majority of the film. In total, barely two minutes of the film's nearly two-hour duration are spent at the Fair, a curious fact in light of how much anticipation the Fair generates.<sup>17</sup> For the most part, the World's Fair remains an object of desire situated at a temporal moment that is far removed from the film's present.<sup>18</sup> As such, all of the events of the film unfold within a state of sustained desire for an idealized future time. Yet, the Smith family anticipates a future moment already located in the audiences' collective past; as such, these characters' naïve

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, as Naremore notes, the visual absence of the World's Fair may be attributed to the way in which "wartime restrictions on sets forced MGM to economize on the design of the fair; the idyllic glow of the film's conclusion is achieved entirely through our memory of the Smith women. . . ." (89).

<sup>18</sup> Even the lyrics to "Meet Me in St. Louis" emphasize the temporal distance of the Fair, as the narrator promises to dance and to "be your tootsie-wootsie" only "*if you will* meet me in St. Louis" (emphasis added). While the lyrics present such merrymaking as a condition located in an undetermined future rendezvous, they also construct the World's Fair as a singular spectacle: "Don't tell me the lights are shining/Any place but there." Much as nostalgia invents a fictional and perfected past, the characters singing the song all reproduce the image of a fantastical utopic future that will exist exclusively at the World's Fair.

ability to desire the future is itself a nostalgic object for audiences who are aware of the turmoil following the moments of optimism depicted in *Meet Me in St. Louis*.

The nostalgic desire to preserve the lengthy period of anticipation for the World's Fair strongly informs the film's conclusion, which presents the Smiths finally entering this long-awaited spectacle. Altman writes that "the World's Fair is at the same time a dream image and a hometown reality for the Smith family" (80), and this observation calls attention to the way in which the temporal distance of longing has caught up to its desired object. Like a nostalgic individual yearning for the past, though, the Smith family appears more preoccupied with experiencing desire than attaining the actual object of desire (in this case, the arrival of the World's Fair). When the Fair finally opens, the present reality matches the characters' desire, which prompts not satisfaction, but astonishment and a revised goal: to preserve the initial moment of contact with the desired object.

This revised desire is evident by the family's reaction to the spectacle of the World's Fair. In the final scene, the entire family gathers together as the World Fair's electric lights blink on and illuminate the festival grounds. Minnelli ends the film with a series of medium shots, each of which features different groupings of the family with the Fair's lights reflecting across their faces, while an instrumental version of the title song rises on the soundtrack. Standing alongside Lucille, Lon Jr., and Alonzo, Anna states, "There's never been anything like it in the whole world." The next shot is of Sheffield and Rose, who proclaims, "We don't have to come here on a train or stay in a hotel. It's right in our own hometown." This is followed by a shot of Agnes, Grandpa, and Tootie. The latter asks, "Grandpa, they'll never tear it down, will they?" and Grandpa replies,

“Well, they’d better not.” The last shot is of John and Esther, who gushes, “I can’t believe it. Right here where we live. Right here in St. Louis.” The scene then fades out and a title card with “The End” appears.

Despite Tootie and Grandpa wishing for the World’s Fair to be preserved, it was built to be ephemeral and temporary. With their desire clearly unrealized at the time of the musical’s release, the film text itself works to restore what was torn down once the World’s Fair ended. Understood in this way, the model of nostalgia identified in Turner and Dreiser – that of progress to a certain point and then a looping return inward or backwards – is very much present in *Meet Me in St. Louis*. The film’s climax is Alonzo’s announcement of the decision not to move, to maintain the Smith family’s present lifestyle, and the film ends rather abruptly once the much-anticipated World’s Fair opens. Not only is this the end of the narrative, but it also is the end of temporal progress for the Smiths. They do not wish to experience anything beyond that final scene, and, as a nostalgic text, the film reflects their desire to remain unchanged in a precise locale at an idealized moment by simply ending. Following the World’s Fair, the future can only suffer by comparison, so Minnelli leaves viewers with an image of the resolutely immobile and Midwestern Smith family in an indefinite state of nostalgic rapture.

The desire for simultaneity<sup>19</sup> – of the lost past occupying the same moment as the present – is a key element of nostalgia, particularly within the context of Midwestern texts produced during (or that represent the region) at the turn of the twentieth century.

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<sup>19</sup> Altman discusses the distinct temporal dynamics of the musical and writes, “Traditional notions of narrative structure assume that chronological presentation implies causal relationship . . . in the musical, chronological presentation and causal relationships alike are at climactic moments eschewed in favor of simultaneity and similarity” (28). In other words, Altman suggests that distinctions between past and present are collapsed within crucial moments in musicals, which exist as a temporal continuum of sorts.

Just as in Turner's writings and in *Sister Carrie*, the true object of nostalgia in *Meet Me in St. Louis* is revealed to be the last moment in which the future was not yet considered to be predetermined or problematic. In essence, nostalgia constructs an ideal relating to the ability to perceive the future as undetermined and full of potentiality, and this ideal then is perceived as being located within precise spatial and temporal coordinates. From Turner transferring idealized frontier traits onto the Midwest to Dreiser's Hurstwood dementedly conjuring up past memories in his temporally-confused present to Minelli leaving the Smith family at the desired World's Fair for an indefinite duration, these texts all offer a fantasy of the Midwest as a nostalgic realm with overlapping temporalities. Configured as the sole locale in which such temporal simultaneity is possible, the Midwest thus comes to be defined as the space of nostalgia within American culture, an identity that stubbornly has remained attached to the region even in the twenty-first century.

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## Chapter Two:

## “Stay Here Till We Rot!”: Midwestern Anti-Modernity and Spatial Constriction, 1929-1944

Near the conclusion of Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Dorothy Gale (Judy Garland) famously learns that she can return to her life in Kansas simply by repeating, “There's no place like home.” Having journeyed across the Technicolor landscape of Oz, Dorothy still yearns for the sepia-tinted hues of the stark Kansas terrain that is onscreen during the film's opening and closing scenes. Before departing from Oz, Dorothy makes an overtly nostalgic resolution by promising, “[If] I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with.” Released just five years later, Vincente Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) – another Judy Garland vehicle – also is preoccupied with preserving a threatened Midwestern lifestyle. As noted in Chapter One, in Minnelli's film, the mere possibility of moving from St. Louis to the east coast is enough to cause panic within the Smith household until patriarch Alonzo (Leon Ames) finally declares, “We're not moving to New York. . . . We're going to stay right here. We're going to stay here till we rot!” These two films' joint emphasis on nostalgically embracing provincialism must have been intended as a comforting sentiment for audiences living in the troubled modern world of the Great Depression and World War II outside of the theatre. Many other Midwestern texts from this period, however, reveal the problematic effects of stability and depict disturbing outcomes stemming from spatial entrapment. Such texts counterpose the nostalgic fear of movement by prominently

featuring protagonists who yearn to escape both physical and more ideological forms of regional restrictions.

This chapter examines three texts released during a fifteen-year period of national and global crisis – from 1929 to 1944 – that overlaps with the Great Depression and the majority of World War II. In popular representations of the Midwest from this era, the region frequently is depicted as having devolved into the very “rot” that Alonzo blithely predicts at the climax of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Indeed, Robert and Helen Lynd’s sociological project, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929), Richard Wright’s novel, *Native Son* (1940), and Preston Sturges’s film, *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* (1944) each configure the Midwest as a stagnating culture, largely due to the region’s status as constricted and enclosed, both socially and geographically. The claustrophobic regional spaces of these three texts undermine positive nostalgic associations with the Midwest and affirm Frederick Jackson Turner’s prediction that the inability to expand further into the West would produce cultural turmoil by transforming the nation into “a witches’ kettle” (186) of discontent. Building upon my earlier analysis of Turner, this chapter has two purposes: first, to consider – within a Midwestern context – the lingering cultural repercussions of Turner’s claim that the United States was “thrown back upon itself” (186) when frontier expansion theoretically ended in the late nineteenth century; second, to reveal the ways in which the Lynds, Wright, and Sturges each construct nostalgically-influenced Midwestern norms, particularly in relation to restricted social mobility and physical movement.

Together, *Middletown*, *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, and *Native Son* portray the Midwest as a space that, to varying degrees, resists or is apart from the modern

culture experienced elsewhere. As will become clear throughout this chapter, these texts present the entire Midwest, particular regional communities, or individual Midwestern characters as anti-modern and out-of-synch with the daily demands of modernity. In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), Marshall Berman describes what modernity requires of its subjects, and he writes,

In order for people, whatever their class, to survive in modern society, their personalities must take on the fluid and open form of this society. Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change: not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively to demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through. They must learn not to long nostalgically for the “fixed, fast-frozen relationships” of the real or fantasized past, but to delight in mobility, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men. (95-96)

Berman observes that thriving in modernity requires a lack of nostalgia, the very quality that rapidly was coming to define the Midwest in the first half of the twentieth century. Hence, the ever-anachronistic culture of the Midwest – on display in the past-oriented depictions of the Midwest offered by figures such as Turner, who locates lost frontier traits within the region – is decidedly anti-modern, a space whose nostalgic character removes it from modernity’s transformative drive.

An unwillingness or inability to embrace change pervades Midwestern narratives from the 1920s through the 1940s. In films such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, characters are committed to preserving nostalgic formations of home; by contrast,

in the texts considered in this chapter, the region is depicted as an environment in which reductive regional norms circulate and lock the Midwest's identity into rigidly fixed ideals. The individuals subjected to the restrictive pressures of such normalizing regional narratives – especially in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Native Son* – experience great anxiety, which becomes manifest through bodily dysfunction or violent outbursts. Before addressing the deranged protagonists presented by Sturges and Wright, a brief overview of how the Midwest's image was shaped in the decades prior to the 1940s is necessary.

### ***Middletown* and Perceptions of the Midwest in the 1920s**

Despite the pretense of being an objective sociological study of Muncie, Indiana,<sup>20</sup> the Lynds' *Middletown* actually participates in a mythologizing discourse about the Midwest that dates back to at least Frederick Jackson Turner's nostalgic conceptualization of the region. As will become clear in this section of the chapter, the Lynds' methodology for analyzing Muncie resembles Turner's historical writings in that the research comprising *Middletown* is informed by assumptions regarding what constitutes "averageness" within the United States and the Midwest. Although the Lynds identify insightful tensions relating to class differences, the effects of expanding technology on socialization, and other issues within Muncie, they also offer a

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<sup>20</sup> The identity of "Middletown" initially was not revealed by the Lynds in order to preserve the anonymity of Muncie's inhabitants. A follow-up study, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (1937), returned to Muncie in 1935, and the Lynds' two volumes inspired a 1982 documentary miniseries about Muncie simply titled, *Middletown*.

problematically reductive understanding of what are “typical” elements of American culture. In this chapter – much like my consideration of Turner in Chapter One – I read the Lynds’ work not for its ostensibly empirical content, but for its presentation and affirmation of reified Midwestern imagery. From this perspective, *Middletown* exists as one of many popular perceptions of the Midwest produced during the 1920s.

In *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), James Shortridge identifies a fluctuating spectrum of American attitudes towards the Midwest across the first half of the twentieth century, and he claims that “1920 marks a clear apogee,” while the region’s “nadir came about 1950” (38-39). Significantly, the downturn from the high water mark of the Midwest’s popular estimation coincides with the emergence of the so-called “revolt from the village” writers, whose ranks include Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis. Throughout *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value* (2004), Tom Lutz analyzes literature with a distinct regional slant, and he describes the beginning of the 1920s as a moment that features a “new, demythologizing approach to the American village” (138) – which commonly was depicted as being located in the Midwest – in texts such as Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920). Lutz explains that Anderson and Lewis detail and criticize “the standardizing small-mindedness of provincialism” by crafting small town characters who are “complicit in their own oppression” (140).

With *Main Street* and *Babbitt* (1922), Lewis especially is harsh in his evaluation of the Midwest, as he indicates that the region’s small town inhabitants willfully foster social insularity, which exacerbates the homogenizing effects of their geographic seclusion. For example, while reflecting on “the surface ugliness” of seemingly

interchangeable small towns, Carol Kennicott – the frustrated protagonist of *Main Street* – asserts, “The universal similarity – that is the physical expression of the philosophy of dull safety” (260). Over the course of the narrative, Carol’s attempts to introduce even a mild bit of cosmopolitanism through activities such as upscale parties or the development of a local theatre group are stymied by Gopher Prairie’s inhabitants, who are resolute in their resistance to change. In contrast to Carol, *Babbitt*’s titular protagonist embraces the provincialism that often characterizes the Midwest in popular representations of the region.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Lewis presents George Babbitt as devoted to acknowledging only a sanitized version of his fictional Midwestern hometown, Zenith. As George drives through Zenith, his willful blindness towards any less-than-ideal sections of the midsize city is made clear when Lewis writes, “As always [George] ignored the next two blocks, decayed blocks not yet reclaimed from the grime and shabbiness of the Zenith of 1885” (58). In this brief passage, Lewis subtly reveals how Midwestern environments selectively are imagined through the omission or obscuring of elements that do not correspond to idealized regional imagery.

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<sup>21</sup> During one especially longwinded speech, George elaborates on “the ideal of American manhood and culture,” which he defines as

a God-fearing, hustling, successful, two-fisted Regular Guy, who belongs to some church with pep and piety to it, who belongs to the Boosters or the Rotarians or the Kiwanis, to the Elks or Moose or Red Men or Knights of Columbus or any one of a score of organizations of good, jolly, kidding, laughing, sweating, upstanding, lend-a-handing Royal Good Fellows, who plays hard and works hard, and whose answer to his critics is a square-toed boot that’ll teach the grouches and smart alecks to respect the He-man and get out and root for Uncle Samuel, U.S.A.! (207)

With an emphasis on being uncritically patriotic and pious, individualistic and devoted to community, Babbitt’s ideal citizen recalls Turner’s mythic frontier settlers who are compelled westward by personal, communal, and nationalist goals.

Significantly, the Lynds conducted their research for *Middletown* during 1924 and 1925 in the immediate wake of the literary assaults on Midwestern culture by Anderson and Lewis.<sup>22</sup> Although the “revolt from the village” authors had antecedents in earlier writings by figures such as Hamlin Garland and Mark Twain, a key distinction is that the Midwest did not achieve popular recognition as a discrete region until the early twentieth century. As such, the work of these later writers was produced within a still-developing regional context, one that permitted them to react against the Midwest’s popular identity as it was evolving. The Lynds, interestingly, appear to have been influenced by (and perhaps even embraced) the reductive images of the Midwest that Lewis and others sought to trouble and undermine.

While outlining criteria for the selection of Muncie as the focus of *Middletown*, the Lynds reveal several significant biases about the Midwest and American culture. To

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<sup>22</sup> Although Lewis emphasizes the problematic elements of Midwestern communities, the Minnesota native’s true object of critique is American culture in general. In *Main Street*’s one-page prologue, Lewis notes that even though the novel is set in the fictional Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, “its main street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same in Ohio or Montana, in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois, and not very differently would it be told Up York State or in the Carolina hills” (6). Near the end of the novel, Carol is exasperated by her life in Gopher Prairie and flees to Washington, D.C. Of her time there, however, Lewis writes, “Always she was to perceive in Washington (as doubtless she would have perceived in New York or London) a thick streak of Main Street. The cautious dullness of a Gopher Prairie appeared in boarding-houses . . . in the Sunday motor procession, in theater parties, and at the dinners of State Societies. . . .” (410). Eventually, Carol concludes that “institutions are the enemies. . . . They insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous names, such as Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race. . . .” (413). These passages clarify that, while Lewis’ critique is born and centered in the Midwest, *Main Street* actually is a much broader indictment of the United States as a whole. Hence, Lewis’s version of the Midwest is representative of “average” or “typical” American culture by virtue of the fact that it most clearly reveals the inherent flaws of the nation.

ensure that “the city be as representative as possible of contemporary American life” (7), the Lynds determine that their object of study should feature seven qualities:

(1) A temperate climate. (2) A sufficiently rapid rate of growth to insure the presence of a plentiful assortment of the growing pains accompanying contemporary social change. (3) An industrial culture with modern high-speed machine production. (4) The absence of dominance of the city’s industry by a single plant, i.e., not a one-industry town. (5) A substantial local artistic life to balance its industrial activity; also a largely self-contained artistic life. . . . (6) The absence of any outstanding peculiarities or acute local problems which would mark it off from the mid-channel sort of American community. . . . a seventh qualification was added: the city should, if possible, be in that common-denominator of America, the Middle West. (7-8)

This seventh desired trait reveals that the Lynds assume the “average” nature of the Midwest is self-evident and a preexisting condition, rather than being a cultural association that their project is complicit in further reproducing. Moreover, for the Lynds, the Midwest’s generic quality extends into the realms of the cultural, the economic, and the natural environment itself. With Muncie, then, the Lynds identify a locale featuring an abstract “middle-of-the-road quality” (9) that is presumed to be a defining element of the entire Midwest. Clearly, the Lynds’ project is predicated on a presumption of Midwestern normativity and standardization.

Even as the Lynds proclaim Muncie's status to be a "representative" city within the nation's "common-denominator" region,<sup>23</sup> they quickly undermine such synecdochic presuppositions. Regarding Muncie, the Lynds confusingly qualify that, "although it was its characteristic rather than its exceptional features which led to the selection of Middletown, no claim is made that it is a 'typical' city, and the findings of this study can, naturally, only with caution be applied to other cities or to American life in general" (9). Here, as is often the case, the Midwest is presented as a space onto which any qualities may be projected, however contradictory they might be. At once "representative," yet not "typical," the Lynds' version of Muncie (and the Midwest) is that of a malleable space,

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<sup>23</sup> The perception of Midwestern averageness persists in many ways across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but consumer culture is one of the clearest categories in which the region is believed to have nondescript preferences. In *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (2008), Victoria Johnson discusses how "the Midwest has been a particularly problematic region in network history. It is simultaneously understood to be the most reliable, 'mass,' 'all-American' market – as an aggregate class of consumers with presumptively popular, commercial tastes – and to be a risky investment, considering its lower population density and weaker, more rural market strength. . . ." (7 emphasis in original). Thomas Frank further explains this supposed Midwestern taste for the generic in *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004). Frank writes that Kansas is anti-exotic, familiar even if you've never been there. As a tourist destination, Kansas ranks dead last among the states but it remains a popular proving ground for test marketers of every kind. It has been a prolific birthplace of chain restaurants – Pizza Hut, White Castle, and Applebees, to name a few – and it supplies the nation with anchormen, comedians, and actors of wholesome visage and accent inoffensive. Kansas City is the home of Hallmark Cards and the nation's very first suburban shopping center. Thanks to its unerring sense for the middle, the state is a politician producer of the first rank, a reliable wellspring of down-home statesmen. (29-30)

As evident in these passages by Johnson and Frank, the Lynds' assumptions about the Midwest's "common-denominator" quality remains attached to the region and has been used strategically by marketers in order to predict the potential for mass consumption of television shows, chain restaurants, and other products.

one that may be constructed to affirm preexisting ideals instead of reflecting actual circumstances.

Another primary consideration directing the Lynds' methodology casts further doubts on the pretense of their objectivity. The Lynds state that Muncie was chosen for being "compact and homogenous enough to be manageable" (7), and this is a rather loaded phrase. Although the Lynds' desire for manageability may appear to be innocuous and related to issues of scale, it also suggests some type of manipulation towards their object of study; in this sense, Muncie as a "manageable" space configures the city as something akin to a block of clay that might be molded into a desired shape. Such an evaluation of *Middletown* is affirmed when the Lynds detail how they assessed the desired "compact and homogenous" character of potential cities for their project.

For the Lynds, three characteristics were identified as necessary "to secure a certain amount of compactness and homogeneity" regarding the city that they would study:

(1) A city of the 25,000-50,000 group. This meant selection from among 143 cities, according to the 1920 Census. A city of this size . . . would be large enough to have put on long trousers and to take itself seriously, and yet small enough to be studied from many aspects as a unit. (2) A city as nearly self-contained as is possible in this era of rapid and pervasive inter-communication, not a satellite city. (3) A small Negro and foreign-born population. In a difficult study of this sort it seemed a distinct advantage to deal with a homogenous, native-born population, even though such a population is unusual in an American industrial city. Thus, instead of

being forced to handle two major variables, racial change and cultural change, the field staff was enabled to concentrate on cultural change. The study thus became one of the interplay of a relatively constant native American stock and its changing environment. (8)

In the context of Midwestern representational conventions, particularly during this period, two elements assume a high degree of significance in this passage. First of all, the Lynds express a general concern with the cultural effects of movement and containment. The requirement for stasis and provincialism – for the city to be “self-contained” and to have limited “inter-communication” with other locales – certainly would produce a more “manageable” object of study, but it also reflects an attitude that imagines the Midwest as distant and detached from the rest of the nation’s experience of modernity. Here, the Lynds’ version of the Midwest retains a proximity to past modes of living, due to its perceived cultural isolation and lack of modern communication technologies.

The second major element in this passage is, of course, the Lynds’ highly problematic engagement with race and regionalism.<sup>24</sup> The Lynds note that Caucasians “compose 92 per cent. [sic] of the total population” in Muncie, which might otherwise explain their decision to limit the study to the city’s “native whites” (9); however, the fact that they sought a locale with limited diversity for their project exposes the way in which they actually invent a standard and racist definition of what constitutes a small Midwestern city. Revealingly, the Lynds’ dismissal of the heterogeneous elements of

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<sup>24</sup> Two anthologies respond to the Lynds’ willful omissions of Muncie’s African American and Jewish populations: *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie’s African American Community* (2004), which is edited by Luke Eric Lassiter, Hurley Goodall, Elizabeth Campbell, and Michelle Natasya Johnson, and *Middletown Jews: The Tenuous Survival of an American Jewish Community* (1998), which is edited by Dan Rottenberg.

Muncie's demographics recalls the pervasive racism of Turner's work. Turner describes the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (14), and this dichotomy is based upon both physical terrain and racial distinctions. For Turner, North America's supposed past vacancy (which enabled European settlers to expand across the continent) was contingent on defining Native Americans as "the savage lords of the boundless prairie" who stubbornly "resist the march of civilization" (125). Throughout Turner's work, Native Americans are configured as simultaneously present and absent. Native Americans exist, but because they are not part of "civilization," the spaces that they occupy remain "vacant."<sup>25</sup> Simply through a reductive classificatory system, Turner invents a version of the continent to support his theories, and his overt erasure of difference portends the troubling racial absences in *Middletown*, as well as the popular image of the Midwest in general.

For contemporary readers, the Lynds' linkage of Muncie's white population with the term "native American" (8) is shocking in its casual elision of actual Native American history. Yet, labeling white Midwesterners as "natives" signals a major shift in popular perceptions of the Midwest and its inhabitants as the 1930s approached. In Chapter One, I recounted Turner's conception of the frontier as a space whose unique qualities produce "Americanized" (27) settlers. Once the frontier becomes "closed," Turner transfers those standardizing capabilities onto the Midwest, a region that he claims was "merging the

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<sup>25</sup> In "Liberating Contrivances: Narrative and Identity in Midwestern History" (2001), Eric Hinderaker addresses "the rhetorical practices that have allowed Midwesterners, and those who have written about Midwestern experience, to elide the moral problem of conquest" (50). As indicated in the title of the piece, Hinderaker uses the phrase, "liberating contrivances," to describe regional narratives that "allowed later residents of the Midwest to cultivate and sustain their myths of reconciliation and pluralist democracy in a conquered, debatable land" (50). Clearly, the work of both Turner and the Lynds functions as, to varying degrees, "liberating contrivances."

individual life in the common product” (292) of the nation: that is, the region itself was reshaping all who passed through it into “Americans.” Between Turner’s earliest writings and the Lynds’ study of Muncie, the Midwest’s identity had evolved from Western territory to American region, a development that reframed its popular identity. This identification shift of the white Midwesterner from “settler” to “native American” required a sort of cultural amnesia about how the regional space previously had been understood. No longer was the Midwest dutifully transforming individuals into “Americans” as in Turner’s writings; now, “native-born” (8) white Midwesterners were being perceived as not only intrinsically “American,” but the most exemplary incarnation of American citizens. That social scientists such as the Lynds unquestioningly accepted and repeated this narrative reveals the full extent to which it had been absorbed into American culture by the mid-1920s. Even with the literary critiques of the period – or perhaps because of their success in imagining the region as a discrete space – the Midwest’s identity as the nation’s “common-denominator” was affirmed. Beyond *Middletown*’s status as an influential, if problematic, classic in the field of sociology, the Lynds’ study also exists as evidence of the power of essentialist regional narratives to permeate and ingrain themselves in history.

### ***The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek***

In sharp contrast to the ways in which Turner and the Lynds create and disseminate reductive depictions of the Midwest, writer-director Preston Sturges overtly calls attention to the mechanisms that produce normalized regional narratives with his

subversive wartime comedy, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*. Blending slapstick and screwball conventions, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* exposes the problematic linkages between nostalgic Midwestern imagery, essentialist definitions of masculinity, and restricted movement. Sturges addresses these issues through the film's narrative and form; Norval Jones (Eddie Bracken) struggles with conforming pressures exuded by the small Midwestern community,<sup>26</sup> and a series of lengthy tracking shots accentuate the social and geographic constriction of Morgan's Creek. With *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, Sturges strips Midwestern imagery of nostalgic associations and shows it to be a space of odious cultural stagnation.

*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* revolves around a series of escalating deceptions and features characters scheming about how to create a perception of conformity to the Midwestern social mores that are enforced by the town's inhabitants and public institutions. Despite multiple attempts to enlist in the army, Norval's crippling anxiety has left him stuck in Morgan's Creek, much to his dismay. Norval also is infatuated with Trudy Kockenlocker (Betty Hutton), a flirtatious young woman who attends a military

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<sup>26</sup> As with many films set in small towns, there is a general lack of specificity regarding where Morgan's Creek is located in terms of both state and region. Near the end of the film, though, there is diegetic confirmation of the town's placement within the Midwest, as Sturges includes shots of newspaper headlines announcing that the "miracle" sextuplets were born in the region. In *Hollywood's Small Towns: An Introduction to the American Small-Town Movie* (1984), Kenneth MacKinnon writes that "individual small towns in Hollywood movies have no resonance of the sort analogous to that of New York or Los Angeles in the movies and that such associations as are imported into individual small towns seem to be those created by an amalgam of elements much less to do with actual American small towns than with manifold literary descriptions and repeated cinematic treatments" (18). According to MacKinnon, then, there is a lack of precision afforded issues of verisimilitude regarding small towns on screen, and such locales often are depicted as spaces located potentially anywhere or nowhere in particular. In a curious way, such vagary links most cinematic small towns to ways in which the Midwest has been configured as an absent space without clearly defined characteristics, beyond being generically "American."

party that culminates with her getting drunk, married, pregnant, and unable to remember the name of the soldier who she wed, much less the act of consummation.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, Trudy gives birth to sextuplets, who represent the titular “miracle” of the film. Prior to the birth, Trudy and her younger sister Emmy (Diana Lynn) collaborate to coerce Norval into participating in a series of plans designed to obscure Trudy’s indiscretions so that her marriage and pregnancy will appear as “legitimate” in the eyes of the townspeople. These plans are foiled until the last-minute intervention of Governor McGinty (Brian Donlevy), who pardons the jailed Norval, gives him an honorary position in the State Guard, and has marriage documents falsified so that Trudy’s sextuplets are on the record as having been born into wedlock. The film concludes with Norval embracing his marriage to Trudy, only to convulse wildly upon discovering that he now is responsible for six children.

In *Intrepid Laughter: Preston Sturges and the Movies* (1985), Andrew Dickos writes that Sturges “utilized Hollywood as a tool to complicate, cynicize, as well as contradict, the myths and vision of America that directors such as Capra, Ford, and Griffith propagated. . . .” (112). The very “compositions” in Sturges’s films, Dickos suggests, “belie the delusion that there is much harmony in the world” (112). Regarding *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, Dickos writes,

Sturges’ vision of small-town life in 1940s America confirms certain cultural myths and values as much as it debunks others. The idyllic harmony one envisions about provincial America becomes little more than

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<sup>27</sup> As Leger Grindon notes in *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy* (2011), “The Sturges dialogue plays upon the implied substitution of the forbidden for the respectable. The equation of sex with ‘marriage’ is a repeated gag that becomes a pivot for humor” (108).

a delusion in the chaotic world of Morgan's Creek. All of the same elements are there—the setting, people, and activities; however, they are constituted differently, invested with qualities of frenzied anxiety, contradiction, and paradox. (106)

Leger Grindon similarly observes, “The film portrays failure or success as inadvertent: the individual is essentially a helpless plaything of circumstances and the unpredictable ebb and flow of social sympathy, condemnation or praise” (115-116). Unlike Turner's conception of the Midwest as a space that retains the frontier-like conditions for individual success, Sturges now argues that the region is a disorderly realm of chance and restriction.

Aside from merely presenting chaos within the supposedly staid environment of the Midwest, Sturges also exposes the highly constructed nature of the idealized images that circulate about the region from the earliest frames of the film. This critique emerges through Sturges subversively emphasizing a gap between actual events and official records, thus exposing the machinations involved in sustaining the deceptively ideal surface of Midwestern small town imagery. The majority of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* is presented as a flashback from framing scenes in which an unnamed newspaper editor (Victor Potel) informs Governor McGinty of an unfolding crisis in Morgan's Creek. At the start of the film, Sturges cuts between the newspaper editor and McGinty in order to obscure details of the crisis, but the governor's hyperbolic reaction suggests a potentially devastating catastrophe. McGinty proclaims, “This is a matter of state policy, state pride. National pride,” and he quickly appends, “This is the biggest thing to happen to this state since we stole it from the Indians.” These comments are notable for two

reasons. First, the explicit acknowledgment of land theft from Native Americans – not the Lynds’ white Midwestern “native Americans – is relatively rare in mainstream entertainment, particularly during this period. Such an admission is absent from the Lynds’ study, and it belies any pretense of moral superiority on the part of the government agencies that continually attempt to regulate the behavior of the residents of Morgan’s Creek. Secondly, McGinty immediately links the “crisis” to “pride” on both a local and national scale, as well as, curiously, to “state policy.” As the narrative proceeds, this governmental concern with the private lives of the state’s constituents recurs; again and again, authority figures emphasize and enforce a linkage between individuals and the broader identities of the town, state, and even nation.

Sturges sporadically cuts back to this phone conversation throughout the film, and McGinty’s ongoing preoccupation with Trudy’s status further foregrounds the connection between private life and public regulation. During one segment of the conversation, the governor interrupts the editor and proclaims, “Wait a minute, never mind the details. Is the girl married or isn’t she married? It’s a matter of state honor. . . . Well, she’s got to be married, that’s all there is to it. We can’t have a thing like that hanging over our fair state, besmirching our fair name.” Eventually, McGinty rectifies the “problem” of Trudy’s pregnancy by simply rewriting the official account of what occurred. Regarding the irregularities of the marriage license,<sup>28</sup> McGinty shouts, “What’s the matter with the marriage? She’s married to Norval Jones, she always has been,” and so it is recorded as

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<sup>28</sup> Because Trudy cannot remember who she married after the farewell party for the soldiers, she and Norval concoct a convoluted scheme to attain a proper marriage license. Basically, Norval plans to assume the identity of the absent soldier and marry Trudy under that name; they then will secure a divorce and remarry one another with Norval’s real name listed on a new license. This plan fails almost immediately when they attempt to implement it at the Honeymoon Hotel.

such. Reminiscent of the race-omitting “liberating contrivances” found in Turner and the Lynds, in *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, Sturges presents a clear process by which a non-ideal development – Trudy’s drunken military marriage to an unknown soldier and her accompanying pregnancy – is reinscribed into an “official” sanitized narrative.

Within the film, reconciling Norval’s spasmodic body with idealized masculine traits proves to be just as great of a challenge as explaining away Trudy’s indiscretions, even with his earnest desire to conform.<sup>29</sup> Part of what makes Norval such a subversive character is the wartime context in which *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* was produced. In *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood: From Lubitsch to Sturges* (1987), James Harvey notes that “it was not a good time for the romantic comedy” because of “the spreading atmosphere of religiosity-cum-patriotism” (413). Harvey elaborates, “Hollywood – at least as submissive to the State propaganda system as it was to the Catholic Church – was off to war well before the country was” (413). Consequently, Hollywood films – particularly comedies – began to function as recruitment tools “with the heroine inciting the hero not to romance but to enlistment” (413). Trudy herself does not seem particularly interested in marriage until she discovers her unexpected pregnancy, and she justifies her desire to attend the military party with the pretense of being patriotic. As Trudy explains to Norval, the soldiers are “fine, clean, young boys from good homes and

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<sup>29</sup> Norval continually laments his inability to join the military and embody masculine ideals due to his extreme anxiety. For instance, when Trudy initially turns down Norval’s request for a date because of the military party, he dejectedly mutters, “You’d think they’d give a party someday for those who have to stay behind. They also serve, you know, who only sit and . . . well, whatever they do, I forget.” Later, Trudy asks for a favor, and Norval enthuses, “Except maybe getting into the army, I can’t think of anything that makes me more happy than helping you out. I almost wish you’d be in a lot of trouble sometime, so I could prove it to you.” Again and again, Norval reveals a deep longing to be “more” masculine or to have the opportunity to “prove” his conformity to gendered ideals.

we can't send them off maybe to be killed and rockets' red glare and bombs bursting in air without anybody to say goodbye to them, can we?" This statement reveals an awareness, conscious or not, of rigid gender roles in the town, as men are "supposed" to go fight, while women are "supposed" to encourage the men to do so.

Norval, however, upends wartime romantic comedy conventions through his inability to embody masculine ideals, as does Trudy's early flirtations with numerous soldiers. Grindon writes, "The soldiers represent the ideal of strong, self-sacrificing men ready to defend their country; however, the romantic comedy needs to embody these virtues in a sterling individual, a move the film refuses. As the handsome soldiers depart, they are replaced by Norval Jones" (108). Norval, as Dickos describes, "craves order in his life . . . but his hyper-dysfunctional behavior belies any possibility for physical, let alone mental order" (106). Moreover, Dickos suggests that the physical comedy of Norval's uncontrollable body actually contains a critical dimension:

For Sturges, the art of slapstick is less a matter of the mind exercising control over the body than a case of making one's convulsiveness conform to the desires and intentions one would like to express. Physical movement, in this sense, necessarily plays against linear, logical thinking and undermines such thinking to make us see that the comedy of an orderly existence lies precisely in our dogged attempts to make such an existence possible. (108)

Beyond Bracken's spasmodic performance functioning only as physical comedy, Norval – through the chaos of his body – reveals the extent to which attempts to conform to normalized ideals produce disorder and discontent. Even though Norval claims to have a

strong desire to enlist in the army, his body physically revolts against that wish. The true impetus for Norval's desires, then, simply is intense social pressure to conform to masculine ideals. Exposing this dynamic is one of Sturges's greatest acts of subversion in the film, as he consistently undermines the myth of the idealistic and patriotic individual by emphasizing the collective conformity at work within the community. In this light, Norval's masculine deficiencies actually reveal the way in which all of the town's characters are performing constructed roles; Norval is a device that disrupts the order produced by the rest of the town abiding by a normalized cultural script.

The marriage plot in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* functions as one additional way in which Sturges introduces tensions between movement and entrapment.<sup>30</sup> Prior to ensnaring Norval in their schemes, Trudy and Emmy consult the town lawyer, Mr. Johnson (Al Bridge), for advice about attaining an annulment or divorce. Mr. Johnson's brusque response reaffirms the restrictive gender roles enforced within Morgan's Creek and directly equates marriage with entrapment:

Responsibility for recording a marriage has always been up to the woman. If it wasn't for her, marriage woulda disappeared long since. No man is gonna jeopardize his present or poison his future with a lot of little brats hollerin' around the house unless he's forced to. It's up to the woman to

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<sup>30</sup> Harvey observes that such thematic elements became common in the romantic comedies of this era. He explains, "Romantic comedy shifted from a fantasy of freedom to a joke about entrapment: women by their nonsense, and men by their women; she trying to escape her nature, and he trying to fulfill it, and both without success" (415). Increasingly, Harvey suggests that "the whole feeling was different" within this genre, as each film "had become less a comedy about falling in love than about trapping a man" (415-416).

knock him down, hogtie him, and drag him in front of two witnesses immediately, if not sooner. Anytime after that, it's too late.

Mr. Johnson's brief lecture links gender and movement through the regulatory role ascribed to women, which highlights the important and contradictory status that they occupy in Morgan's Creek. Traditional marriage is explained throughout the film as an institution that stabilizes society, but males supposedly are resistant (except, of course, when getting married will enable them to have sex before departing for combat). Sturges repeatedly highlights the townspeople's general anxiety about young women potentially disrupting society by deviating from their designated roles as protectors of social order. Consequently, the women of Morgan's Creek are scrutinized so that they, in turn, will regulate the young men whose disregard for conservative social conventions presumably would lead to chaos.

Following this scene with the lawyer, Emmy concocts a plan to trick Norval into proposing, and the younger Kockenlocker sister explains to Trudy, "It would hurt me just as much as it would you to have you hurt and miserable and ashamed and everything. That's the only reason I want you to get married. You can't tell how a town is going to take things. . . . All suspicious and suspecting the worst in everything." Here, the fear of judgment and social discipline resulting from the town's gossipy surveillance culture is shown to provide the true motivation for marriage. Accordingly, Trudy's attempt to trick Norval into proposing to her is couched in appeals to the normative ideals that create the pressure to marry. Trudy claims that "a woman's place is in the home," and a surprised Norval responds, "That sounds kind of old-fashioned and domestic coming from you, Trudy." Norval's statement prompts Trudy to elaborate on why she abruptly is embracing

“old-fashioned” values, and she says, “Sometimes you just naturally feel old-fashioned and domestic, Norval. I guess no girl ever gets away from it, really. She thinks she is, and then one day something happens, and then she finds out she isn’t.” Again, a sense of proximity and distance is apparent in Trudy’s explanation, albeit of a temporal, rather than spatial, variety; when younger (prior to the soldiers’ going away party), Trudy felt distanced from domestic aspirations, but now that she is older (i.e., pregnant), she has been pushed closer to such values.

By the end of the film, Trudy’s affection for Norval has gone beyond mere appreciation of his status as available dupe and appears to be genuine. When the couple finally is reunited just after the birth of the sextuplets, Trudy declares that she is “so happy,” and she lovingly tells Norval, “You’re a papa now. . . . You are one. A papa gives love, protection.” With these words, their assimilation into “proper” society and conformity to approved gender roles is complete, as Trudy and Norval are bound in marriage, which the governor backdates so that the sextuplets are identified as “legitimate” in the town’s official records. No longer a wild youth, Trudy has found satisfaction in marriage, and Norval has attained some degree of masculinity by virtue of his status as a “papa.” Not content to leave the protagonists in such a content and blissful state, Sturges ends the film with Norval’s physical disarray returning upon the discovery that he is responsible for six children, and an onscreen postscript emphasizes the artificiality of the couple’s newfound respectability. Attributed to Shakespeare, the quote reads, “Some are *born* great, some *achieve* greatness, and some have greatness *thrust upon them*” (emphasis in original). Both Trudy and Norval are indicted by these sentiments, as neither one has done much to attain “greatness,” aside from permitting

themselves to be folded into the normalizing narratives from which they each previously had been excluded.

The mechanisms that “thrust” such an acceptable status on the couple extend beyond the behind-the-scenes machinations of the governor, and Sturges briefly depicts the national newspaper industry<sup>31</sup> as working to normalize the “miracle” results of Trudy’s deviance. Near the end of the film, Sturges includes a montage of newspaper headlines, the first of which declares, “SEXTUPLETS BORN IN MID-WEST,” while another proclaims, “SIX! ALL BOYS! SIX!” An additional newspaper links the sextuplets to the war effort with the headline, “NATURE ANSWERS TOTAL WAR,” and the article’s explanatory subheadline reads, “PLATOON BORN IN MIDWEST.” Together, these newspapers assign the Midwest a very particular identity within the 1940s context. First, labeling the sextuplets as “nature” responding to the manmade destruction of World War II echoes the perception of the Midwest as an anachronistic, past-oriented space; only a region closely linked to nature could produce such a

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<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, the Lynds also note the conforming function of the newspapers that circulate in Muncie. They write, “It is largely taken for granted in Middletown that the newspapers, while giving information to the reading public as best they may, must not do it in any way that will offend their chief supporters,” namely, the “business class” (475). The Lynds observe a suppression of “adverse news about prominent business class families” (476), and they write that “in any given controversy the two leading papers may be expected to support the United States in any cause, the business class rather than the working class, the Republican party against any other, but especially against any ‘radical’ party” (476-477). Through this selective and biased reporting, the Muncie newspapers shape the values of the citizens, who are made to imagine that an ideological consensus exists within the community, which functions as a micro version of Benedict Anderson’s discussion of the newspaper in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson describes the individual “ceremony” of reading the daily newspaper as one in which the reader “is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. . . . fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” (35-36).

“miracle,” and the diametrical opposition of the pastoral Midwest to modernity persists in these headlines. The “miracle” of a large birth conjures up associations with bountiful harvests, so it must occur in a region often represented with images of rural labor. Secondly, the newspapers immediately declare that the male sextuplets are to be a platoon. Although this may be attributed partly to the wartime context, the headline also presumes that Midwestern males must perform physical labor of some sort. In this case, their labor will involve patriotic sacrifice, yet another allusion to the way in which the region is configured as the “most” American of spaces. By including this brief montage of headlines, Sturges outlines the scope of the mutually supporting mechanisms that reify a sanitized, “official” version of the Midwest: from gossipy neighbors to the state governor to the national media, the Midwest’s identity and its inhabitants are subjected to a massive regulatory operation, one that delineates approved behaviors, while subsuming deviance beneath a veneer of normative values.

Sturges presents restrictions on movement as being necessary to sustain the superficial appearance of order within Morgan’s Creek. With the exception of the departing soldiers, the borders of the town seemingly are impermeable, and even their excursion is something of a nostalgic return to the origins of white expansion across the American continent. That is, the only movement permitted in the film is a return by patriotic males to the site of original departure – at least if the region’s history is reduced solely to its occupation by European settlers – that eventually resulted in the dysfunctional and constricted Midwestern culture of the 1940s. The remainder of the townspeople are trapped and subjected to burdensome ideological dictates that are designed to impose order on the community. In Chapter One, I discussed how Turner

viewed the closing of the frontier as a turn inward for the United States, one that situated the Midwest as the fulcrum of this motion. Turner configured the Midwest as a space of nostalgic desire that bore the burden of the cultural rot or decay that ensued from limitations on the nation's ability to expand. A preoccupation with restricted movement also pervades *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, and Sturges's fascinating use of tracking shots adds a complex formal dimension to this concern.

Sturges generally adheres to classical Hollywood shooting conventions and keeps his camera stationary for most of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*; however, there are five major scenes in which the camera is untethered, as Sturges strategically utilizes lengthy tracking shots to integrate his concern with movement into the very form of the film itself. Each scene that features these extended camera movements – tracking shots that are absent elsewhere in the film – depicts characters physically moving while plotting ways in which they might react against various social restrictions and resolve personal problems. These scenes feature the following durations and narrative events: a nearly four-minute long take in which Trudy embarks on a date with Norval as a cover to attend the military dance which her single father Edmund (William Demarest) had forbidden her from attending; a minute and a half long take in which Emmy and Trudy create a plan to trick Norval into proposing to Trudy; a three-minute sequence comprised of several tracking shots featuring Trudy confessing to Norval that she is married and pregnant; a two-minute long take that concludes with Norval developing the ill-fated marriage by proxy scheme in which he will pose as Trudy's unknown husband so that she will have a marriage certificate to attain a divorce and then remarry Norval under his own name; finally, a two-minute long take that functions as a pseudo-tracking shot in which Norval

and Trudy finalize the details of the false marriage plan while seated in a car with rear projection used to suggest motion.

Dickos writes that “the sheer frantic energy expended in Sturges’ world illustrates our American spirit – our need always to be moving somewhere – and his characters, pushing and shoving their way across the screen become part of the uncontrollable momentum gathered by this spirit” (viii). This conception of the “American spirit” appears to be informed by Turner’s views, yet Dickos neglects to mention the frontier theorist or to examine the crucial tracking shots in *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* beyond observing that they “impassively take note of the various images of small-town life” (110). By contrast, I contend that the tracking shots in these five scenes reflect a fantasy of escape from the oppressive narratives imposed on the inhabitants of Morgan’s Creek, as well as from the accompanying cultural stagnation that is endemic to the town in particular and the Midwest in general. Perhaps Sturges’s most devastating critique within the film is the fact that the extensive movement of the characters and cameras during these scenes never actually produces distance or separation from sources of conflict. Instead, these characters’ movements – dutifully tracked by Sturges’s camera – expose the fishbowl quality of Morgan’s Creek, as every depiction of wandering consistently leads nowhere except back to where the characters began. Furthermore, this inability to transcend the spatial boundaries of Morgan’s Creek reflects the temporal frustrations of the nostalgic subject, whose yearning for the past produces a looping desire circuit. Sturges thus expands his critique of rigid narratives about the Midwest by spatially representing their neurosis-producing effects (as opposed only to showing the way in which they produce Norval’s physical spasms). The individual citizens subject to

such regional norms are compelled into motion, but perpetually find that their movement is stifled.

Following the 1920s, Shortridge observes an ebb and flow of criticism directed towards the region, and he writes, “The decades of the 1930s and 1940s are difficult to assess in terms of regional imagery, for the period clearly was a transitional one, and the arguments are often contradictory” (62). Overall, Shortridge notes that “the consensus of observers throughout the late 1930s and the 1940s was that there had been a loss of regional vitality” (64). With *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, Sturges joins this chorus by depicting the many layers of entrapment and restriction that are brought to bear on the fictional Midwestern town’s residents. Nearly all of the major characters spend time scheming about, for instance, how to trap one another in marriage or how to escape persecution by the watchful eyes of their fellow citizens and white male community leaders, including the lawyer, newspaper editor, and state governor. Sturges exposes the constructed nature of the normalizing narratives that circulate about the Midwest, particularly through the framing scenes with the intrusive Governor McGinty, who rewrites history to fit scripted ideals. Moreover, Sturges critiques the deranging effects of compulsory conformity through Norval’s physical dysfunction and with numerous wandering tracking shots, the duration of which belies actual spatial progress. The claustrophobic space of Morgan’s Creek provides perhaps the most thorough interrogation of the restrictive spatial dynamics and regional narratives that contributed to the Midwest’s stagnating image as the mid-century approached.

*Native Son*

In “Depression Culture: The Dream of Mobility” (1996), Morris Dickstein discusses the “lightheartedness and frivolity” (236) of much popular entertainment in the 1930s, and he explains, “The fantasy culture of the 1930s . . . is all about movement, not the desperate simulation of movement we find in the road stories but movement that suggests genuine freedom” (238). Furthermore, Dickstein argues that “the real dream of the expressive culture of the 1930s was not money and success, not even elegance and sophistication, but mobility, with its thrust toward the future” (239). As I have contended throughout this chapter, a preoccupation with movement and mobility – both socially and geographically – particularly underpins Midwestern narratives during the Great Depression and World War II. Published in 1940, but set in the 1930s, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* engages with issues of spatial restriction and the ways in which essentialist regional narratives (especially those featuring ideals relating to gender, race, and class) produce derangement in Midwesterners. Most importantly, within the context of this project, *Native Son* exists as a text that belies the Midwest’s popular image in two ways: the narrative is confined to the urban space of Chicago, and it details the tribulations of an African American protagonist, Bigger Thomas. By reading Wright’s novel as a Midwestern text, *Native Son* both affirms and complicates conventional representations of the region.

As detailed in my Introduction chapter, James Shortridge observes that Midwestern cities have been considered to be “outside the context of regional labels” (56) in American culture, partially because of increasing “racial conflict and industrial collapse” (68) in such urban spaces as the twentieth century progressed. Victoria Johnson

similarly expounds the peculiar relationship between the Midwest's popular image and race, as the region simultaneously "symbolizes the ideal nation" and "functions as an object of derision" (5). These dual and seemingly irreconcilable roles relate to the Midwest's perceived racial character, and Johnson explains that

the persistent association of "midwesternness" as "white" is critical to the region's revaluation – particularly in moments of social upheaval and trauma – as 'home' of 'authentic' cultural populism and traditional U.S. values. . . . Imagined in this way, the Heartland Midwest underscores the nation's historic and ongoing, systemic racism while also functioning as the site upon which to transfer or "locate" the culture's possessive investment in whiteness. The Heartland thus offers a myth through which the nation reifies racism as the status-quo, *and* by which national discourse disavows racism, proclaiming enlightened ideals that stand in direct contrast to those imagined to inhere in the region. (18 emphasis in original)

By configuring the Midwest as "white" and lacking racial heterogeneity, it becomes a derided "other" region that contains the worst elements of the nation, while also being the most representative of American values. With the regional perceptions detailed by Shortridge and Johnson firmly ingrained in the cultural imagination, how might a text such as *Native Son* be resituated within a Midwestern context?

A possibility emerges from Wright himself, whose description of *Native Son*'s Chicago setting links the novel to Turner's frontier theories. In "How 'Bigger' Was

Born” (1940), an oft-referenced companion piece to *Native Son*, Wright describes the Midwestern metropolis of Chicago as

the fabulous city in which Bigger lived, an indescribable city, huge, roaring, dirty, noisy, raw, stark, brutal; a city of extremes: torrid summers and sub-zero winters, white people and black people, the English language and strange tongues, foreign born and native born, scabby poverty and gaudy luxury, high idealism and hard cynicism! A city so young that, *in thinking of its short history, one’s mind, as it travels backward in time, is stopped abruptly by the barren stretches of wind-swept prairie!* But a city old enough to have caught within the homes of its long, straight streets the symbols and images of man’s age-old destiny, of truths as old as the mountains and seas, of dramas as abiding as the soul of man itself! A city which has *become the pivot* of the Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern poles of the nation. (453 emphasis added)

Wright’s reflection on Chicago’s past prompts a nostalgic turn “backward in time,” and he locates the city’s origins within “the barren stretches of wind-swept prairie,” an image that conjures up associations with both Turner and the Midwest’s pastoral identity. Turner establishes the Midwest as the fulcrum of the nation’s coiling turn inward, a development that results from the end of frontier expansion. In this passage, Wright affirms that the Midwest functions as the fulcrum of the nation, and he further identifies Chicago as the very “pivot” of that turning motion, the precise point in which the rot of constriction and restricted movement originates.

Wright immediately immerses readers in Bigger's "life lived in cramped limits" (338) during the novel's first scene, in which the troubled protagonist and his mother, brother, and sister contend with a rat invading their tiny, one-bedroom apartment. This claustrophobic space is merely one of several ways in which Wright presents Bigger and all of the members of his impoverished African American community as being enmeshed in a restrictive network of systematized racism. Throughout *Native Son*, Wright shows that racism is institutionalized through housing discrimination and geographic segregation,<sup>32</sup> which fragment Bigger's sense of identity and prompt him to perform different versions of himself depending on the locale. In "Social Demarcation and the Forms of Psychological Fracture in Book One of Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (2010), Matthew Elder explores the causes of this divided self and explains that Bigger "struggles with negotiating the different formulations of his identity, which are thrown into disarray by a segregated, inequitable, and frequently hostile society" (31). As such, Elder argues that Wright's novel reveals "the psychological pressure of existing in an environment that

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<sup>32</sup> Depictions of these issues have been a major element in several other texts that focus on African American experiences in Chicago, including Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) and Bernard Rose's horror film, *Candyman* (1992). The former text details the challenges faced by the Younger family, who purchase a home in a mostly white neighborhood. They quickly are offered a bribe not to move there by Karl Linder, a representative of their prospective community. Linder continually refers to the Youngers as "you people" (114, 116, 119, 146, 149) and explains that, although "racial prejudice simply doesn't enter into it," he and his white neighbors believe that "Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities" (118 emphasis in original). *Candyman* similarly deals with racial and class segregation. The narrative revolves around the infamous Cabrini Green housing project, in which a supernatural entity known as "Candyman" is said to reside and to perpetrate violence in response to his murder at the hands of a lynch mob years earlier. Beyond critiquing Cabrini Green as a failure of modernist architecture, Rose also calls attention to the layout of the highways cutting through Chicago, which serve as additional borders between neighborhoods.

demands the artificial adoption of so many different roles” (35).<sup>33</sup> Over the course of the narrative, Wright consistently reiterates some degree of disconnect between Bigger’s internal and external states. At times, Bigger uses violent threats to mask fear around his friends, and he adopts an inarticulate and inexpressive façade in the presence of wealthy white people, such as the Dalton family, for whom he works as a chauffeur. After inadvertently killing Mary Dalton and then disposing of her body in the family’s furnace,<sup>34</sup> Bigger develops a fake ransom scheme to account for the daughter’s

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<sup>33</sup> For instance, when Bigger first reports for work as the chauffeur for the wealthy and white Dalton family, the boisterous personality on display around his friends is replaced by a much more stoic performance. As Elder observes, “The change, though not unexpected, is unsettling nonetheless and all the more striking here because these scenes are proximately juxtaposed with the vivid scenes of Bigger’s volatile aggression and reckless bravado. He speaks the simpleton dialect expected of him and appropriate to the role that white society has circumscribed for him. . . .” (40). In “Bigger’s Divided Self: Violence and Homosociality in *Native Son*” (2009), Masaya Takeuchi also addresses how “Bigger’s identity splits into two conflicted selves, an assertive one among blacks and a submissive one in front of whites” (56). Takeuchi elaborates, “Bigger attempts to balance his submissive self, which is thoroughly conditioned by whites, by asserting control over others. . . . [His] sadistic behaviors are the product of a frustrated manhood that ultimately seeks expression in a violent sexual assault” (63). Although Bigger is quite distinct from Norval in *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*, both characters are compelled to adopt unnatural mannerisms because of normalized expectations relating to race and gender, respectively.

<sup>34</sup> In “Sewer, Furnace, Air Shaft, Media: Modernity Behind the Walls in *Native Son* and *Manhattan Transfer*” (2010), Kate Marshall provides a fascinating reading of the “infrastructural modernity” (56) evident through Wright’s attentiveness to physical structures and their effects on movement. Marshall writes,

Circulation in *Native Son* is always double-sided, and so it follows that the circulation system of the furnace relies on another form of circulation to operate. It also makes sense that in a novel so invested in movement, enclosure, and communication, a fiery furnace becomes both a way to locate these things explicitly and the occasion to reflect upon how they work. When the circulation of heat halts in the novel, it draws attention to the fact that the outside of the circulation system is another circulation system, albeit engaged with another medium. As the furnace reveals ventilation and combustion to be two aspects of a larger circulatory dynamic, the clogging of the furnace with body parts ensure that the

disappearance; these ill-advised machinations force Bigger to oscillate among personas at a more rapid pace, which causes further anxiety.

Eventually, Bigger's crime is discovered, and he attempts to hide from the police with his girlfriend Bessie, but the city grid easily is transformed into an ever-tightening surveillance network. Cut off from any escape outside of Chicago, Bigger moves among the abandoned and dilapidated "houses on the South Side" that were "homes once of rich white people, [but] now inhabited by Negroes or standing dark and empty with yawning black windows" (182). As the police close in on Bigger, Wright narrates,

How easy it would be for him to hide if he had the whole city in which to move about! They keep us bottled up here like wild animals, he thought.

He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the 'line.' No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live. (248-249)

The Dalton family is shown to profit from this racial segregation through ownership of multiple buildings on the South Side, including Bigger's decrepit tenement. During Bigger's trial, his lawyer Boris Max confronts Mr. Dalton about this practice, and the latter simply replies that "it's an old custom" to segregate and that he would be "underselling my competition" if he charged lower rent in areas of the city populated by white inhabitants (327-328).

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embeddedness of persons within these circulation systems will not go unnoticed. (67)

Even the infrastructure of buildings, as Marshall details, reflects the restrictive forces at work throughout *Native Son*.

Earlier in the narrative, Bigger tries to justify his extortion scheme because of Mr. Dalton's exploitative practices. Bigger reflects, "Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot" (174). While on the run, Bigger returns to the topic of housing discrimination and suggests that rich white people "had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die" (240). Bigger's usage of the word "rot" in these passages implies a linkage between movement and decay; when motion is inhibited, rot is produced. Here, Wright again echoes Turner's sentiments regarding the debilitating effects of limited expansion, but Wright also provides a necessary revision to the frontier theorist's persistent racism by highlighting racialized restrictions on movement – both socially and geographically – in the urban Midwest.

Wright's attentiveness to constriction extends beyond merely calling attention to racist housing segregation, and Bigger's personal confinement<sup>35</sup> throughout the narrative is mirrored by Wright's desire to confine readers to his protagonist's paranoid perspective in *Native Son*. In "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Wright explains, "Wherever possible, I told of Bigger's life in close-up, slow-motion, giving the feel of the grain in the passing of time. I had long had the feeling that this was the best way to 'enclose' the reader's mind

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<sup>35</sup> Many critics have commented on the vast range of restrictions in Bigger's life. For instance, in "Breaking Out of the Rooster Coop: Violent Crime in Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*" (2011), Sara D. Schotland writes, "Bigger is closed off from all avenues that lead out of the ghetto into the privileged world of meaningful work, political power, and material wealth" (16). In "Native Sun: Lightness and Darkness in *Native Son*" (2011), Eric Van Hoose perceives constriction within the very progression of the narrative, and he writes, "*Native Son* is built upon the structural principle of reversal. . . . the relative freedom of movement utilized by Bigger and his friends at the novel's opening has, by the novel's end, been replaced by his literal confinement and death" (51). Of course, the earlier "freedom" still is limited by the racist culture pervading Wright's depiction of Chicago.

in a new world, to blot out all reality except that which I was giving him” (459). Wright’s use of “close-up, slow-motion” to describe his portrait of Bigger has a decidedly cinematic connotation, which serves to situate the novel as a pictorial experience, one that configures the reader as a spectator forced to gaze upon horrifying images projected at an agonizing speed. As such, Wright’s desire to “enclose” the reader mimics the spatial constriction that deranges Bigger. Whether due to racism, class inequality, or simply the police systematically surveying Chicago, Bigger is enmeshed in a network of forces collaborating to fix him in a heavily regulated state, and Wright compels the reader to share in the intense anxiety produced by these circumstances.

In addition to influencing *Native Son*’s formal qualities, the cinema retains a crucial function within the narrative, where it serves as both a protective and formative space for Bigger’s damaged psyche. The full importance of the cinema, in fact, relates to the novel’s modernist context, and Wright displays an acute awareness of the power of mass culture during the 1930s to create and shape desire. When discussing the numerous real-life incarnations of Bigger Thomas that led to the creation of the fictional composite version, Wright suggests that these violently rebellious figures were “trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came . . . through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life” (439). To some degree, then, Bigger’s struggles to attain a cohesive self – while greatly exacerbated by racism – are indicative of the modern experience in general. Marshall Berman observes, “To be modern . . . is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one’s world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction. . . . To be a modernist is to make

oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom. . . .” (345 emphasis in original). Rather than being a stabilizing force that helps Bigger to be a “modernist,” the fantasy images within the dark and isolating space of the cinema further skew Bigger’s personal desires and engagement with his environment.<sup>36</sup> For instance, when Bigger travels to the Dalton residence for the first time, Wright notes that, “while walking through this quiet and spacious white neighborhood, he did not feel the pull and mystery of the thing as strongly as he had in the movie” (43). In this moment, Bigger considers the filmed images of the neighborhood to be more compelling than their actual ontological source, and this affinity for fantasy greatly informs his ever-shifting desires. Despite being surrounded by modern culture, Bigger is shown to lack the adaptability necessary to thrive in such conditions, which somewhat aligns him with the perceived anti-modern status of the nostalgically imagined Midwest.

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<sup>36</sup> The cinema works as both a temporary salve and damaging stimulus for Bigger’s ongoing frustrations while attempting to navigate the modern maelstrom. For example, in *Urban Confrontations in Literature and Social Science, 1848-2001: European Contexts, American Evolutions* (2010), Edward J. Ahern writes that, inside the cinema, Bigger is inculcated with “distorted information about race and financial success” (80), which produces desires that will remain unrealized in the harsh space of the city. By contrast, in “Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity” (2003), Jacqueline Stewart explains the concept of “reconstructive spectatorship, a formulation that seeks to account for the range of ways in which black viewers attempted to reconstitute and assert themselves in relation to the classical cinema’s racist social and textual operations” (653). Stewart goes on to discuss the “reconstructive spectatorship” of Bigger and Pauline Breedlove, the protagonist of Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Blue Eye* (1970). Stewart writes that the fictional pair “use the cinema to fill spaces in their lives that result from both their status as working-class African Americans with few social options and their status as migrants struggling to (re)construct themselves – physically and metaphysically – in new and often hostile urban environments” (669-670). As evident by these varied readings of Bigger’s encounters with the cinema and other aspects of mass culture, their precise effects are rather muddled, even while exerting a major influence on his perception of the world.

Bigger's unrealized desires partly suggest a nostalgic dimension because of his perpetual sense of longing throughout the narrative. Just as the nostalgic subject yearns for an inaccessible sense of authenticity located in an alternate space and time, Bigger's changing desires remain forever unavailable. Early in the novel, Bigger is asked by his friend Gus what he desires, and Wright describes his response: "'Anything,' Bigger said with a wide sweep of his dingy palm, a sweep that included all the possible activities of the world" (20). Later, Bigger simply has "an overwhelming desire to be alone" (41), but, following the death of Mary, he wants "the power to say what he had done without fear of being arrested; he wished that he could be an idea in their minds, that his black face and the image of his smothering Mary and cutting off her head and burning her could hover before their eyes as a terrible picture of reality which they could see and feel and yet not destroy" (130). While evading the police, Bigger reflects on the way in which modern culture influences his desires, and Wright narrates, "It was when he read the newspapers or magazines, went to the movies, or walked along the streets with crowds, that he felt what he wanted: to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black" (240). Images of physical dissolution – of Bigger transcending his body's corporeality and becoming a symbol of an obscured "reality" or blending seamlessly into Chicago's crowded mass – abound in these passages. Much like Bigger's view that filmed images have a more substantive "pull and mystery" than reality, his desires appear rooted in a fantasy that becoming an incorporeal symbol will enable an escape from physical restraints and permit a newfound ease of movement.

The desires detailed above reveal that Bigger holds a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the urban space of Chicago, as he alternately wishes to be apart from and be absorbed by the city and its inhabitants. In *Outsider Citizens: The Remaking of Postwar Identity in Wright, Beauvoir, and Baldwin* (2006), Sarah Relyea writes, “*Native Son* unfolds from a basic premise: in the modern world, one cannot grasp the complex whole or the lived experience of others” (22). Crucially, Wright presents this modern incommunicability and alienation as endemic to the Midwest’s ostensible cultural capital, Chicago, and a sense of environmental determinism<sup>37</sup> recurs throughout his novel. Bigger’s desires clearly are shaped by Chicago, yet realizing those desires seems impossible within that same space. According to Wright, Bigger “was hovering unwanted between two worlds – between powerful America and his own stunted place in life – and I took upon myself the task of trying to make the reader feel this No Man’s Land. . . . [Bigger] felt the *need* for a whole life and *acted* out of that need; that was all” (451 emphasis in original). As such, the relationship between Bigger’s internal disjuncture and intermediate cultural status is key to understanding why his initially nebulous desire for “anything” produces violent tendencies.

In addition to the social level at which the pervasive racism in American culture is reproduced and experienced, Bigger’s rage emerges from his unmet desires being stimulated by the desire-producing space of Chicago. Wright argues, “The urban

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<sup>37</sup> In *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (2006), Nicole Rafter discusses films that provide “bad-environment” (68) justifications for criminality, and her explanation is applicable to how Wright depicts Chicago in *Native Son*. Rafter observes that the criminals in such narratives “initially . . . are like everyone else: blank slates on which the social environment engraves behavioral patterns. Films of this type are highly deterministic; arguing that escape from one’s situational fate is unlikely or impossible, they offer their characters few alternate courses of action, a point they drive home with images of entrapment. . . .” (65-66).

environment of Chicago, affording a more stimulating life, made the Negro Bigger Thomases react more violently than even in the South. More than ever I began to see and understand the environmental factors which made for this extreme conduct” (442). Furthermore, Wright believes that “the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be affected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction” (442). Although these views are potentially problematic and reductive in their prediction of how individuals react to stimuli in everyday life – and Wright’s views on the original “Bigger Thomases” certainly veer towards a blend of dubious psychology and sociology – environmental determinism persistently characterizes much commentary about the Midwest, as evident in Turner’s claims about the “Americanizing” properties of the region. In this sense, Wright’s forceful depiction of racism and classism in Chicago overlaps with the critiques of less urban Midwestern locales in other texts from this general period, such as Sturges’s *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek*.

As Midwestern imagery evolved since the early twentieth century, the region itself very often was configured as a blank space, a formation that suggests interactions among negatives colliding with one another: in other words, the Midwest is a blank space operating on and reshaping the “blank slates” who enter it. Such transformative properties superficially may appear to be aligned with the rapid growth fostered by modernity. For instance, in the passage at the beginning of this chapter, Berman describes the flexibility – or even eagerness – to be altered continually as a necessary condition of the modern subject. Yet, depictions of the Midwest from this period present the region as

a static space that stubbornly resists change. *Middletown*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, and *Native Son* each present the Midwest as a space whose past-oriented character is bolstered by essentialist regional narratives that delimit acceptable parameters for Midwestern behaviors. Moreover, these restrictive norms symbolically are mirrored by physical enclosures within all three texts, as the Midwestern settings (excluding Chicago) are shown to be cut off from modern developments elsewhere, and their inhabitants cannot escape each locale's seemingly impenetrable borders.

The reductive Midwestern norms on display in this chapter's three primary texts foreclose the region's ability to be seen as "modern," and this quality exacerbates perceptions of the Midwest as a rotting, stagnating space. Turner had predicted that the "forces of reorganization" resulting from the nation's turn inward were transforming the United States into "a witches' kettle" (186), and the cultural rot presented in *Middletown*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, and *Native Son* each reflect this degraded status. The Lynds exclude all racial categories that may not be considered "white" from their conception of what constitutes an "average" American – and Midwestern, the supposed "common-denominator" of American regions – demographic. Sturges depicts how reified values about gender and the Midwestern family constrain movement and produce social and bodily turmoil. Wright examines the deranging effects of systemic racial and class-based discrimination and their production of physical, intellectual, and emotional entrapment. Clearly, Bigger is the victim of overtly racist attitudes and practices, but his violence also stems, in part, from a decided lack of adaptability within a modern environment. This development becomes increasingly prominent in Midwestern texts from the mid-century forward, as later chapters will address. Whether seeking to return

home or to transcend restrictive regional boundaries, though, the Midwest of the 1920s through the 1940s commonly is presented as a space that is resolutely anti-modern, and whose inhabitants either are impervious to or unable to cope with the transformative pressures of modernity.

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### Chapter Three:

#### “Neither Here Nor There”: Blank Identities and Nostalgic Landscapes in 1970s

#### Midwestern Films

Terrence Malick’s debut feature, *Badlands* (1973), enters its final act with protagonists Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) and Holly Sargis (Sissy Spacek) driving across the barren landscape of the Great Plains in order to escape the South Dakota police. In their attempted flight from the Midwest, though, the lethal couple is encumbered by the vast flatness of the borderlands between South Dakota and Montana, and their constant forward motion strangely seems to yield no actual spatial progress. As Kit and Holly journey further into this regional border, it increasingly appears to be an untraversable space, and its parameters expand indefinitely in all directions. With the desired “mountains of Montana” perpetually in the distance, Holly laments, “We lived in utter loneliness, neither here nor there. Kit said that ‘solitude’ was a better word, ‘cause it meant more exactly what I wanted to say. Whatever the expression, I told him we couldn’t go on livin’ this way.”

“Neither here nor there” is a particularly apt phrase for describing changes in depictions of the Midwest during the 1970s. Holly’s narration imagines the region as an indeterminate space, one in which its physical terrain is experienced as a nebulous environment resistant to the linearity of time. Indeed, Holly alternately might have qualified that she and Kit were occupying a time “neither now nor then.” Along with announcing the emergence of a major American director, *Badlands* also helped to introduce a new mode of cinematically representing the Midwest’s long association with

nostalgia. In this decade, several influential films began to render the region's nostalgic quality in at least two distinctive ways: by presenting the Midwest as a realm in which distinctions between past and present increasingly are impossible to discern; by showing Midwesterners to be blank slates who are compelled by nostalgia either to adopt stereotypical regional behaviors that mask an underlying absence of identity or to engage in violent acts intended to imbue the present with meaning.

This chapter identifies *Badlands* as a crucial and singular text among popular representations of the Midwest. Malick's film features a new approach to depicting Midwesterners and the nostalgic landscape that surrounds them, one that has proven to have a lasting influence across subsequent regional narratives. The importance of *Badlands* within a Midwestern context is due to the film blending the two emerging methods of presenting the region's nostalgic identity outlined above. Kit and Holly are blank slates who adopt and discard identities throughout the narrative, which unfolds in an environment that Malick reveals to be both spatially and temporally removed from other locales. The Midwest of *Badlands* is a space whose physical flatness is reflected in the deadpan personas of its inhabitants. In addition to *Badlands*, this chapter also considers two later films with similar thematic content: Werner Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977) and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). In *Stroszek*, Herzog fills his depiction of Wisconsin with looping, circular imagery that configures the Midwestern setting as one that is resistant to a linear progression of time; in *Halloween*, Carpenter's monstrous "boogeyman" figure of Michael Myers is perhaps the blindest Midwesterner ever depicted onscreen, and his shocking violence obscures the underlying nostalgia that compels him to terrorize his hometown in Illinois.

Although the settings of these three films may appear to be similar to the sparse terrain and small town environments that often denote the Midwest on film, they actually each contain a high degree of spatial and temporal abstraction that is concealed beneath traditional regional imagery. Together, these texts highlight a distinctive branch of Midwestern representations that begins to emerge in the 1970s. In such films, the Midwest is brought further into alignment with nostalgia's temporal dynamics by presenting the region's physical terrain as increasingly nebulous, as well as through depicting many Midwesterners as blanks who fill their innate vacancy with violence and superficial enactments of identity. This blend of abstract landscape and its performative inhabitants becomes particularly acute in cinematic depictions of the Midwest around the turn of the twenty-first century, as will be detailed in later chapters. Here, however, the focus is limited to the ways in which Malick, Herzog, and Carpenter set about undermining the stability of the region's normalized image as a placid environment filled with good-natured and simpleminded individuals.

The increasingly abstract version of the Midwest on display in *Badlands*, *Stroszek*, and *Halloween* reflects a significant change in how the region was being understood in American culture since the middle of the twentieth century. In *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (1989), James Shortridge identifies the 1950s as a period in which "a new perspective on the region emerged. This was nostalgia" (67). Shortridge argues that, as the twentieth century's second half progressed, nostalgia and the Midwest became more and more entwined in the American public's imagination, and he explains,

[S]mall towns and traditional farms, indeed the entire Middle-western culture, began to be labeled as quaint. Support for this viewpoint quickened in the mid 1960s, and by the early 1970s it was perhaps the dominant image that outsiders held about the region. From this perspective, the Middle West had become a museum of sorts. No up-and-coming citizen wanted to live there, but it had importance as a repository for traditional values. The Middle West was a nice place to visit occasionally and to reflect upon one's heritage. It was America's collective "hometown," a place with good air, picturesque farm buildings, and unpretentious "simple" people. (67-68)

This passage presents a striking spatial image of the Midwest's identity in American culture. By describing the Midwest as a "museum," Shortridge highlights a recurring configuration of the region as a realm that permits access to the past, which is a fundamentally nostalgic function. Essentially, the Midwest-as-museum image asserts that the regional space somehow sutures the separated past and present, as those who enter the Midwest experience a temporal collapse.

Portrayals of the Midwest as a linear time-defying museum literalize the ways in which previous texts linked the region and nostalgia. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the Midwest increasingly became perceived as actually housing the past and serving as something of an archive for American culture, rather than merely lagging behind the coasts in terms of being contemporary and trendy. As a "museum," the Midwest does not simply feature an anachronistic culture: the region enables and encourages a nostalgic engagement with time. Glimpses of these peculiar temporal

conditions appear throughout *Badlands*, *Stroszek*, and *Halloween*, as each of these films strongly features a complex, distinctly nostalgic relation to space and time.

### ***Badlands***

*Badlands* is set in the 1950s and loosely based upon the real life exploits of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, a teenage couple who embarked on a killing spree across Nebraska in late 1957 and early 1958 before being apprehended in Wyoming. Despite such specific reference points, an ahistorical quality permeates *Badlands*, which writer-director Terrence Malick describes as intentional. While discussing the film in a 1975 interview, Malick explains, “I tried to keep the 1950s to a bare minimum. Nostalgia is a powerful feeling; it can drown out anything. I wanted the picture to set up like a fairy tale, outside time, like *Treasure Island*. I hoped this would, among other things, take a little of the sharpness out of the violence but still keep its dreamy quality” (qtd. in Walker 83). Curiously, though, by working against nostalgia for the 1950s,<sup>38</sup> Malick instead produces a depiction of nostalgia in the abstract: that is,

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<sup>38</sup> In *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Fredric Jameson identifies the 1970s as the decade in which nostalgia for the 1950s became prominent in American popular culture. Jameson explains that “one tends to feel, that for Americans at least, the 1950s remain the privileged lost object of desire – not merely the stability and prosperity of a pax Americana but also the first naïve innocence of the countercultural impulses of early rock and roll and youth gangs. . . .” (19). In *Screening Nostalgia: Populuxe props and Technicolor aesthetics in contemporary American film* (2009), Christine Sprengler distinguishes between the “Fifties” as “the mythic, nostalgic construct” and the “1950s” as “the actual historical period of time between 1950 and 1959 and all of its social, political and cultural complexities” (39). Like Jameson, Sprengler identifies the 1970s as a period of renewed fascination with the “Fifties,” due in part to the “fiscal despair” of the later decade (47). Within this 1970s context, Malick’s

*Badlands* is saturated with a sense of temporal displacement that corresponds to the forever-desiring state of nostalgia, but the film does not feature a typical object of nostalgic desire. Kit and Holly both seek *something*, but they appear unable to articulate precisely what that might be.

The distinctive composition of the Midwest on display in *Badlands* is most evident in two ways: first, through presenting the Midwestern landscape as a nebulous and inescapable environment that is oppressive in its flatness; second, through the characters of Kit and Holly, both of whom are obstinately “blank,” even while committing murder and oscillating among various adopted personas. Throughout the narrative, this violent pair exhibits contradictory tendencies, as their murderous trek across South Dakota belies what appears to be an impulse to conform to “traditional” Midwestern imagery and values. Before returning to Kit and Holly’s peculiar identities, a closer examination of the regional venue for their behaviors is necessary.

A relationship among trauma, environment, and nostalgia is introduced immediately in *Badlands*, which opens with a medium dolly shot that circles around Holly as she plays with a dog on her bed. Holly’s aloof and disconnected narration – the first instance of the disjunctive voiceover that would become a recurring convention across Malick’s filmography – quickly complicates this brief scene by introducing the peculiar tone of the film:

My mother died of pneumonia when I was just a kid. My father had kept their wedding cake in the freezer for ten whole years. After the funeral, he gave it to the yardman. He tried to act cheerful, but he could never be

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debut is even more prescient and radical, as *Badlands* works against the 1950s nostalgia that only was beginning to develop in American popular culture.

consoled by the little stranger he found in his house. Then, one day, hoping to begin a new life away from the scene of all his memories, he moved us from Texas to Fort Dupree, South Dakota.

In *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: The Uses of Nostalgia* (2003), Vera Dika discusses Holly's opening narration, from which "a hollow thud results in emotional terms, subtly distancing us from the film we are watching" (57). Moreover, Dika writes that Holly's dispassionate reflection begins to reveal the way in which "nostalgia for the past is slowly being corrupted" (58) throughout *Badlands*. To expand upon these observations, Holly's voiceover highlights how Malick troubles nostalgia in multiple ways: by showing the nostalgic commemoration of events and attachment to random objects as being strained attempts to create meaning, especially for Kit; by depicting the way in which perceptions of the Midwest's nostalgic character are contingent upon imagining the region either as an environment offering refuge from past trauma or as a nebulous space of entrapment (or as both of these categories at once).

According to Holly, she and her father (Warren Oates) relocated to the Midwest so that he could escape "the scene of all his memories," and this statement suggests that the region functions as a blank canvas within which the past may be revised, elided, or erased entirely. In previous chapters, I outlined how the Midwest has been understood as a space of nostalgia from the first regular uses of the regional label in the early twentieth century. By the mid-century setting of *Badlands*, Holly's father believes that moving to the Midwest permits him to leave behind his personal nostalgic attachments because the region functions as a protective barrier from the personal traumas that are located elsewhere and else-when. Rather than Mr. Sargis nostalgically lamenting his own history,

the Midwest-as-museum (as described by Shortridge) provides him with access to a more general and positive American nostalgia that overwrites individual losses. Significantly, Holly's father works as a sign painter<sup>39</sup> touching up advertisements that have cracked and faded – a profession that entails covering up evidence of decay. Physical markers of temporal progression (such as a billboard's increasingly weathered state) are obscured, as Mr. Sargis transforms these artifacts of the past into vibrant images affirming the vitality of the present. This labor parallels the Midwest's perceived museum-like role of cultural archive in which the region preserves past modes of living and outdated values.

In "Killer Couples: From Nebraska to Route 666" (1999), Jack Sargeant provides a provocative description of how Malick abstracts the Midwest with shot compositions that depict the region as a nebulous realm:

While the narrative focuses on the transgression of the rule of law and entry into a zone of willful exclusion, of outsidership, the *mise-en-scene* reiterates this narrative trajectory of the borderless state. This is most apparent in the scenes set in the badlands, here the great plains are shot as an almost hellish infinity of flat, empty miles, mirrored by the flatness of the sky above them. . . . The geography is filmed to emphasise [sic] its collapse, until the horizon seems to vanish into pure flatness; world and

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<sup>39</sup> Dika provides an insightful reading of a scene in which Kit approaches Mr. Sargis, who is working on a billboard painting that "renders all objects on the same flat representational plane. Shown in long shot against a flat prairie landscape and cloud-filled blue sky, the effect is to equate the billboard and the film image itself as pictures" (60-61). For Dika, this spatial flattening is one of many instances that showcase Malick's "concern with the 'pictureness' of the image" (61). Nostalgia is an imagistic affliction, one that fosters desire for idealized or outright fabricated images of the past; the father's restoration work mirrors this nostalgic project, and, as Dika suggests, Malick himself slyly reflects on the cinema's nostalgic potential to preserve or brighten the vanished past.

sky as one massive blank canvas. Such a landscape can only ever be identified as borderless; as infinite; the end of distinction between sky and earth merely reiterating the collapse of other borders and boundaries within the narrative. (153-154)

Sargeant does not mention nostalgia, but the characteristics he attributes to the badlands reflect the nostalgic fantasy of simultaneity, in other words, the nostalgic yearning to eliminate the temporal separation of the past and present or the physical distance from desired locales. The objects of nostalgic desire forever are removed, but, as Sargeant suggests, Malick's depiction of the badlands configures the territory as one whose expansive quality seemingly collapses boundaries between here and there, now and then.

But even as this "borderless" and "infinite" landscape compresses experience and identity into flattened images, it fails to reconnect individuals with what they desire. In this sense, the badlands serve as the most perfect site of nostalgia. To enter this nebulous space is to seek access to lost objects of desire or to forget past trauma, but these borderlands merely reproduce longing and separation. After the scene in which Holly describes her father's nostalgic purpose for moving to the Midwest, Malick progressively reveals an unsettling effect of the region's presumed ability to grant its inhabitants a sort of nostalgia-induced amnesia regarding personal longing: once inside this nostalgic landscape, no exit appears possible, as evident in Kit and Holly's failed escape across the badlands. Malick shows that the true outcome of living within this environment is a compulsion to embody a nostalgic state, one that results in a profound yearning for an alternate existence that forever is lost in the past or deferred to the future.

In *Badlands*, the blankness of the Midwestern landscape proves to have a transformative effect upon those living within this nostalgia-producing space. Beyond the flat landscape expanding so as to be inescapable, it also renders some of its inhabitants as blank slates, which particularly is evident in the characters of Kit and Holly. In “Two Characters in Search of a Direction: Motivation and the Construction of Identity in *Badlands*” (2004), Hannah Patterson observes that Kit and Holly “are fundamentally lacking a strong or clear sense of *their own* identity. . . . Although they may appear motiveless, it is possible to view their actions in the film as motivated by their need to find, and more fully construct, identities for themselves” (25 emphasis in original). From this perspective, the superficial inscrutability of Kit and Holly is merely a façade covering the fact that they are individuals who yearn to attain some form of selfhood. How, though, are such obscured and unarticulated desires manifest in the film?

Dika discusses the search for identity in relation to the nostalgic genre elements<sup>40</sup> of *Badlands*, and she writes that Kit and Holly are “from ‘nowhere,’ but throughout the

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<sup>40</sup> To address the “critical attitude toward its material and the present” (56) in *Badlands*, Dika draws upon Jameson’s concept of the “nostalgia film.” Dika describes “nostalgia films” as “reconstructions of dead or dismantled forms, genres that are now returned after a period of absence or destruction. The films are thus better understood as *copies* whose originals are often lost or little known” (11 emphasis in original). In *Postmodernism*, Jameson links the replicative quality of the nostalgia film to the way in which such texts “restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation” (19). As such, Jameson writes that “the nostalgia film . . . approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image. . . .” (19). I include these definitions of “nostalgia film” in order to distinguish my own arguments from such conceptualizations. Although I do not dispute the validity of framing certain uses of generic conventions in cinema since the 1970s as “nostalgic,” my interest in the nostalgic qualities of *Badlands* is distinct from these concerns. As with all of the texts in this project, I explore the ways in which *Badlands* represents the relationship between nostalgia (as a general concept) and the film’s Midwestern setting. Within the regional

film they never get ‘somewhere.’ Instead these outlaws run across a landscape that does not accept them, not does it allow them in. They stand as paper cutouts against a flat, illusory, picture plane. And since they never desired material possessions, the only way they envisioned participating in the American dream was to *become the image*” (64 emphasis in original). Although Dika is correct to observe that Kit and Holly sometimes aspire to represent the “image” of outlaws in crime films, this is merely one of many identities that they adopt and discard, depending on the scene. Rather than a purely genre-oriented inspiration for their identity construction, Kit and Holly’s efforts are shaped by the Midwestern environment – in both a social and geographic sense – in which they reside. Consequently, Kit and Holly’s acts of identity construction may be categorized in three general ways: as attempts to infuse present events with nostalgic connotations via commemorative rituals and the fetishization of objects; as replications of imagery from popular culture (such as crime film conventions) and of behaviors normalized as “Midwestern”; as abrupt outbursts of violence whose seemingly inexplicable nature belies the ideological implications of such actions.

The first identity construction category is introduced via Holly’s opening narration in which she recounts her father’s treatment of his wedding cake, which must be understood as a nostalgic object. After preserving the cake for a decade, Mr. Sargis unceremoniously disposes of this memento. Such abrupt shifts in nostalgic attachments to objects recur throughout *Badlands*. Kit habitually assigns nostalgic meaning to random objects in an attempt to commemorate various personal events, only to compulsively

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context of my project, Malick’s appropriation and subversion of crime film conventions is less relevant than the way in which he imbues the Midwest’s landscape and various characters with nostalgia.

discard those items soon after. This fascination with objects is evident when Kit first appears onscreen while emptying garbage cans in the back alleys of Fort Dupree. In addition to filling the trash truck, Kit demonstrates a peculiar interest in what others have thrown out, and he explicitly comments on a dead dog, a pair of boots, and a collection of unpaid bills. Even on first viewing, Kit's assessment of these discarded objects seems like something other than merely a way to pass the time while enduring physical labor; indeed, Kit scrutinizes this detritus as if he were an alien figure befuddled by human behavior. Kit's analysis of the discarded items focuses on how that refuse might relate to one's identity, and his own persona remains predicated upon objects, visual appearance, and actions throughout the film. This externalization of identity stems from Malick presenting Kit as a "past-less" character, one who has no history to be nostalgically mourned or restored.

To compensate for a lack of identity – for being a resolutely blank individual – Kit compulsively imbues random objects with nostalgic significance, and he also commemorates mundane occurrences with symbolic rituals or statements. These instances include: the launching of a red balloon with personal mementos early in Kit and Holly's courtship, a later instance in which Kit buries some of his and Holly's possessions in a bucket while crossing the badlands, and a pile of rocks that Kit constructs beside his car as a monument to mark his capture by the police.<sup>41</sup> In "The

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<sup>41</sup> Regarding the bucket, Holly observes that Kit "said that nobody else would know where we put 'em, and that we'd come back someday, maybe, and they still be sittin' here, just the same, but we'd be different. And if we'd never got back, well, somebody might dig 'em up 1,000 years from now, and wouldn't they wonder." Kit's plan to return and unearth the time capsule indicates that he believes he will become nostalgic in the future; as such, he preserves objects in the present so that a link to the current moment will be possible as time passes. Objects that are mundane in the present presumably will

Highway Kind: *Badlands*, Youth, Space and the Road” (2004), Neil Campbell addresses many of these instances and writes that “Kit marks his ‘history’ with symbolic gestures. . . . With these acts, Kit records his life by inscribing his otherwise anonymous identity into space for others to know. . . .” (43). While accurate, Campbell does not go far enough in observing how intrinsic such gestures are to Kit’s understanding of what identity actually is. Kit’s persistent reduction of identity to exterior traits and actions is indicative of an imagistic engagement with reality. Significantly, such a perspective is aligned with nostalgic desire, which seeks to preserve or invent an idealized veneer that glosses over the imperfections of the past. In the case of Kit, his body functions as a hollow husk that he adorns with signs of an internal identity that remains forever absent. Whether marking the physical terrain surrounding him or incongruously wearing cowboy boots as a garbage collector,<sup>42</sup> Kit’s identity continually is constructed through physical tokens and the ritualistic commemoration of various events.

Kit’s commemorative actions are intended to transform his body into an artifact, one that superficially displays the meaningfulness that his existence otherwise lacks. One

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be bursting with nostalgic meaning in the future. This attitude about the future reappears when Holly decides to abandon Kit and surrender to the police in the badlands. Initially, Kit becomes angry, but he then abruptly offers her a “second chance” by proposing an overtly romanticized and symbolic reunion in the future: “Twelve noon, the Grand Coulee Dam, New Year’s Day, 1964. You meet me there. Now you got that?” For Kit, the future will feature the meaningfulness that he is unable to attain in the present.

<sup>42</sup> Early in the film, Kit expresses relief about getting a job at a feedlot because he had been wearing cowboy boots as a garbage collector. With the new job, Kit says, “Well, at least nobody could [sic] get on me about wearing these boots anymore.” Patterson observes that “Kit gives no clear indication as to why he wears the boots – what they may or may not symbolically mean to him,” and this lack of explanation suggests that “Kit *does not know* why he wears the boots” (26 emphasis in original). Rather than indicating uncertain reasons for wearing boots, however, Kit’s dismay at the skeptical reactions of others reflects his frustrations that adopting the appearance of an iconic figure – that of the mythic American cowboy – has not actually granted him that identity.

of the first instances of this behavior occurs after the first time that Kit and Holly have sex. Kit picks up a rock and states, “We should crunch our hands with this stone. That way we’d never forget what happened today. . . . I’m gonna keep [the stone] for a souvenir.” Much like Kit’s alterations of the landscape to mark his existence, in this scene he expresses a belief that physically branding his body (and Holly’s) is necessary to denote significant life changes. Again, identity is considered to be detectible through external signs. When Holly fails to assent to Kit’s symbolic mutilation plan, he defaults to fetishizing a mundane object: in this case, the rock. Later, Kit adds a ritualistic element to his and Holly’s temporary occupation of a rich man’s home while evading the police. Upon entering the home, Kit rings a bell and proclaims, “Next time I ring that means it’s time to clear out.” Again and again, Kit grasps for significance until ultimately transforming his own body and personal effects into nostalgic objects after being apprehended by the police. Before Kit and Holly are flown back to South Dakota, the duo is held at a military base, where Kit ceremoniously gives his comb, lighter, and a pen to various police officers. During Holly’s final bit of narration, she reveals that Kit was sentenced to death in the electric chair and subsequently donated his body to science. In being captured and executed, Kit’s body – the physical exterior that he believes displays one’s identity – is transformed into an artifact, a remnant of the past akin to the various objects he sought to ascribe with nostalgic connotations.

The linkage between nostalgia and death is most evident through Kit donating his body to science, and this association projects an added degree of desperation and tragedy onto the numerous ritualistic acts earlier in the film. Because Holly’s past is presented as not worth remembering and Kit’s history is entirely missing or forgotten, the couple

seeks to transform their present into a temporal moment that one day will be nostalgically desired. In this sense, the objects that are collected in the narrative and the numerous ritualistic moments are efforts to invent a past that may be nostalgically mourned and commemorated in the future. Kit and Holly are not actually nostalgic for any specific thing, but because they equate desire with identity, the blank duo continuously engages in a mimicry of nostalgic longing. Consequently, the murderous couple's behavior might be described as preemptive nostalgia, as Kit and Holly do not mourn or desire the past; by imagining having nostalgic desire in the future, however, they seek to instill the present with meaning – even if that meaning will not be recognized until a later time. In the interim between the lived present and the presumably nostalgic future, Kit and Holly adopt and enact various personas in order to substitute for their lack of internal identities.

Despite Kit shooting eight people<sup>43</sup> over the course of the narrative, Patterson observes that he and Holly's general politeness “signals their desire not only to be liked and accepted but also to conform to the rules of convention” (34). Certainly, the use of polite language provides an unsettling contrast to the lethal violence wielded by Kit. For instance, when Mr. Sargis discovers Kit packing a suitcase for Holly, Kit demurely states, “Hi. . . . I got a gun here, sir.” Kit then shoots the unarmed Mr. Sargis, who had merely walked downstairs. Later, as Kit directs a young couple into a storm shelter at gunpoint, he respectfully inquires, “I’m gonna have to keep my eye on you, though. You don’t mind?” Such politeness is cosmetic during encounters in which Kit clearly occupies a

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<sup>43</sup> At least five of these individuals are killed, but it is uncertain whether the other victims are dead or injured. In one scene, Kit herds a young couple into a tornado shelter and then fires blindly through the doors. He turns to Holly and says, “Think I got ‘em? [. . .] Well, I’m not going down there and look [sic].” The final victim is a police officer who lands in a helicopter near Kit and Holly in the badlands. Kit shoots him, but the extent of the officer's injuries are not clear.

higher position of power than his soon-to-be victims. The desire “to be liked” can only account partially for the behaviors of the aloof protagonists.

Malick continually reaffirms the blankness of Kit and Holly by showing the pair cycling through a variety of personas that temporarily are adopted and then quickly discarded. In this way, the couple exists as chameleon-like individuals who absorb and refract the iconography of popular culture and normalized Midwestern values and imagery. As detailed in previous chapters, the Midwest commonly is presented as a “pastoral” landscape in which rugged individualists share communal goals while retaining the idealized traits that Frederick Jackson Turner located in American frontier spaces. The primacy of white masculinity, physical labor, and traditional family formations are crucial elements of this version of the Midwest. With the characters of Kit and Holly, Malick offers a critique of these Midwestern images by highlighting the violence and reactionary values that underpin such nostalgic conceptions of the region. Kit and Holly are overtly performative subjects, as there is no developed sense of self beneath their outer appearance and actions. The duo’s blankness both reflects and results from the flattened Midwestern environment on which they act out their adopted identities, and the various performances of Kit and Holly accentuate their belief – especially Kit’s – in the exteriority of identity.

The most self-consciously performative moment of the film occurs when Kit and Holly flee Fort Dupree following the murder of Mr. Sargis. In voiceover, Holly states that she and Kit adopt pseudonyms, and she explains, “His name would be James, mine would be Priscilla.” These chosen names correspond to James Dean and Priscilla Presley, and Kit’s resemblance to the icon of teen rebellion is articulated by both Holly and a

police officer in the film.<sup>44</sup> Malick undercuts the ostensibly rebellious allusions to Dean, though, by showing the fugitive “James” and “Priscilla” recreating a domestic idyll while on the run. After killing Holly’s father, Kit burns down the Sargis home; the destruction of the domestic space merely precedes a reenactment of domesticity while Kit and Holly hide out in a wooded area. Sargeant describes this sequence as “a simulation of domestic bliss” (152), and the blank pair build an elaborate treehouse and interact as an anachronistic, frontier-like version of husband and wife. Kit installs booby-traps around their living quarters and hunts, while Holly gathers water and other supplies. Yet, Holly’s narration reiterates the temporary and tenuous status of this performed domestic tranquility. At one point, Holly wonders about the appearance of “the man I’ll marry,” who clearly is not Kit and who exists in an undetermined future moment.<sup>45</sup> As with all of the identities tried out by Kit and Holly, the domestic bliss of “James” and “Priscilla” proves to be fleeting.

Even when murdering people and playing at being James Dean or a generic crime film character, Kit persistently speaks authoritatively about mundane topics and advocates social conformity. Upon first encountering Holly, Kit asks her to take a walk

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<sup>44</sup> Kit’s attire and hairstyle alternately resemble Dean’s appearance in Nicholas Ray’s *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and George Stevens’s *Giant* (1956). Dika contextualizes Malick’s appropriation of Dean within the film’s 1970s period of production, and she writes, “The allusions to James Dean in *Badlands* . . . is [sic] not meant to ridicule the original star, nor is [sic] it meant to blankly re-present his image, as might be the effect of other copies. . . . *Badlands* thus evokes a marginalized James Dean, one whose profession is that of garbage man, and whose rebel status is transformed to that of sociopath” (58-59). Kit’s appropriation of Dean is yet further evidence of his own need to draw upon preexisting imagery for an identity.

<sup>45</sup> During the forest sequence, Holly’s narration also reveals a sadistic desire to witness violence: “We had our bad moments like any couple. Kit accused me of only bein’ along for the ride, while at times, I wished he’d fall in the river and drown, so I could watch.” This voyeuristic statement perhaps explains why Holly is so willing to accompany Kit on his killing spree without much complaint.

with him because “Oh, I got some stuff to say. Guess I’m kinda lucky that way. Most people don’t have anything on their minds, do they?” Kit’s near-incessant pontificating reveals few independent or complex ideas, and he continually reaffirms his existence as a reflector for generic, “traditional” values. For example, while collecting garbage, Kit critiques a woman for habitually throwing away unpaid bills. A few scenes later, he sees a bag on the ground while walking with Holly and admonishes, “If everybody did that, the whole town’d be a mess.” Clearly, such statements stand in stark opposition to Kit’s murderous actions, yet he does not acknowledge any contradictions between his stated values and actual behavior.

Kit’s performed rebelliousness further contrasts with his articulated values while hiding out at the rich man’s house. For the second time in the film,<sup>46</sup> Kit makes a Dictaphone recording – yet one additional artifact to mark his existence – and states:

Listen to your parents and teachers. They got a line on most things, so don’t treat ‘em like enemies. There’s always an outside chance you could learn something. Try to keep an open mind. Try to understand the viewpoints of others. Consider the minority opinion, but try to get along with the majority of opinion once it’s accepted. Of course, Holly and I have had fun, even if it has been rushed. And, uh, so far, we’re doin’ fine. Hadn’t got caught. Excuse the grammar.

In this baffling endorsement of conformity, Kit encourages his imagined audience to yield to authority figures, to embrace “the majority of opinion,” and to be attentive to

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<sup>46</sup> The first instance occurs between Kit killing Mr. Sargis and burning down the house. This recording is intended to be a red herring for investigators, as Kit states that he and Holly decided to kill themselves, and the record is left playing outside of the burning home.

proper grammar while speaking. The deference to authority undermines Kit's status as a murderous outlaw by showing that role to be a performance, one whose deadly effect on others is assimilated into the killer's warped attitudes. Kit believes that killing is a part of playing the outlaw role, and he generally abides by idiosyncratic rules of engagement with others.

Holly explains Kit's philosophy about the police after he murders three bounty hunters who locate their treehouse hideout, and she narrates, "Kit felt bad about shooting those men in the back. But he said they'd come in like that and would've played it as down and dirty as they could. . . . With lawmen, it would've been different. They were out there to get a job done, and they deserved a fair chance. But not a bounty hunter." During the police pursuit of Kit through the badlands, Kit extends a "fair chance" to the pursuing officers to such an extent that he declines to even fire his gun at their car, instead shooting haphazardly without aim through the driver side window. Following Kit's surrender, he praises the police officers for having "performed like a couple of heroes" during their pursuit and apprehension of him. These comments and behaviors indicate that Kit is disconnected from his own violent actions and show that he has an innate respect for authority figures, despite being unlawful himself. Like the "James" persona, Kit's "unlawfulness" may be considered as merely one temporary identity.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Despite Kit being captured, Patterson claims that he "has managed . . . to develop a clearer sense of identity, one which does not fit into society but is an identity nonetheless" (35). Patterson observes that Kit's "defined role" is that of "dangerously criminal and psychologically fascinating" (35). Perhaps from the perspective of his captors, Kit's identity is that which Patterson describes. Within the broader context of the film, however, it merely appears as the last identity shown to audiences, but not really any change from the Kit on display at the start of the film. From the beginning to the end of *Badlands*, Kit remains a blank slate who temporarily is locked into an identity

Kit's deference to authority is mirrored by his admiration for wealth. With the exception of the rich man and his maid, Kit shoots everyone else who he encounters while on the run. The lack of violence perpetrated against the rich man and his maid is exceptional and suggests that Kit's conformity is linked to an aspirational class-consciousness. Malick confirms this notion and states that the rich man is "the only man [Kit] doesn't kill, the only man he *sympathizes* with, and the one least in need of sympathy. It's not infrequently the people at the bottom who most vigorously defend the very rules that put and keep them there" (qtd. in Walker 82 emphasis in original). Certainly, Kit is no class warrior, but his blankness and continual adoption of personas stem from an impulse to obscure what he actually is: an impoverished, unskilled worker living in a rural Midwestern community. As a physical laborer, Kit is socially marginalized, but by articulating generic values, emulating James Dean's image, and adopting visual signs of wealth, Kit attempts to transcend the limitations of his class. For example, Kit and Holly steal nonessential items from the rich man in order to masquerade as having wealth. When leaving the mansion in the stolen Cadillac, Kit wears the rich man's Panama hat and Holly's head is draped in a veil, creating an image that Campbell describes as that of "a parodic married couple" (46), which recalls their performance of frontier domesticity earlier in the film. Kit even dons the hat while awaiting capture by the police, as if to mark his body as being even more exceptional than that of a common criminal. Inside the police car, one of the officers abruptly lifts the hat from Kit's head and throws it out the window in a gesture that visually restores Kit to his lower class status. Kit responds in his typical deadpan intonation, "You tossed my hat out the

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performance, but who also demonstrates that he will continue to oscillate among personas.

window,” but he may as well have stated that the officer deflated his flimsily performed identity as a rich man.

Given Kit’s compulsion to conform, his violence initially registers as inexplicable, but must be considered in relation to the character’s commemorative acts and performative gestures. So what might be potential meanings of Kit’s violence? In “The Enigma of Senseless Violence” (2000), Anton Blok describes “senseless violence” as “cases where easily recognizable goals and obvious relationships between means and ends are absent,” but he qualifies that, instead of dismissing all violence “as senseless and irrational, we should consider it as a changing form of interaction and communication, as a historically developed cultural form of *meaningful* action” (24 emphasis in original). Blok adds, “Widely different forms of violence routinely labeled as ‘senseless’ or ‘irrational’ are governed by rules, prescription, etiquette, and protocol. Ritualization characterizes any number of violent operations. . . . If there are any goals involved, they can only be reached in a special, prescribed, expressive, indeed *ritualized* way” (24-25 emphasis in original). Blok’s attentiveness to the ritualistic nature of some forms of violence – even of the “senseless” variety – suggests that routinization itself may be a purpose of violence.

As detailed in this chapter, Kit certainly is guided by individualistic codes of conduct, as he tries to ascribe meaning to his listless life. Accordingly, Kit compulsively ritualizes mundane developments in his daily existence and philosophizes about propriety, particularly in relation to violence. When being pursued by the police, for instance, Kit performs as if he is trying to kill the officers by firing his gun, but he neglects to aim because the car chase is a form of play-acting; Kit even pulls over and

shoots out his own tire so that the police can catch up and apprehend him peacefully and without resistance. Of course, Kit diverges from this etiquette of violence when killing Mr. Sargis and shooting blindly at the young couple he imprisons in a tornado shelter. Such inconsistency points towards another possible explanation for Kit's violence.

In *Violence* (2008), Slavoj Žižek briefly addresses the 2005 French suburban riots, and his interpretation of these events has applications for Kit's violence in *Badlands*. Žižek classifies the violence of the Paris riots as "a zero-level protest, a violent protest act which demands nothing" (75). Žižek's emphasis on the demand of "nothing" calls attention to how framing violence as "meaningful" often is attached to its deployment in relation to the acquisition of material goods or physical territories. For the French protestors, Žižek explains, "The riots were simply a direct effort to gain *visibility*" (77 emphasis in original).<sup>48</sup> Although Kit's marginalization does not have the ethnic and religious dimensions of the French protestors, he also is an invisible figure at the beginning of *Badlands*, lurking in the back alleys of Fort Dupree among discarded objects. He exists as an excluded body within society, performing necessary labor – i.e., collecting garbage – that remains hidden. Kit's attempts to perform what he perceives to be normal behaviors and to articulate supposed Midwestern values go unrecognized, which results in his subsequent violence.

Unlike, say, the protagonists in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Kit does not explicitly frame his violence as being in the service of some sort of class conflict.

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<sup>48</sup> Žižek adds that it was not that the protestors "found their ethnic-religious identity threatened by French republican universalism but, on the contrary, that they were not included in it, that they found themselves on the other side of the wall which separates the visible from the invisible part of the republican social space" (77). Essentially, Žižek believes that the protestors were responding to an intense feeling of exclusion across French culture, from government institutions to social contexts.

This lack of revolutionary rhetoric is because Kit reflects ideology that circulates in mainstream American culture, such as a respect for authority and admiration of the wealthy. Hence, Kit parrots authoritative language about social mores and mimics the rich man. Like one of Žižek's French protestors, Kit rebels so that he might gain visibility and be integrated into "normal" society, rather than lurking at its fringes. Indeed, Kit's first several murders are efforts to remove individuals who exist as barriers to his attempts to conform more fully. Holly's father prevents Kit from engaging in a traditional relationship with Holly, and the bounty hunters disrupt the couple's enactment of domesticity in the wilderness. Interpreted in this way, Kit's violence, at least initially, is not irrationally destructive, but is an attempt to gain access to and recognition through the dominant social order that systematically has rejected him. Kit demands "nothing" materially with his violence, but those violent acts reveal a deep-rooted desire for recognition that Kit himself is incapable of articulating. Instead, he collects and discards nostalgic objects, while marking his existence on the surrounding terrain and through the violence he inflicts on others. Crucially, all of these acts fail to produce the stable identity and satisfactory spatial and temporal coordinate that Kit and Holly (perhaps unconsciously) seek, which links their behaviors to the elusive desires of nostalgia.

In "Things to Look Into: The Cinema of Terrence Malick" (2007), Adrian Martin identifies a troublesome instability experienced by characters throughout Malick's filmography, and he writes,

A settled life, settling down, is a constant dream for Malick's characters. . . . Everyone starts out displaced, or soon finds themselves displaced, from any centre [sic] in which any such settlement might actually, mythically

occur. . . . The only experience of settlement . . . is an experience of fleeting time rather than fixed place – an idyll, a rest of plateau between upheavals, between catastrophes (death is everywhere in his films).

The general lack of fixity in Malick's films is perhaps most overt in *Badlands*, in which protagonists' identities fluctuate to match the ever-shifting nature of their surroundings. Kit's violence is a mechanism that allows the couple temporarily to establish spaces within which their adopted personas may be enacted. These performative venues exist as spaces outside of a linear temporal progression; that is, locales such as the treehouse or the rich man's home are elliptical environments that enable a brief pause from the rapid changes in identity that Kit and Holly undergo elsewhere.

No single space proves sustainable in *Badlands*, and the ideal temporal moment for Kit and Holly forever is projected into the past or deferred to the future. For instance, even during the romanticized scene in which Kit launches the balloon filled with mementos, Holly's voiceover explains, "His heart was filled with longing as he watched it drift off. Something must've told him that we'd never live these days of happiness again, that they were gone forever." Kit apparently is unable to be content in the present, and he experiences the contemporary moment as if it already has slipped into the past. Holly later repeats this sentiment as she wanders through the rich man's neighborhood and reflects on her disconnected status by narrating, "The world was like a faraway planet to which I could never return. I thought what a fine place it was, full of things that people can look into and enjoy." This commentary emphasizes the nostalgic perception of the world as an imagistic space, one that is to be gazed upon but not inhabited. Ultimately, Kit and Holly's flight takes them into the nebulous space of the badlands, an

environment featuring a spatial and temporal collapse. The state of simultaneity so desired by nostalgic individuals is achieved and exposed as confinement.

The liminal existence that Kit and Holly experience in the badlands is the ultimate outcome of nostalgia: by reducing identity to a series of superficial performances, the environment itself is flattened into a featureless backdrop in which linear progress has been halted. Thus, the badlands exist as a metaphoric space that never can be traversed. Across this territory, the nostalgic subject desperately pursues a static spatial and temporal existence that is “neither here nor there.” As the present assumes an unsatisfactory and inauthentic quality, the perception of time becomes muddled for Midwesterners such as Kit and Holly. Desire is redirected towards idealized and temporally dislocated images, which these blank protagonists are compelled to replicate through stylized performances. In the atemporal environment of *Badlands*, nostalgic desire is shown to malfunction and transform every moment into an experience of traumatic loss, while the region’s inhabitants frantically adopt and discard identities in order to prop up decaying images of normality. Since the release of *Badlands*, the depiction of the Midwest as an anachronistic space populated by blank inhabitants performing assumed identities has become increasingly prominent, as the region’s nostalgic image frequently is exposed as a surface-level veneer, particularly in two films released later in the 1970s: *Stroszek* and *Halloween*.

*Stroszek*

With *Stroszek*, iconoclastic director Werner Herzog brought his unique sensibility to bear on the Midwest. A key figure who emerged during the New German Cinema movement that spanned from the 1960s to the 1980s, Herzog is notorious for taking on arduous film projects, from dragging a several-hundred ton steamship over a mountain in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) to venturing to Antarctica for the documentary, *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007). In light of such undertakings, the Wisconsin setting for the majority of *Stroszek* appears to be exceptionally mundane by comparison. On the DVD commentary track for *Stroszek*, Herzog even praises the Midwest, stating that the central region is “the best part of America. . . . People are very kind, very big hearts, down-to-earth, hardworking, no bullshit, nothing like Hollywood, nothing like the craze in New York or whatever. Good people, solidly on the ground, generous. Everything that’s good about America you’d find in the Midwest, and always the very best come from there.” Despite this stated appreciation for the Midwest, in *Stroszek*, Herzog depicts the region as a soul-crushing space of deceptive surfaces from which escape is impossible once an individual has entered its parameters.

To escape harassment by violent thugs and vicious pimps in Berlin, Bruno Stroszek (Bruno S.), Eva (Eva Mattes), and Scheitz (Clemens Scheitz)<sup>49</sup> decide to move to America, about which Eva claims, “Everybody makes money there, and we can, too.” As Malick does in *Badlands*, Herzog presents the Midwestern setting of *Stroszek* as an

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<sup>49</sup> The coinciding names of the performers and the fictional characters they portray is one of several ways in which Herzog blurs distinctions between reality and fiction in *Stroszek*. In particular, the film’s early scenes in Berlin largely are based on the experiences of Bruno S. (born Bruno Schleinstein). During this portion of the film, the character of Bruno is released from prison, but his alcoholism immediately compels him to resume drinking excessively, and he struggles to make money as a street performer. According to Herzog, settings such as Bruno’s apartment and the bar depicted in these early scenes were the actual living quarters and haunts of Bruno S.

increasingly abstract environment<sup>50</sup> over the course of the narrative, one whose spatial properties reflect the looping desire circuit of nostalgia. Once inside Wisconsin, progress – in terms of the accumulation of material wealth and the linear flow of time – is revealed as an illusory fantasy for the film’s trio of German immigrants. The Midwestern landscape transforms the boisterous Bruno and his optimistic companions into sullen, depressed individuals whose status in Wisconsin is equivalent to or worse than their circumstances in Berlin. This regression of the characters’ mental state and material conditions is reflected by a circular motif that is evident in the narrative and form of *Stroszek*.

In “How American Is It: The U.S. as Image and Imaginary in German Films” (1984), Eric Rentschler writes, “The circle is *the* informing structure in Herzog’s cinema. . . . The circle connotes a trapped life without purpose, a human existence without meaningful activity, merely an eternal repetition of the same, motions that leave us time-bound captives, subject to the whims of inscrutable higher powers” (610 emphasis in original). Although circular motifs are prevalent throughout Herzog’s filmography – for instance, in the remarkable final shot of *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), the camera circles around the film’s crazed protagonist standing on a sinking raft while surrounded by monkeys and corpses – they assume new meanings within a Midwestern context.

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<sup>50</sup> In “Werner Herzog’s *Stroszek*: A Fairy-Tale Film in an Age of Disenchantment” (1987), Jan Mouton claims that Herzog “draws upon the folkloric tradition . . . and in so doing he creates a fairy tale film” (100). Consequently, Mouton reads the peculiarities of the Midwestern setting as evidence that “the marvelous” is present within the narrative and claims, “What is visible on the screen will imply what is not visible, what is just beyond” (100). Malick admitted that *Badlands* was intended to be understood as something of a fairy tale that was located outside of time, which lends greater relevance to Mouton’s observation of a very similar dynamic in *Stroszek*, given that the two films both feature a Midwestern setting and were produced in roughly the same period.

Certainly, Rentschler's references to "a trapped life" or "time-bound captives" are applicable to the emotionally-stunted and geographically-constrained characters in *Badlands* or many of the other Midwestern narratives considered throughout this project, such as Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Regarding *Stroszek*, the circle motif is indicative of the perceived nostalgic character of the Midwest; nostalgia is anti-linear and produces desire for a looping return to the past, which becomes particularly evident in cinematic depictions of the region's anachronistic culture and nebulous terrain. Herzog engages with both of these Midwestern representational conventions throughout *Stroszek*.

Even before departing for America, Herzog presents Bruno as something of a nostalgic character who is reluctant to leave his home, despite being subjected to constant threats. When Eva and Scheitz discuss the trio's immigration plans, Bruno observes that "if we don't like it, we can always come back." Bruno later echoes this sentiment in Wisconsin after his relationship with Eva fails, and he is unable to repay the bank loan that was used for their mobile home. Speaking in the third person, Bruno nostalgically laments, "Bruno's on the outside looking in. Stupid of him to ever have done it, coming to America, just to watch his whole world fall apart. I might as well be back where I came from." Together, these two statements provide insights into Bruno's changing perception of the relationship between space and time. In the former statement, Bruno expresses faith that his then-present Berlin lifestyle may be restored if the journey to America proves to be unsatisfactory; once installed within the Midwest, however, Bruno no longer considers a recovery of his past self to be possible, so he nostalgically longs for what once was.

On the DVD commentary track for *Stroszek*, Herzog claims that “America is so open, the center of America is . . . vast and strange and open.” Yet, *Stroszek* regularly features symbolic foreclosures of movement and opportunity, along with a bank literally foreclosing on Bruno’s mobile home. Herzog shoots both the delivery and repossession of the home in a long shot with a stationary camera, which has the intriguing effect of rendering Bruno’s Wisconsin living space as an approximation of a point on a timeline. When the trailer home is delivered, it enters from the left of the frame and moves towards the right; when the home is removed, it is towed from the center of the frame and exits to the right. In both scenes, the rectangular home roughly bifurcates the frame horizontally, and the composition of the trailer home’s sharp lines and the empty lot – initially filled by the home, and later vacated once more – suggest that Bruno is trapped in a static bubble on a timeline through which other objects pass. Herzog’s Wisconsin, then, extends the anachronistic and atemporal depiction of the Midwest that *Badlands* made prominent.

Both the notion of pausing temporal progress and Herzog’s circular motif are evident in *Stroszek*’s Wisconsin setting, which features several frozen ponds brightening the otherwise drab landscape. For instance, in one long shot, Herzog fills the frame with the elliptical curves of a frozen pond as Bruno, Eva, Scheitz, and the latter’s American nephew Clayton (Clayton Szalpinski) frolic in the background. Earlier, Clayton had explained that there have been several unexplained disappearances of farmers in Railroad Flats, which locals superstitiously attribute to four or five unknown murderers. For his part, Clayton scours the area with his metal detector in order to uncover clues, and the colder temperatures enable him to use the device on the very surface of the frozen ponds. In this way, the circular ponds reflect perceptions of the Midwest’s general stasis and

ability to grant its inhabitants access to the past. By virtue of being frozen surfaces, the ponds serve as an apt metaphor for the Midwest's nostalgic character, in addition to the more practical narrative function of permitting Clayton to search for submerged artifacts of the past that otherwise would be inaccessible.

The circle motif similarly is prominent in a brief scene during which two farmers antagonize one another over a land dispute next to Clayton's property. Each individual claims ownership of a narrow strip of land, so when one farmer rides on his tractor in the general area, the other emerges and mirrors those actions. Both farmers are armed with rifles while plowing, and they circle the same spot again and again in a counterclockwise direction. The two farmers loop back and forth, keeping one another at bay, but they never actually go anywhere or achieve a resolution to their disagreement. Their constant efforts and threats merely produce stasis.

Circling also is evident throughout *Stroszek's* soundtrack via a distinctive doubling that appears in two ways. First, as Emily Hauze observes in "Keyed Fantasies: Music, The Accordion and the American Dream in *Stroszek* and *Schultze Gets the Blues*" (2009), "internal performances are replaced by a carefully aligned external musical soundtrack in Bruno's America. Most of this music appears twice, highlighting incongruities between events" (90).<sup>51</sup> Such instances include "a vocal duet entitled 'Silver Bell' from a circa-1911 Edison cylinder [that] accompanies the arrival and removal of Bruno's mobile home" (90). Once in Wisconsin, Bruno's ability to indulge his love of

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<sup>51</sup> For Hauze, "internal" essentially corresponds to diegetic sounds, while "external" corresponds to nondiegetic sounds. While in Berlin, Bruno plays the piano, glockenspiel, signal horn, and accordion regularly; in America, Bruno's performances are limited to one blast of the signal horn and one scene in which he plays his accordion.

music is restricted, and the soundtrack itself becomes oppressively repetitive as various nondiegetic songs keep recurring and call attention to the Midwest's circular temporality.

The second form of doubling on the soundtrack becomes apparent through the many acts of translation that occur once Bruno, Eva, and Scheitz arrive in America. Bruno speaks only German, Clayton speaks only English, Eva has fluency in both languages, and Scheitz sometimes appears able to translate English into German, but frequently is shown to be incapable of communicating clearly with locals. Because of these language barriers, Eva (and occasionally Scheitz) serves as a translator and repeats statements made by Clayton and Scott (Scott McKain), a representative of the bank who harasses Bruno and Eva about repaying their loan. Significantly, Herzog typically shows a statement in one language and then its repetition in another language during these moments of translation. One such instance involves Clayton explaining the neighboring farmers' mutual hostility towards one another, which Scheitz then tells to Bruno in German. Repetition – through a constant doubling of verbal communication – thus informs Bruno's experiences in Wisconsin, a space that features an almost immediate return and re-articulation of past speech acts. By emphasizing translation, Herzog again affirms the looping and circular nature of the Midwest.

The final act of translation in *Stroszek* is perhaps the most unusual and occurs immediately prior to the film's remarkable concluding sequence. Following the repossession of the mobile home and Eva returning to prostitution and embarking for Canada with a trucker, Bruno and Scheitz decide to rob the local bank with a rifle. Upon discovering that the bank is closed, the tragicomic duo abruptly rob the barber next to the bank before entering a supermarket across the street. Scheitz promptly is arrested, but

Bruno is able to escape with a frozen turkey; he then returns to Clayton's garage, steals an old tow truck and several cans of beer, and drives away with the turkey and rifle. Although it is unclear how far Bruno travels,<sup>52</sup> he ultimately arrives in a small town filled with Native Americans and tourist shops selling replicas of objects such as hunting spears. As a fire ignites in the engine of Bruno's tow truck, he pulls into a parking lot where a solitary figure in ceremonial Native American garb stands.

With rifle and turkey in hand, Bruno enters a sandwich shop, and Herzog uses a jump cut to move from the parking lot to inside of the shop. This edit is not a direct continuation of Bruno's movement, as might be expected. Instead, once Herzog cuts to inside of the shop, Bruno already is seated at a table with an unidentified man, and the pair apparently has been conversing for an uncertain period of time. Their relationship is never explained; it seems likely that Bruno merely sat at the man's table, but, strangely, this individual is revealed to be bilingual. In English, he says, "So, your car is kaput. And your girlfriend is gone. And thine house they have sold." The stranger then shifts to German and declares, "I wouldn't worry about it," which prompts Bruno to reply (in German, of course), "You said it. Absolutely." After the anonymous man toasts Bruno with "Prost," Herzog's camera lingers on a silent close-up of Bruno. Aside from the uncertain duration of the encounter and nature of the relationship between the two men, this scene is significant as the final moment of translation in a film filled with them. Unlike the earlier instances, though, Herzog does not depict the initial speech act that prompts the translation – in this case, Bruno's narrative of his trials in Wisconsin.

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<sup>52</sup> Herzog shot this final sequence in North Carolina, but it conceivably could be considered a Midwestern town within the film, especially given the Native American culture and names that remain prominent in various parts of Wisconsin.

Furthermore, the stranger's recitation of Bruno's ordeal in English is unwarranted, as Bruno cannot understand what the man says in any language but German, and no one else is near their table. In this scene, then, the act of translation is for no one within the diegesis. As such, the man's rote translation complicates the doubling and circularity throughout the film by revealing such acts to be compulsory and compelled by the very landscape itself.

This peculiar interlude leads into the film's even more bizarre conclusion. Bruno exits the restaurant, hops in the tow truck cab, and sets the flaming vehicle spinning in a circle. Still clutching the rifle and turkey, Bruno leaves the truck circling in the parking lot and walks into a building across the street, where he observes chickens and a rabbit in cages; he deposits coins in these cages, and the animals are prompted to pantomime various acts, such as steering a toy fire truck, plunking a miniature piano, or "dancing." Continuing through this building, Bruno gains access to a ski lift that rises up a wooded hillside, which he turns on and then boards. On the back of Bruno's lift chair, a sign reads, "IS THIS REALLY ME!" and the protagonist completes a full circuit on the lift – which loops around in a counterclockwise direction – but remains seated to circle around again. Herzog's camera tilts upwards from ground level as Bruno ascends the hill, and a single gunshot rings out; although unconfirmed in the diegesis, Bruno appears to have killed himself, and his corpse is left to circle around and around on the lift.

In *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth* (2007), Brad Prager discusses the tow truck and the ski lift during the film's final sequence. Of the truck, he writes, "The vehicle now going around and around stands in for a world that has spun out of control: the journey to the Midwest has placed Stroszek in a vehicle without a

driver. There is no changing course, no means by which one can approach the circle's empty centre. . . ." (75). Prager later argues that "Herzog's characters themselves . . . turn in circles, as in the case of Bruno . . . endlessly circling the ground on a ski-lift. This 'going nowhere' can be seen as a reflection on the substance of the subject itself. It is an ever-widening spiral in which none come closer to the centre, and by virtue of which the permanence of things is endlessly proposed and then negated" (114). Prager's comments reiterate the primacy of circular motifs in Herzog's work and attach such symbolism to an individualized quest for a coherent sense of one's self within a troubled world. Beyond Prager's astute observations, the film's Midwestern setting produces an additional layer of complexity and meaning for the circling truck and ski lift.

The spiraling search for an undefined, subjective "centre" that Prager mentions has clear nostalgic connotations. As a looping desire circuit, nostalgia compels individuals to circle backwards in an attempt to regain a lost, idealized, or perhaps even fictionalized past that is perceived as superior to the degraded present. In *Stroszek*, the Midwest has reshaped Bruno into a backwards-looking nostalgic, an individual who wishes to return to his own falsely-idealized past in Germany. As Herzog makes abundantly clear in the film's early scenes, Bruno's experiences in Berlin oscillated between institutional imprisonment and routine brutality when free. Yet, Bruno claims that the openness of such violence in Germany is preferable to America, in which various oppressors such as the bank representative "do it ever so politely and with a smile. It's much worse." Despite the Wisconsin environment appearing more desolate than Berlin, Bruno's quality of life appears poor regardless of his location. What truly has changed

over the course of the film is his attitude towards the past, which the Midwest has transformed into one informed by nostalgia.

Bruno's actions and the setting of the final sequence affirm this nostalgic reading of *Stroszek*. Both the tow truck and the ski lift circle in a counterclockwise direction. Consequently, Bruno's otherwise inexplicable actions express an internal nostalgic desire to go backwards in time that is externalized onto the physical environment itself. Herzog even features camera movements that situate the truck and ski lift on an abstract graph, just as the shots depicting the arrival and removal of the mobile home resemble a rough timeline. This highly important shot begins with the now-immobile and flaming truck emitting copious amounts of smoke as it fills the frame; the camera then pans to the right, where it pauses on the entrance to the ski lift before tilting upwards to the top of the hill. With these fluid movements, the camera connects the truck and ski lift by locating each object on the horizontal and vertical lines that comprise an x-y axis. The perpendicular convergence point of these lines is the entrance to the ski lift, which Herzog highlights in order to expose the sequential and impotent nature of nostalgia; the circling truck leads to the looping ski lift, and poor Bruno's only response to this endless desire circuit is to kill himself. Moreover, the paused truck billows smoke, which quickly spreads throughout the scene. Like Bruno's terminal loop on the ski lift, the counterclockwise movement of the truck is an act of literal and figurative immolation. In addition to signaling the truck's demise, the smoke that pours out hovers over everything in close proximity and obscures the unfolding present. Together, all of these elements – Bruno's suicide, the interconnectedness of the looping truck and lift, their muddling effect on the present, and

the Midwestern environment's continual production of nostalgic subjects and circular symbols – comprise the thorough critique of nostalgia that is hidden within *Stroszek*.

### ***Halloween***

On the promotional poster for John Carpenter's iconic horror film, *Halloween* (1978), the tagline reads, "The Night *He* Came Home!" The "he" referenced in the tagline is the film's monstrous boogeyman, Michael Myers, who escapes from a mental institution and returns to wreck havoc in his fictional Midwestern hometown of Haddonfield, Illinois. Fifteen years after six-year old Michael kills his older sister Judith (Sandy Johnson) by stabbing her to death, he now "comes home" as an adult to continue murdering (mostly) teenagers. Clearly, the tagline and narrative lend themselves to a psychoanalytical reading of Michael Myers – and his villainous brethren in subsequent slasher/stalker horror films – as a figure representing a return of repressed impulses, an unbound id or perhaps a rampaging super ego, given Michael's propensity for punishing youths engaged in debauchery.

Such an interpretation of *Halloween* corresponds to ways in which the horror genre in general has been theorized. For example, in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . And Beyond* (1986), Robin Wood considers American horror in the 1970s and writes, "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression" (68). From Wood's perspective,

the “collective nightmares” on display in horror films are a surreptitious engagement with the individual and cultural “conditions under which a dream becomes a nightmare . . . the repressed wish is, from the point of view of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and that it is so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat” (70). For Wood and theorists such as Carol Clover and Barbara Creed – who each produced classic studies of the genre including, respectively, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) and *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) – the horror films of the 1970s and 1980s largely are concerned with issues of gender in relation to American society.

While these studies convincingly demonstrate how gender dynamics shape horror from this period, my reading of *Halloween* extends such analyses by considering the film’s regional and temporal dimensions. I propose an interpretation of *Halloween* that reframes Michael Myers as a troubled nostalgic character and that also emphasizes the film’s Midwestern setting, which features peculiar temporal properties that are similar to the region’s presentation in *Badlands* and *Stroszek*. Much like Kit Carruthers in Malick’s film, Michael Myers exemplifies the nostalgic Midwestern subject frequently depicted in cinematic regional images during the 1970s. In other words, Michael is a blank figure who compulsively seeks to restore the past because the present is found to be unsatisfactory. Similar to Kit, Michael is knowable only through his actions, which serve as an exteriorized performance of identity that is layered over his rather overt blankness.

Director/co-writer Carpenter and producer/co-writer Debra Hill intended for Michael Myers’s blank façade to accentuate his unsettling presence onscreen. In *Halloween: Unmasked* (1999), a short retrospective about the horror classic, Carpenter

discusses the goal of making Michael into “a blank slate that we [the audience] can project everything into.” To achieve this effect, Carpenter and Hill dressed the mute antagonist in a pale, featureless mask<sup>53</sup> and mechanic coveralls, which reduce his identity to the level of physical action. Accordingly, Michael Myers is designated as “The Shape” (Nick Castle)<sup>54</sup> in the film’s credits. With this label, the filmmakers distinguish between Michael when he is masked and unmasked, the latter of which only occurs during two brief instances in the film. Consequently, Michael’s “true” identity is established as the blank exterior that permits the projection of fears by audience members while simultaneously transforming The Shape into a symbol of the general nostalgic longing of Midwesterners for the past. Whereas in *Badlands*, Kit’s blankness occasionally is obscured by his charisma and adoption of personas such as “James Dean” or an archetypal criminal on the run, Michael selects attire that reinforces the inherent absence of his identity. Kit engages in performative gestures to cover up his blankness, but The Shape’s very appearance confirms his inherent lack of an identity beyond a driving

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<sup>53</sup> As detailed in *Halloween: Unmasked*, when the filmmakers were creating Michael’s “look,” they narrowed down the choice of masks between that of an Emmett Kelly clown mask and a doctored William Shatner mask from *Star Trek*. In “Horror and Humor” (1999), Noel Carroll claims, “The clown figure is a monster. . . . a fantastic being, one possessed of an alternate biology” that can sustain severe physical abuse which normal humans cannot (155). Michael certainly has the indestructibility of Carroll’s monstrous clown, but to achieve the desired lack of individual features, the filmmakers selected the Shatner mask, which resulted in the character’s eerie “blank” exterior.

<sup>54</sup> Although Castle plays the masked Michael Myers for the majority of the film, the six-year old Michael shown during the opening scene obviously requires a different actor, Will Sandin. When the adult Michael briefly is unmasked near the end of the film, Tony Moran fills in as the youthful twenty-three-year-old face beneath the killer’s blank exterior. On a side note, within the film’s chronology, the adult Michael – listed as twenty-three in the credits – actually should be twenty-one, based on the fifteen-year gap between killing his sister and returning to Haddonfield; clearly, this seems to be a continuity error on the part of the filmmakers.

compulsion to kill. Aside from the gender-oriented readings of *Halloween*, though, what might Michael's motives for violence be?

With the exception of two moments during which Michael is unmasked – after killing his teenage sister Judith (Sandy Johnson) as a child and while assaulting the teenaged babysitter (and surrogate sister) Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) during the film's climax – none of the relentless killer's facial expressions are visible, and he does not verbalize an explanation for his actions. That task falls to Michael's (rightly) paranoid doctor, Sam Loomis (Donald Pleasence), who regularly describes his patient in monstrous and supernatural terms. Loomis's connection to Michael veers towards the obsessive, and following the latter's escape from a mental institution, the doctor immediately predicts that Michael is returning home to Haddonfield. When Loomis and Sheriff Leigh Brackett (Charles Cyphers) tour the dilapidated Myers home, they discover evidence that Michael has reoccupied the house, which prompts the doctor to explain his relationship to the killer:

I met him fifteen years ago. I was told there was nothing left: no reason, no conscience, no understanding, and [not] even the most rudimentary sense of life or death, of good or evil, right or wrong. I met this six-year-old child with this blank, pale, emotionless face and the blackest eyes – the devil's eyes. I spent eight years trying to reach him and then another seven trying to keep him locked up because I realized that what was living behind that boy's eyes was purely and simply evil.

Setting aside the overwrought labeling of Michael as “evil” or devil-like – a clear nod to genre conventions hyperbolizing the substantial threat of a horror monster – an

attentiveness to the fifteen-year gap between the initial murder and return home recurs across the film and is highly significant in relation to the context within which *Halloween* was produced, as well as the narrative's engagement with nostalgic temporality.

In "The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture" (1993), Christopher Sharrett notes that the emergence of the slasher/stalker film in the late 1970s – a subgenre whose popularity surged following *Halloween* – coincides with the dawn of a "post-liberal" period (102). In addition to American culture taking a conservative turn on social issues, the late 1970s also witnessed the development and implementation of neoliberal economic policies that continue to shape the global economy, as David Harvey explains throughout *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005). In fact, the first line of Harvey's book asserts the significance of this historical period, and he writes, "Future historians may well look upon the years 1978-1980 as a revolutionary turning-point in the world's social and economic history" (1). Within an American context, this shift in "social and economic history" was complimented by a burgeoning sense of nostalgia for idealized (and conservative-leaning) versions of 1950s culture within films produced in the 1970s. *Halloween* stealthily engages with this nostalgic tendency and predicts the conservative turn in American culture – albeit within a social context, rather than an economic one – through the presentation of Michael Myers's shift between active and inactive states over the fifteen-year period that comprises all of the film's narrative events.

Michael's development – his personal history and awareness of historical events – is halted just after killing his sister on Halloween night in 1963. Significantly, this date is less than one month before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, an event that further exacerbated the cultural turmoil that would continue for more than a decade.

Michael's subsequent return occurs within a year of the Iran hostage crisis, which helped to foment support for Ronald Reagan's presidential aspirations and subsequent conservative agenda. Obviously, Carpenter and Hill could not have known what changes actually were to come in American culture, but in hindsight, these historical events provide illuminating bookends to Michael's lengthy period of inactivity. In the world of *Halloween*, Michael is removed from history and locked away in a mental institution during the prime years of the countercultural movement, and he returns only on the cusp of a new conservative era. By "coming home" in the late 1970s after a fifteen-year absence, Michael functions as a horrific parody of the decade's nostalgia for the 1950s. Just as Malick critiques the cultural limitations of that earlier era in *Badlands*, Carpenter shows the destructive effects of the past intruding into the present through the violently nostalgic character of Michael Myers.

The blank boogeyman's nostalgia is evident through both his actions and the mythology that is circulated about him. For instance, late in *Halloween*, Sheriff Brackett again expresses skepticism about Michael being a threat in Haddonfield, which prompts Dr. Loomis to proclaim, "I watched him for fifteen years, sitting in a room, staring at a wall, not seeing the wall, looking past the wall, looking at this night, inhumanly patient. Waiting for some secret, silent alarm to trigger him off. Death has come to your little town, Sheriff." Loomis's emphasis on "this night," however, belies the rather arbitrary selection of the fifteen-year anniversary of Judith's murder as the date of Michael's return to Haddonfield (rather than, say, a return twenty or thirty years later). This act of commemoration is significant, and the duration between original event and its reenactment (through new murders) requires a lengthy period in order to lend a nostalgic

quality to Michael's violence as an adult. By depicting the convergence of violence and nostalgia, *Halloween* bridges Midwestern representational norms and the still-developing conventions of the slasher/stalker subgenre of horror.<sup>55</sup> Before returning to *Halloween*'s regional context, it is worth reviewing how horror generally addresses the past in a way that, I argue, overlaps with and subverts the nostalgic desire to invert temporal progress.

In *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (2000), Paul Wells observes that “the horror genre is predominantly concerned with death and the impacts and effects of the past” (7). Each era and subgenre of horror reflects this concern in distinct ways, and *Halloween* is no different. For instance, in *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (2005), Kendall R. Phillips writes that “*Halloween* entails a kind of Gothic return of the past to haunt the present” (135), while Robin Wood notes

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<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, the numerous subsequent entries in the slasher/stalker horror subgenre display something of a nostalgic compulsion through a seemingly endless repetition of *Halloween*'s basic narrative elements. Regarding sequels, Clover writes that such later films “are better taken as remakes than sequels . . . in most cases [a sequel] simply duplicates with only slight variation the plot and circumstances – the formula – of its predecessor” (23). Carpenter himself observes, “Basically, sequels mean the same film. . . . That's what people want to see. They want to see the same movie again” (qtd. in Harris 107). The reproduction and perpetuation of *Halloween*'s “original” elements – a production that also drew heavily upon prior films including Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Bob Clark's *Black Christmas* (1974) – expose a nostalgic tendency within horror, one that underpins such films' “return of the repressed” narrative developments. Audience desires to re-experience the same film with minor changes smacks of a nostalgic fascination with and, potentially, a debilitating attachment to the past. In “Final Girls and Terrible Youth: Transgression in 1980s Slasher Horror” (2001), Sarah Trencansky identifies a possible explanation for such nostalgic narrative repetitions and habitual returns of slasher villains by focusing on the historical context for these films. Trencansky writes, “None of these monsters can be eliminated unless the very nature of society is transformed and authority definitively undermined” (70). Similarly, in *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (2007), Rick Worland observes that “the slasher film was another indirect reprocessing of Vietnam's impact on American culture, the accompanying tremors set off by the women's movement in particular” (231). The subsequent decline of the number of slasher/stalker films being produced during the Clinton presidency in the 1990s supports Trencansky and Worland's views regarding the subgenre's link to conservative culture.

that Michael features a “compulsion to reenact the childhood crime” (172). But what might account for this compulsive desire to restore or reactivate the past? As Susan Stewart explains in “The Epistemology of the Horror Story” (1982), “the horror story presents a repetition that is cumulative. Rather than canceling the significance of the original event by displacing it, the horror story increases that event’s significance, multiplying its effect with each repetition. It articulates a paradox of reversibility and irreversibility in the given social shape of death” (36).

Horror narratives, then, are not merely “concerned” with the past; rather, the genre depicts worlds in which the distance between past and present is collapsible, which permits temporal simultaneity. Across this genre, the nostalgic desire to return to the past thus is reimagined as an actual potentiality, albeit one fraught with horrific effects stemming from the past intruding into the present. Unlike many haunted house stories and other supernatural fright narratives, the slasher/stalker subgenre typically features – at least within popular franchises such as *Halloween* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (the latter of which also is set in the Midwest) – a monstrous figure who originates from the relatively near-past (within a few years or decades, instead of being an ancient evil of some sort), as well as from the terrorized community itself.

With “The Stalker Film, 1978-81” (1987), Vera Dika further examines the distinctive temporal dynamics of horror by identifying a “two-part temporal structure” subsumed in the slasher/stalker subgenre that revolves around the relationship between a “past event” and a “present event” (93-94). Dika explains, “The two-part temporal structure of the stalker film first depicts an event long past, and then a resurgence of that event after a period of latency” (96). Accordingly, one of the subgenre’s “narrative

functions” that Dika identifies is a present “event [that] commemorates the past action” (94). This “function” requires a temporal gap of some duration in order to ensure that the present commemoration of the past is shocking (due to unexpected return of temporally-distant trauma), as well as, crucially, nostalgic. Considered in this light, Michael’s fifteen-year period of inactivity is a necessary prerequisite for the attempt to reenact his childhood violence; because a substantial amount of time has passed, his new violence now registers as a nostalgic activity.

Michael’s nostalgic actions as an adult again lend a comparison to Kit, who constantly sought to imbue the present with meaning through commemorative rituals and by assigning significance to various objects seemingly in anticipation of future nostalgia. Similarly, upon returning to Haddonfield, Michael does not immediately begin killing people. Instead, Michael initially reoccupies his childhood home during an early scene in which protagonist Laurie drops off a key at the abandoned Myers house; Carpenter’s camera watches Laurie from behind the front door of the house, and Michael abruptly steps into the frame to reveal his presence.<sup>56</sup> On the sidewalk, young Tommy Doyle (Brian Andrews), who Laurie babysits later in the evening, recounts the mythology of the Myers home that circulates among his elementary school friends. Tommy claims that it is a “haunted house” and that “awful stuff happened there once.” Within the “two-part

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<sup>56</sup> Presumably, it is this chance encounter with Laurie that leads to Michael fixating on her as a contemporary surrogate for his dead sister Judith. Michael’s endless pursuit of Laurie never is explained in *Halloween* beyond this possibility, although subsequent sequels in the franchise reveal that the pair are brother and sister; following the murder of Judith, Laurie apparently was given up for adoption as a baby, which explains her different last name and lack of awareness about familial connections to the original film’s blank boogeyman.

temporal structure” of *Halloween*, “once” invariably produces a subsequent “again,” as Michael’s physical return portends a reactivation of the “awful” past.

Beyond merely returning to his childhood house, Michael also nostalgically seeks to commemorate – by compulsively reenacting – his murder of Judith, which marks the moment at which the development of his identity was halted. Michael commences this nostalgic endeavor by collecting objects that are related to the murder of his sister, such as her tombstone. In addition, Sheriff Brackett is shown responding to a robbery at a hardware store in which a “Halloween mask, rope, and a couple of knives” are the only stolen items. Michael used a knife to kill his sister and wore a mask during the violent act; a key element of Michael’s nostalgic return to Haddonfield, then, is to recreate the conditions of his final moments before being removed from the town and from temporal progression during his stay at the mental institution. As the film progresses, Michael stalks Laurie and kills two of her friends – Annie (Nancy Kyes)<sup>57</sup> and Lynda (P.J. Soles) – who clearly are nostalgic substitutions for Judith. Both of these murders occur in a house across the street from where Laurie is babysitting (through a narrative contrivance, Annie is babysitting on the same block as Laurie at the Wallace home). When Laurie investigates why no one will answer the phone at the Wallace house, she discovers that Michael ritualistically has arranged the corpses and tombstone within an upstairs bedroom that resembles the space in which he killed Judith. Annie’s body rests face-up on a bed with Judith’s tombstone placed near the headboard and a jack-o’-lantern sitting on the nightstand. The bodies of Lynda and her boyfriend Bob (John Michael Graham) are stored in the room’s wardrobe and closet.

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<sup>57</sup> Kyes is listed as “Nancy Loomis” in the credits for *Halloween*.

This ritualistic arrangement of bodies and objects reflects Michael's innate nostalgic tendencies, as it seems preposterous to assume that the horrific display was designed merely to frighten Laurie (and the audience), even if that is its ultimate effect. Instead, Michael produces this grotesque tableau to satisfy his own nostalgic desire. By collecting corpses and totems that recall the murder of his sister, Michael seeks to merge the past and present. Moreover, by virtue of waiting fifteen years to become active once again, Michael further reveals the nostalgic impulse that compels him to violently attempt to restore the past. A temporal gap between past event and present commemoration is necessary to produce nostalgia, and Michael's return home to Haddonfield ultimately functions as a critique of the nostalgia informing numerous popular texts in the 1970s, such as *Happy Days* (1974-1984) and *Grease* (1978). In nostalgically replicating the past murder of Judith, Michael undermines the cultural nostalgia for the 1950s and early years of the 1960s by showing the idealized imagery of that period to be patently false. In fact, Michael and his sexualized violence are a product of that era, and his return troubles the nostalgic fantasy of collapsing distinctions between the past and present by revealing how horrific and destructive such a development would be to the contemporary moment.

Significantly, *Halloween's* emphasis on the violence inherent in nostalgia plays out within the Midwest, which, as Shortridge discusses, long has been configured as an anachronistic space that exists as the nation's nostalgic museum. These cultural associations with *Halloween's* regional setting further correspond to conventions of the slasher/stalker horror film, as well as to recurring elements in Carpenter's filmography. According to Carol Clover, one of the primary components that distinguish this subgenre is its recurring emphasis on the site of horror, which generally is "not-home, at a Terrible

Place” (23-24). Clover explains, “Into such houses unwitting victims wander in film after film, and it is the conventional task of the genre to register in close detail the victims’ dawning understanding, as they survey the visible evidence, of the human crimes and perversions that have transpired there. That perception leads directly to the perception of their own immediate peril” (30-31). Although Clover identifies the Myers house as the “Terrible Place” in *Halloween* (30), the Wallace home more fully satisfies her definition of this key element of the slasher film. Yet, the final images of *Halloween* point towards an even more expansive notion of what the film’s “Terrible Place” actually might be. After Michael pursues Laurie from the Wallace house to the second floor of the Doyle residence, Dr. Loomis intervenes and shoots the masked killer, who falls to the ground outside. Upon looking out the window, Loomis discovers that Michael has vanished, and *Halloween* concludes with a montage of various locales from earlier in the film. Carpenter uses Michael’s heavy breathing as a sound bridge across these images, which end with successive exterior shots of the Wallace, Doyle, and Myers homes. So, what is the lingering horror of this sequence?

Certainly, the ongoing threat of Michael’s violence is one unresolved issue in the narrative. But the concluding montage of locations and accompanying breathing on the soundtrack indicate that Michael’s presence has transcended his corporeal body; despite being shot multiple times by Dr. Loomis, Michael still lives and, terrifyingly, he now appears to have the ability to manifest himself anywhere in Haddonfield. The final montage thus configures the entirety of Haddonfield as a “Terrible Place,” one in which the Midwestern community is susceptible to Michael’s violence at any moment. Furthermore, by the film’s end, Michael has attained a dual status as a nostalgic subject

who seeks to restore the past and as a figure whose very presence symbolizes the return of the repressed past. Given the nostalgic impulses of Michael Myers – as well as the nostalgic connotations of his return to Haddonfield – the film’s true horror ultimately is the seemingly permanent destabilization that results from the past’s unceasing invasion of the present. Uncritical nostalgia for the 1950s has enabled the return of a monstrous boogeyman, one born in that era and resolutely intent on nostalgically and violently collapsing distinctions between the past and the present in the film’s 1978 setting.

This nostalgia-based interpretation of *Halloween* is supported by Phillips’s provocative reading of Carpenter’s career as a whole in *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film* (2012). Phillips describes Carpenter as “a director of Westerns, in spite of the fact he has not produced a film recognizably within that genre,” and this quality is attributable to the fact that Carpenter regularly reimagines “the notion of the frontier” in his films (123). Whereas Frederick Jackson Turner considered the frontier as “a site of perpetual progress,” Phillips contrasts, “In Carpenter’s cinematic logic, the frontier mythology lingers, but its trajectory is reversed. His films are peopled not by pioneers but by the isolated remnants of a civilization that has begun a slow, painful withdrawal” (125). Consequently, Phillips explains that “Carpenter’s films provide a graphic reversal of the frontier mythology of progress” (125) by depicting “the frontier in reverse: a desolate frontier encroaching on the shrinking space of civilization” (126). Regarding *Halloween*, Phillips designates Haddonfield as one such “desolate frontier” (142), particularly due to the way in which it “represents the broader sense of American suburbia as a place in which the American family had begun to disintegrate” (143).

In Chapter One, I addressed how Turner envisioned the Midwest as a space that contained the idealized traits he previously located solely in the mythical space of the American frontier. Through this transference of values, Turner helped to situate the Midwest as the nation's space of nostalgia, an association that grew until the region became understood as a nostalgic museum for American culture around the middle of the twentieth century. By the 1970s, however, films such as *Halloween*, *Stroszek*, and *Badlands* began to emphasize the deleterious consequences of reducing the Midwest's identity to this nostalgic function through critical depictions of the blank individuals occupying this atemporal terrain. *Halloween* especially troubles the conception of the Midwest as an anachronistic perpetuation of frontier ideals with the character of Michael Myers, whose blankness literally masks the character's violently nostalgic compulsion to bring the past and the present into a chaotic state of simultaneity. At the conclusion of *Halloween*, Haddonfield is an unstable environment in which violence may erupt at any moment because of Michael's seemingly supernatural mastery of that Midwestern space. The horror of *Halloween*'s boogeyman stems not just from his physical violence, but also from the nostalgic compulsion to restore the past within the present. In this sense, the supposed singularity of Michael Myers's monstrosity belies the fact that he merely represents the disastrous outcome of the reductive Midwestern nostalgia that is reproduced across representations of the region throughout the twentieth century.

By the end of the 1970s, the longstanding image of the Midwest as an out-of-time frontier space or as a "pastoral ideal" (27), to borrow Shortridge's term, was disrupted and challenged by films such as *Badlands*, *Stroszek*, and *Halloween*. Together, these texts critique perceptions of the Midwest as an atemporal nostalgia museum with an

anachronistic culture by presenting the problematic repercussions of such a cultural function on the region's inhabitants. Characters in these films regularly are rendered as blank subjects – the German Bruno is a clear exception at the outset of *Stroszek*, but he eventually proves susceptible to the Midwest's "blanking" effects on identity – who are characterized primarily by a nostalgic longing for *something* which forever remains out of grasp; sooner or later, the frustrating nostalgia experienced by these Midwesterners compels them to commit violence in desperate attempts to imbue the unsatisfactory present with meaning or to return to the desired past. Examples of such nostalgia-influenced violence include: Kit's startlingly abrupt murders which punctuate the ongoing commemoration of his blank existence with mundane objects and various ritualistic actions; Bruno's despairing of the present and future that culminates in his (likely) suicide; and Michael's implacable drive to reenact the violent past that involves ravaging the youth in his hometown.

This burgeoning linkage of nostalgia and violence is attributable, in part, to the environments in which such blank characters are enmeshed. Across these films, the Midwestern settings are shown to be nebulous spaces that feature a pause of temporal progress, which generates a distinctly violent form of nostalgic desire. By abstracting the Midwest's physical territory, these three films respond to the region's image as an American nostalgia museum and show the debilitating effects of such an association. Whether individuals are native Midwesterners or transplants, to occupy this supposed nostalgia museum is to be denied identification traits beyond a general and insatiable desire for the past. Following the blank and damaged characters presented in *Badlands*, *Stroszek*, and *Halloween*, many popular depictions of the Midwest would continue to

interrogate the complex interplay of violence, performativity, and nostalgia in shaping Midwestern identities through the turn of the new millennium, as will be addressed in the next chapter.

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## Chapter Four:

### The Millennial Midwest: Nostalgic Violence in the Twenty-First Century

Set in the fictional Indiana town of Millbrook, David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* (2005) portrays the Midwest as a space containing layered identities, deceptive tranquility, and – as the title indicates – a tradition of violent behavior. At the time of the film's release, Cronenberg stated that exploring the superficially placid nature of Millbrook piqued his interest in the project: "You . . . wonder what does it take to support that perfect little town? What outside of that town, and outside of that country, has to happen in order for it to exist?" (qtd. in B. Johnson). As detailed in previous chapters, one form of outside "support" is a widespread perception circulating throughout American popular culture regarding the idyllic nature of Midwestern small towns. Through sheer repetition of reductive Midwestern imagery, the region's role as a nostalgia museum for the United States is confirmed again and again. Yet, to focus solely on conditions external to the Midwest is to elide the very complex regulatory mechanisms at work within the region, at least as depicted within Midwestern narratives of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Despite Cronenberg's professed interest in circumstances outside of "perfect" Millbrook, *A History of Violence* actually demonstrates that the town's surface normalcy is maintained through intra-communal performativity and violence.

Chapter Four marks a shift in the organization of "Nostalgic Frontiers." Whereas the first three chapters provide a broad history of the development and reification of the Midwest's popular identity in American culture over the course of the twentieth century –

with a particular focus on spatialized modes of nostalgia – the final three chapters feature an extended analysis of changes in regional representations during the years surrounding the turn of the new millennium. As always, nostalgia remains a crucial component in Midwestern narratives. During this period, though, nostalgia increasingly is presented as a cultural force that regulates Midwesterners' identities and behaviors with often extreme violence. This is not to suggest that nostalgia as a spatialized element no longer is present in Midwestern texts or, conversely, that its mode as a cultural force was absent in earlier texts; rather, this observation simply denotes a change in the primary mode of nostalgia evident across many representations of the Midwest. By examining texts produced in the relatively recent past, the final three chapters of "Nostalgic Frontiers" assess the Midwest's popular identity in the young twenty-first century while anticipating the region's future status.

Through a lengthy analysis of Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* and a shorter reading of Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), this chapter outlines several key qualities that recur across Midwestern narratives and define the region during this period. In particular, these attributes are: a techno-cultural lag being located within the Midwest in relation to the proliferation of digital media; a variation of regional performativity that is more community-oriented than the individual performances discussed in Chapter Three; the emergence of what I describe as "nostalgic violence." I define nostalgic violence as a violent act committed in an attempt to manipulate the surface appearance of a particular space and its inhabitants. Nostalgic violence regulates the visible performances of individuals so that the present might *appear* as the nostalgic subject *imagines* the desired past to be. To expand upon Cronenberg's questions that open this

chapter, it now is imperative to ask: what conditions sustain the linkage between the Midwest and nostalgia across films produced around the turn of the twenty-first century?

Filmic depictions of the millennial Midwest regularly display an anxiety-driven return to idealized regional iconography, and this turn to the past is dependent upon nostalgic violence. Narratives featuring nostalgic violence generally are set in fading communities shown to be in the process of losing elements long thought to be foundational for Midwestern identity. In 1901, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that early Midwesterners were “idealists,” nearly “every family was a self-sufficing unit,” and because of diligent labor, “[i]nto this region flowed the great forces of modern capitalism” (132-133). Throughout his racially problematic writings, Turner consistently contrasts mythic European settlers with Native Americans, who are said to “resist the march of civilization” (125). Over a century later, Victoria Johnson explains that “‘whiteness’ and heteronormativity are routinely mobilized as *belonging* in the Midwest” (19 emphasis in original). In sum, the availability of productive (often physical) labor, the reduction of sexual orientation solely to heterosexuality, the primacy of whiteness, and the stability of the nuclear family all have strongly informed the Midwest’s popular image since the early twentieth century.

Many twenty-first century Midwestern narratives revolve around the strategic use of nostalgic violence to prop up superficial signs that these vanishing elements persist and remain dominant, despite the fact that they are simply components of reductive regional mythology, rather than being representative of the Midwest’s actual past or current state. *A History of Violence* is the most overt example of this representational trend, but a short (and non-exhaustive) list of films with a complementary emphasis on

Midwestern mythology includes: *A Simple Plan* (Sam Raimi, 1998), *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (Michael Patrick Jann, 1999), *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011), and, perhaps most famously, *Fargo* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996). Several of these films will be addressed more thoroughly in upcoming chapters, but this chapter's focus remains on *A History of Violence* and, to a lesser degree, *Boys Don't Cry*. Both films present nostalgic violence as being used to obscure the fragmentation of the Midwest's traditional image in order to preserve a surface-level veneer of normative ideals; essentially, because signs of difference and regional decay cannot be excised, they must be violently subsumed beneath a vast normative Midwestern façade. Such an insecure fixation on regional identity becomes particularly acute during this period because of concurrent cultural narratives about the geography-transcending capabilities of digital media technologies.

### **“No Environment” Outside the Virtual Frontier**

In Chapter Two, I detailed ways in which the pastoral Midwest was understood within American culture as being asynchronous in relation to the modernity experienced in urban centers elsewhere. Despite containing cities such as Chicago or Detroit, the Midwest generally was presented as lagging behind the cultural and, importantly, technological changes produced through modernity's transformative force. During the 1990s, a similar regional narrative began to emerge in popular texts regarding the Midwest's relationship to digital media and its accompanying cultural effects. In order to

better understand nostalgic violence, *A History of Violence*, and *Boys Don't Cry*, I will briefly survey debates informing this intersection of regionalism and media studies.

Many Midwestern films produced around the new millennium complicate perceptions of the Midwest within American culture and, interestingly, also serve as counter-narratives to concurrent analyses of digital media and its effects on individual and communal identity. Across these narratives, the celebratory rhetoric about emergent technologies is presented as being at odds with the highly localized and non-digitally networked Midwest. I contend that these Midwestern narratives offer a rebuttal to the cultural changes predicted by many digital media theorists. Reviewing just a few examples of such hopeful rhetoric highlights the stark contrast between the optimism surrounding new technologies and the despair of regions that are perceived to be geographically and technologically isolated, such as the Midwest.<sup>58</sup> For instance, Douglas Rushkoff enthuses about the utopic possibilities of a latter-day cultural renaissance made possible through increased interconnectivity and networks of online communities (31). Frances Cairncross is even more overtly utopic with her prognostications that the “death of distance” will “reinforce local cultures” (9) and that greater communication technologies will “increase understanding, foster tolerance, and ultimately promote worldwide peace” (10). Filmic portrayals of the Midwest, on the other hand, portray a decidedly provincial culture that either resists or is unable to join this technological utopia.

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<sup>58</sup> Obviously, the actual Midwest does not lack access to digital media or the Internet, but the region's popular image generally is that of a space forever lagging in terms of culture and technology.

In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich further brings debates about the effects of rapid advances in storage and communication technologies into a specifically American context by arguing that the “flat structure of the Web” reflects what he describes as “the American ideology of democracy with its paranoid fear of hierarchy and centralized control” (258). Continuing in this vein, Manovich compares the mythic figure of the “nineteenth-century American explorer to the explorer of navigable virtual space” (273), an association that can be linked directly to Turner’s theories about the frontier being closed in the late nineteenth century. Turner suggested that the American frontier was a space that granted “perennial rebirth” (14) to its occupants, a utopic sentiment that Manovich borrows for his views on the new “virtual” frontier. Unlike Manovich, who projects few limitations for users within digital space, Turner offers dire warnings about the cultural fallout from the loss of the Western frontier, a development that supposedly produces an upended nation “now thrown back upon itself” (186). For Turner, frontier space – as opposed to Manovich’s “navigable virtual space” – became filled up, which forced would-be explorers to shape their identities within newly recognized regional formations, particularly the Midwest.

The Midwest of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is portrayed in popular culture as a nostalgic space counterposed to the virtual environments praised by Manovich and others. In this respect, it is instructive to draw upon Svetlana Boym’s critique of online temporality in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). According to Boym, “Time in cyberspace is conceived in terms of speed: speed of access and speed of technological innovation” (347). For Boym, this fetishization of speed by “info-enthusiasts” often recalls

the nineteenth-century narrative of progress with occasional eliminational pathos. The extreme version of the eliminational model of progress . . . presents a kind of tunnel vision of the road toward the future. It presumes that there is *no environment around that tunnel, no context, no other streets and avenues that take a detour* from the underground speed lanes and traffic jams. Reflective nostalgia challenges this tunnel vision, backtracking, slowing down, looking sideways, meditating on the journey itself. (347-348 emphasis added)

In this passage, Boym identifies a disavowal of materiality accompanying the breathless hyperbole about digital media during the late twentieth century. Jonathan Sterne similarly emphasizes the physically embedded nature of such emergent technology and writes, “In its very name, the Internet signals hardware and infrastructure. . . . our new media subjects are not only embodied, but they are surrounded by piles and piles of humanmade stuff. Much of this stuff is going to be taken out of service long before it no longer works. It will sit in offices and warehouses. And then it will be trashed” (17). But what of spaces such as the Midwest that still contain the physical and cultural detritus of pre-digital industries, as well as a dependency on such materiality for an identity?

Boym’s spatial metaphors for technology and nostalgia dovetail with the way in which popular narratives configure the twenty-first century Midwest’s anachronistic status in relation to a digitized online frontier. The Midwest is a territory that repeatedly has been situated outside of narratives of technological progress, and the region’s popular image corresponds to the slower, non-linear qualities that Boym attributes to reflective nostalgia. This resistance to the new has pervaded Midwestern narratives since the turn of

the twentieth century, and regional texts from the past two decades continue to define the Midwest as an atemporal space of nostalgia. Just as the Midwest once was a destination or stopping point for European settlers entering Turner's frontier space, it again is configured as a bubble outside of the ceaselessly expedited flow of information within a virtual frontier.

Despite historical challenges to the veracity of Turner's views, his stance on the fallout from geographic constriction continues to loom large in popular representations of the Midwest. Due in part to the Midwest being a circumscribed territory, its spatial and cultural isolation is presented as a factor that prompts Midwesterners to look into the past for their identity. Films such as *A History of Violence* and *Boys Don't Cry* show the Midwest to be a rough and tumble space that has regressed to violent frontier conditions requiring equally anachronistic individuals to occupy and tame the environment. In this regard, various twenty-first century Midwestern narratives surreptitiously contemporize Turner at the same moment that Manovich links an emerging digital frontier with the closed Western frontier from one century earlier. The tone towards this shared reference point varies wildly between Manovich's quite utopic outlook on virtual frontiers and the regressively nostalgic flipside emerging from the fictional Midwest. These surprising parallel allusions to Turner thus expose tensions regarding the cultural touchstones that remain for those communities and spaces that have been left behind from the ostensibly ubiquitous expansion into a digital frontier. As I will detail, *Boys Don't Cry* and *A History of Violence* provide a complex view of the regional environments that persist outside of digital realms.

### ***Boys Don't Cry***

*Boys Don't Cry* depicts the regulation of regional identity via nostalgic violence in a manner that compliments *A History of Violence*. Peirce's film has received extensive scholarly commentary and critique, but its Midwestern setting has been under-examined in relation to other ideological concerns. A renewed attentiveness to this regional context extends and complicates the film's treatment of gender, class, and race by revealing those categories to be greatly restricted within standardized Midwestern representational conventions. Given this regional context, *Boys Don't Cry* is both a representative and singular film among a diverse group of regional texts from around the turn of the millennium.

Based on actual events, *Boys Don't Cry* details the final days of Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank), a transgender male who was raped and killed by John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III) in Falls City, Nebraska after it was discovered that his biological sex was female. Across a "debate" spanning several issues of *Screen* in 2001 and 2002, Patricia White, Judith Halberstam, Jennifer Devere Brody, and others have remarked on the primary ways in which Peirce's film explores issues of sexuality, gender, and race. For instance, Halberstam identifies an internally-divided "transgender gaze" and problematizes the way in which Peirce's film "makes the transgender subject dependent upon the recognition of a woman" (296), a reference to scenes in which Brandon's lover Lana Tisdell (Chloe Sevigny) is called upon to affirm Brandon's performance of masculinity.

Another major point of criticism is Peirce's omission of Philip DeVine, a disabled African-American man, from the film's narrative. In reality, John and Tom murdered Brandon, Lisa Lambert,<sup>59</sup> and DeVine, who had been dating Lambert's sister, Leslie (White 221). *Boys Don't Cry* notably features no African-American characters whatsoever, and Halberstam ties DeVine's absence to the film's troublesome reaffirmation of Brandon as a woman by suggesting that Peirce "sacrifices the hard facts of racial hatred and transphobia to a streamlined humanist romance" (298). Brody writes the most extensive critique of DeVine's absence, and she asserts that "the erasure of DeVine from the narrative places the white female bodies as the only true victims of crime; and the film's inability to show DeVine as violated rather than violator perpetuates the myth of the black man as always already a perpetrator of crime" (95-96). Drawing these analyses together, I contend that Peirce is operating within a cinematic tradition that has its own discrete set of representational conventions, i.e., filmic depictions of the Midwest.

As discussed earlier, Johnson includes "'whiteness' and heteronormativity" (19) as integral components of Midwestern representational conventions, and these strong associations situate the region in a paradoxical situation. Although the Midwest frequently is denigrated for being culturally backwards, Johnson argues that the Heartland's linkage with "dominant cultural identifications" (18) actually ascribes power to regional images. Because of this oscillation between marginal and dominant status, the Midwest serves as a cultural straw man of sorts, a regional depository for negative

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<sup>59</sup> In the film, the character of Candace (Alicia Goranson) is based partially on Lambert.

attributes that are inseparable from American culture, but are presented as being endemic solely to a space already configured as “backwards.”

Within this Midwestern framework, the horrific rape in *Boys Don't Cry* can be read as an act of nostalgic violence because John and Tom assault Brandon in order to “correct” his deviance from oppressive regional norms relating to gender and sexual orientation. The rape is distinguished from Brandon’s eventual murder because the former violence is enacted for purposes of social regulation, whereas the latter act stems from John and Tom seeking to stop Brandon from testifying against them. After the traumatic rape, John callously states, “If you keep our secret, we’ll stay friends. All right, little buddy?” As dubious as the promise of sustained friendship might seem, Peirce presents John’s offer at face value. The implication of this assault is that since Brandon’s gender is brutally “restored” to its “natural” state, then Falls City’s normative social order also is restored. Brandon’s gender performance is considered to be transgressive within the film’s Midwestern setting, which is why he is disciplined through the nostalgic violence inflicted on his body.

Not only do the characters of John and Tom perpetrate nostalgic violence, but so too does DeVine’s absence roughly correspond to this category – as an act of violence by means of narrative elision on the part of Peirce. This omission does not completely obviate the film’s advocacy of sexual and gender identity tolerance, but it still partially reasserts the dominance of the violent discrimination to which *Boys Don't Cry* ostensibly is opposed. An ideological challenge thus becomes apparent for those filmmakers who attempt to represent the Midwest: how might progressive political and social views be

presented within a setting that seemingly drives everything in normative or reactionary directions?

One option is to highlight or possibly exaggerate the dysfunctional elements within standard regional imagery. Brenda Cooper claims that Peirce “challenge[s] heteronormativity and *heterosexual* narratives . . . by dismantling the myth of ‘America’s heartland’” and “by problematizing heteromascularity,” among other functions (49 emphasis in original). Similarly, Lisa Henderson focuses on the film’s stereotypical class elements, which create “a gothic, elemental portrait of a dead-end community whose citizens are rarely able to act on their own behalf. . . .” (302). A general lack of mobility haunts the inhabitants of Falls City, in terms of class and geography, and those restrictions produce a nostalgic desire to preserve identity traits that affirm a “traditional” image of Midwestern identity. Even John and Tom, who violently take it upon themselves to enforce normative regional performances on others (particularly Brandon), are depicted as being unable to perceive any potential for alternate lifestyles. Accordingly, the narrative developments of *Boys Don’t Cry* are inextricable from its setting and require a careful consideration of the relationship between the Midwest and the identity performances that it compels.

The limited varieties of masculine performance in Falls City signal the town’s disconnect from the supposedly liberatory potential of virtual space, where new identities may be adopted and discarded with relative ease. Brandon’s limited financial means and inability to communicate with distant or online communities greatly affect his gender performance and identity in general. Consequently, the influence of the isolated Midwestern setting on Brandon’s performance of masculinity must not be discounted. By

emphasizing the remote Nebraska setting of *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon may be understood as both a gender rebel *and* as a regional conformist. Because Brandon's masculine performance occurs within a distinctly Midwestern locale, the closed environment affects the very construction of that identity. Culturally-embedded restrictions and physical proximity to a limited roster of deviant males, such as John and Tom, conspire to provide Brandon with few gender models to emulate or react against. Although Lana is attracted to Brandon because of his more sensitive and considerate nature, Brandon still feels compelled to display a rougher masculinity by participating in a bar brawl early in the film and later risking serious injury while drunkenly "bumper skiing." Within Falls City, to perform masculinity is to disfigure and damage one's body, to mark it as both an agent and receptacle of violence.

*A History of Violence* also is set within a relatively closed community in which the maintenance of its idealized surface is dependent on the nostalgic violence of white male characters. Much like *Boys Don't Cry*, Cronenberg's film presents characters conforming to Midwestern small town imagery by taking cues from their surrounding social environment in order to infer acceptable behaviors and appearances; any deviance from such norms results in swift "correction." Throughout *A History of Violence*, Tom Stall (Viggo Mortensen) especially utilizes an innate savagery to preserve the stereotypical Midwestern lifestyle that he has adopted. With this film, Cronenberg reveals the clear dependency of regional norms upon nostalgic violence and the accompanying complicity of a community willing to accept such brutality in order to preserve the outdated images to which it nostalgically clings for meaning.

### *A History of Violence*

Adapted from a 1997 graphic novel (written by John Wagner and illustrated by Vince Locke), the film version of *A History of Violence* borrows the general conceit of a Midwestern family man hiding an abandoned identity and violent past from his community. Significantly, Cronenberg discards most of the details of the original narrative. The film focuses on the psychological balancing act of protagonist Tom Stall as he attempts to preserve his outward performance of stereotypical Midwestern traits while dealing with the return of Joey Cusack, Tom's repressed identity as a violent gangster during his youth on the east coast. For the sake of clarity, I generally will refer to the character as "Tom" and note the moments in which "Joey" emerges, although he exists as a true Tom/Joey hybrid during much of the film. Following the violent reemergence of "Joey" within Millbrook, Tom draws the attention of Philadelphia gangster Carl Fogerty (Ed Harris), who "Joey" had maimed years earlier. Tom contends with increased scrutiny from both Carl and his family for much of the film, which reaches its climax when Tom is summoned to visit his estranged brother Richie (William Hurt), a major mob boss in Philadelphia. Tom kills Richie and then returns to Millbrook, where the divided protagonist faces an uncertain reunion with his family.

Throughout the film, Cronenberg highlights the conditions within the undistinguished Indiana town of Millbrook that support Tom's performance and enable it to persist. As Cronenberg observes on the film's DVD commentary track, "This town is maybe too perfect. And that's part of the playing with mythology of Americana that America itself wants to believe. There's a lot of that in this movie." This sense of play

operates on multiple levels in the film, including Cronenberg's manipulation of regional myths, Tom's constructed identity, and the willingness of Millbrook's inhabitants to sustain a façade of normalcy that repeatedly is fractured by violence. I aim to show that, over the course of the film, Cronenberg sets about dismantling reified Midwestern imagery by depicting it as a shell that not only obscures, but also is dependent upon a latent violence housed within such regional fictions. In this way, *A History of Violence* presents an interlocking place-bound network of Midwestern performances that work to create and maintain an idealized version of the region, one whose surface-level unity is preserved through Tom's brutal deployment of nostalgic violence. Situating the film within Cronenberg's filmography will provide context for this thematic content.

Since early in his career, Cronenberg has gained notoriety for presenting viewers with extremely graphic depictions of bodily transformations resulting from medical mishaps, scientific experiments, genetic mutations, and drug usage, among other phenomena. By contrast, *A History of Violence* tells the story of a superficially ordinary Midwestern man defending his family from Philadelphia gangsters. Certainly, there is graphic violence and moments of gore, but the diegetic world of the narrative ostensibly involves no farfetched elements that could not be found in everyday life. Consequently, much of the initial commentary<sup>60</sup> surrounding *A History of Violence* touches on Cronenberg's shift to less abrasive aesthetics that appeared in *Spider* (2002) and have been featured more prominently in the subsequent *Eastern Promises* (2007) and *A*

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<sup>60</sup> For instance, Scott Wilson observes in *The Politics of Insects: David Cronenberg's Cinema of Confrontation* (2011) that *A History of Violence* stands as "the first non-Cronenbergian text by Cronenberg, a film . . . in which all of the recognizably Cronenbergian themes (see *Videodrome*) have been so refined as to be only obliquely visible" (200).

*Dangerous Method* (2011). Those thematic elements that heretofore typically were filtered through outrageous special effects now are evident via an attentiveness to the subtleties of the film's lead performances. In this sense, Cronenberg has mutated from a director of body horror to a director interested in identity transformations that are effected by intentional performative acts within the narrative.

In *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (2006), William Beard suggests that Cronenberg's films "are full of split or scattered subjects, but none of them can survive in what is inevitably revealed to be an emotionally and psychologically dysfunctional status. All of them yearn for a wholeness that can have no place in the (post)modern world; and the author, too, must be seen as yearning for a wholeness that he fully understands cannot exist" (viii-ix). Despite Cronenberg's changing aesthetic mode on display in *A History of Violence*, Beard's summation of the director's troubled characters remains applicable. In this film, divisions of self are entangled with spatial and temporal relationships that are deeply attached to the film's Midwestern setting. Many cinematic depictions of the millennial Midwest feature narratives with fragmented protagonists who remain isolated even in this era of digital communication networks. For instance, Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* features an aged white male protagonist (played by Eastwood himself) who revels in the reactivation of a violent frontier-like space within modern-day Detroit, a development that nostalgically demands a savior in the mold of Turner's idealized white pioneers. In *Boys Don't Cry*, Brandon's performance of masculinity is bound by the film's desolate Nebraska setting, an environment that limits the very construction of his gender identity through culturally-embedded restrictions. Including *A History of Violence*, these films consistently portray the Midwest as a space

with a fractured identity that perhaps never has been as uniform as its popular image would suggest. Yet, the nostalgic violence perpetrated by characters in these films reflects a desire for a restrictive and damaging “wholeness” that is based on fictions about the region’s past.

The Midwest’s anachronistic<sup>61</sup> popular identity simultaneously elevates and degrades the region in the estimation of outsiders. Depending on the perspective, the region alternates between being lauded for its temporal proximity to a nobler, “better” version of the United States that has been lost and denigrated for its preservation of outdated values that limit individuals who fall outside of regressive norms relating to gender, race, sexual orientation, labor, and so on. *A History of Violence*’s Indiana setting is precisely such an anachronistic locale, as Millbrook grants its twenty-first century inhabitants access to an idealized past state of Midwestern living. This temporally aberrant town especially presents opportunities for an outsider such as Tom, who seeks this Midwestern space because it enables him to occupy a temporality preceding the one in which he was a vicious gang enforcer. Rather than the Midwest merely being a museum of past American values, as James Shortridge writes, *A History of Violence* instead shows that the region is a space of simultaneity in which numerous temporalities

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<sup>61</sup> In *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (2009), Bliss Cua Lim links Dipesh Chakrabarty’s discussion of modernity and anachronism to the “objectifying temporal distance of the ethnographic gaze” found in postcolonial discourses (90). For Chakrabarty, Lim explains, the identification of certain spaces and cultures as anachronistic is a necessary conditionality for the establishment of modern homogeneous time elsewhere. Hence, Lim writes that “this allochronic gesture . . . converts something that is our contemporary, something that cohabits our present and attests to the diversity of that present, into something that is ‘noncontemporaneous,’ a relic of the past” (89). The conversion of a coeval space into one that is perceived as containing the past thus is indicative of a hierarchical power structure among various locales, and this relationship forms the basis for how the Midwest is presented in popular culture.

occupy the same territory. A tension thus emerges regarding which temporal conditions are considered to be “Midwestern” and which ones are determined to be representative of elsewhere. In response to this uncertainty, nostalgic violence assumes a regulatory function by which it sorts out those individuals and behaviors that may be designated as “Midwestern” and those that are attached to other locales or that deviate from the region’s essentialized image.

Mark Browning highlights the peculiar temporal dynamics that operate throughout *A History of Violence in David Cronenberg: Author or Film-maker?* (2007). In his brief commentary on the film, Browning notes two shots of a clock that always displays the same time in the center of Millbrook, and from this detail, he extrapolates, “Paradoxically, the narrative takes place within an extended frozen moment. It concerns the past but principally how this co-exists with the present *at the same time and within the same person* – Viggo Mortensen’s character. . . . The past doesn’t meet the present – the two have always co-existed” (37-38 emphasis in original). Considered from this perspective, the overlapping Tom Stall and Joey Cusack personas reflect back upon the museum-like Midwestern setting, which is characterized by temporal simultaneity; past American culture somehow occupies the same space as the present within the region. The ultimate desire of the nostalgic subject – to restore or relive an idealized version of the past – is made available by the very regional landscape itself. But what distinguishes Cronenberg’s usage of the out-of-time Midwestern museum image is that he illuminates the various practices that contribute to the production and preservation of this temporal condition, particularly an unwavering commitment to idealized performances of Midwestern-ness and a willingness to engage in acts of nostalgic violence.

The “focus on a perpetual present” (38) that Browning detects in *A History of Violence* is introduced immediately through a deliberately-paced long take that lasts just over four minutes at the start of the film. Two men, later identified as Leland (Stephen McHattie) and Billy (Greg Bryk), exit from a room at a small roadside motel and slowly get into a convertible. The first cut of the film occurs when Billy enters the motel office to get water. Inside the office are the bodies of two people who presumably have been murdered by Leland and Billy, and a young girl tentatively emerges from a back room. Billy calmly pulls out a pistol and shoots her; just as the gunshot explodes over the soundtrack, Cronenberg cuts to a shot of Tom’s similarly aged daughter Sarah Stall (Heidi Hayes) sitting up in bed and screaming as she awakens from an apparent nightmare. A rapid tonal shift results from the combination of the lethargic long take, the jump cut, and the sound bridge. These elements lend the opening moments a certain degree of uncertainty as to whether the motel scene was Sarah’s dream or an actual narrative event. The sound bridge somewhat suggests temporal continuity, but the spatial proximity between the gunshot and the bedroom is unclear. Are these killers near the Stall home? Are they inventions of Sarah, and is the girl at the motel an imagined version of herself? This ambiguity is furthered by Cronenberg’s nearly parodic depiction of familial unity that ensues.

Upon hearing Sarah’s scream, Tom, teenage son Jack (Ashton Holmes), and wife Edie (Maria Bello) each enter the room and begin comforting the child. Throughout this scene, the Stalls are shot in medium close-up, and their four heads are tightly clustered in the frame, which lends a claustrophobic feel to their support for one another. Tom asserts, “There’s no such thing as monsters,” but Sarah insists, “They came out of my closet, and

then they were in the shadows.” Clearly, this foreshadows the narrative developments to come. Tom is committed to presenting an idealized version of reality to his family, while Sarah reveals an intuited awareness of something sinister already existing within the Stalls’ seemingly perfect domestic space: what eventually is revealed to be the “Joey” persona. The family’s tight interconnectedness is reemphasized during a breakfast scene the next morning, as Jack asks Sarah if a nightlight helped with the “monsters,” Tom gives Jack advice on playing softball, and Edie drives Tom to the diner that he owns.

A small degree of overlapping temporality punctuates a scene set at the end of that same day when Edie and Tom perform some mild sexual roleplaying. Edie dresses as a high school cheerleader because, as she explains, “We never got to be teenagers together.” For Browning, this encounter is “based on creating a fiction in the present” (38), a condition that propels the entire narrative. This scene reveals nostalgic desire for an absent past, a history that simply does not exist because Edie and Tom did not know one another when they were young. Consequently, this performative encounter is their attempt to access a fictional past by adopting cultural images of teenage lust, i.e., a cheerleader uniform. The combination of the early jump cut from dreamlike long take to Sarah awaking from a nightmare and the role playing scene collaborate to undermine the film’s temporal stability, and performativity is shown to be an innate quality in the Stall family.

These initial impressions of the Stalls suggest that they are an exceptionally charmed unit, but Cronenberg’s purpose is not to construct an ironic portrait of Midwestern family life. Each member of the Stall clan appears to sincerely care for the others, and so Cronenberg instead reflects on what is necessary to create and preserve this

portrait of idyllic Midwestern domesticity. Cronenberg publicly pondered what conditions were necessary to support Millbrook, but within the narrative, he probes even deeper by breaking the community into its component parts and examining the elements upon which the Stalls are dependent for stability. Cronenberg begins to provide a response to queries about what “support” entails with his presentation of the symbiotic relationship between Tom’s performance and Millbrook itself. Together, both entities perpetuate and reinforce one another’s illusion of Midwestern perfection. Tom’s embodiment of a Midwestern everyman is sustainable only within a community that is eager to accept it, and that performance also is a product of the very social conditions within that “perfect little town.” Everyone in Millbrook is committed to supporting performances that reflect traditional Midwestern narratives, from Tom’s diligence regarding Midwestern mannerisms to his family and the local police each working to protect Tom’s public identity in their own ways.

The cooperation between Tom and the residents of Millbrook is one additional element that further distinguishes *A History of Violence* from much of Cronenberg’s work to that point in his career. In *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg* (2000), Michael Grant writes, “There is, in Cronenberg’s films, a turning away from the immediacies of communal and social circumstance, a subversion of contour and legible order, in a paradoxical drive to what exists on the far side of humanity” (7). This “turning away” from community and towards isolation in earlier films likely is attributable to the bodily mutations that occur within a given film, whereas the crucial transformation in *A History of Violence* is Joey’s pre-narrative invention of “Tom.” In fact, the “Joey” and “Tom” personas each could be situated on “the far side of humanity,” but on opposing

ends of a spectrum. Both identities may be described as extreme or excessive in various ways, but the Tom identity – the preservation of which is perhaps the film’s primary conflict – necessitates communal support. Maintaining this identity transformation is a collective endeavor that was begun individually, but which quickly became interdependent. So what are the key components of this performance?

Essentially, Tom’s performance of Midwestern traits operates as an amalgam of mainstream imagery that circulates about the region. Recalling Judith Butler’s emphasis on “constraint” as being a defining element of performativity<sup>62</sup> (59-60), Tom’s outward identity is predicated on the physical and abstract constraints that dictate what is acceptable in terms of appearance, values, and behavior within Millbrook. For instance, as “Tom,” Mortensen uses an unassumingly meek and warm vocal affectation, while as “Joey,” Mortensen’s voice remains soft-spoken, but exudes menace through its emotionless, flat cadence. Such understated language and mannerisms are complemented by Tom’s adornment of a Midwestern small town “uniform” of sorts, which consists of jeans, a plaid shirt, and sneakers for the entirety of the film. It is obvious that Tom perceives the Midwest as being the locus of the generic in nearly every conceivable way, but he did not invent such associations; rather, Tom draws on a pre-existing set of

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<sup>62</sup> Butler’s oft-referenced theories of performativity most explicitly consider gender performance, but in *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”* (1993), she clarifies that the “identifications” of “race or sexuality or class or geopolitical positioning/displacement” require as much attention as those of gender, “for these identifications are invariably imbricated in one another, the vehicle for one another. . . .” (78). Focusing on the specifics of a regional setting is one approach by which the interplay between these identifications becomes clearer. The Midwest especially is presented as a space that imposes limitations on its inhabitants, and such dynamics dovetail with Butler’s assertion of “constraint . . . as the very condition of performativity. . . . Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity” (59-60).

images, mannerisms, and behaviors that circulate in popular culture. Hence, Tom's mimicry of this reified regional iconography reveals that the "Tom" persona is an identity that merely had to be learned, rehearsed, and performed.

The complicated task of becoming Tom is not depicted in the film, and this development is yet another narrative omission that troubles linear temporal continuity. Despite the knowledge that Tom came from elsewhere, he seemingly has always been in Millbrook. It is as if the Tom identity already existed, but was held in stasis until being donned by Joey. Because Tom is a generically archetypical Midwestern figure, any absent history may simply be recreated or invented within the nostalgic Midwestern environment. For instance, the roleplaying scene with Edie fills in a gap in Tom's personal history within the Millbrook community. Even though the film lacks a depiction of Tom's arrival in the town, he clearly ingratiated himself to the community very quickly by adopting traits that have been normalized as "Midwestern" in popular culture.

In *The Politics of Insects*, Wilson highlights this strategic element of Tom's identity by observing that "his performance of the town's specific hegemonic, ideological (and, hence, disciplinary) requirements is knowingly and consciously enacted" (204). While recuperating in the hospital after being shot, Tom explains the constructed nature of his identity to Edie, who resentfully asks, "What are you, like some multiple personality schizoid? It's like flipping a switch back and forth for you?" Seemingly bewildered, Tom replies, "I never expected to see Joey again. . . . I thought I killed Joey Cusack. I went out to the desert, and I killed him. I spent three years becoming Tom Stall." This act of "becoming" involves the rehearsal of Midwestern affectations and the adornment of apparel associated with the region in popular culture. The climactic

encounter with Richie repeats the line of questioning from the hospital, as Tom's brother sarcastically inquires, "You're living the American dream, you really bought into it, didn't you? You've been this other guy almost as long as you've been yourself. Hey, when you dream, are you still Joey?" Again, Tom dutifully insists, "Joey's been dead a long time," although to this point in the film, he has used Joey's violent faculties to kill several people.

There are four scenes in which "Joey" makes an appearance in the film, each of which is linked to violence: during an attempted robbery at Stall's Diner by Leland and Billy; when gangster Carl Fogarty and his men threaten the Stalls at their home; in the midst of a brutal sex scene with Edie after Tom has admitted to being Joey; and while disposing of Richie and his men in Philadelphia. In all of these instances, Mortensen oscillates between the Tom and Joey personas, often with some degree of uncertainty as to which identity is dominant at a given moment. Beyond Joey's shocking acts of extreme violence, Mortensen's nuanced performance reveals fissures in the constructed "Tom" exterior through subtle shifts in mannerisms and gestures that alert viewers to the presence of Joey. Before returning to the scenes in which Tom commits murder, the complicated encounter with Edie merits a closer look.

Following Tom's murder of Carl Fogarty's bodyguards (teenage Jack dispatched Carl with a shotgun blast) and a second stay in the hospital, Sheriff Sam Carney (Peter MacNeill) confronts the Stall patriarch about needing to "hear the truth" regarding Tom's past. Edie returns home during this conversation and, despite her misgivings about Tom's newly revealed proclivity for violence, defends the authenticity of her husband's Midwestern identity. Sam exits, and Cronenberg presents a second sexual encounter

between Edie and Tom, who both undergo rapid shifts between personas for its duration. After pursuing Edie to the staircase, Tom reaches out for his wife, who turns and slaps him in the face. Mortensen's visage then hardens into that of "Joey" – as evident by an intense glare in his eyes – and he chokes Edie, who responds by tauntingly calling him "Joey." Edie turns to escape up the stairs, but "Joey" trips her and spreads her legs. Mortensen abruptly softens his countenance and begins to separate himself from Edie, but she pulls his head towards her face and kisses him, which leads to bruising intercourse on the wooden steps. Upon climax, they gently kiss until Edie scornfully pushes Tom away and ascends the stairs, while Tom remains below and passively watches her leave.

Both characters fluctuate between identities throughout this encounter. Tom reverts to the violence-prone Joey while initially assaulting Edie, but overrides this impulse, and the more outwardly passive Tom persona quickly returns. Edie, on the other hand, performs being overwhelmed with grief in front of the sheriff, shuns Tom's emotionally-needy pleas, appears both revolted and aroused by the "Joey" persona, and then pushes feeble Tom away once more. These contradictory impulses are indicative of the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion by violence in the film. A major part of Edie's ambivalence and outright antipathy for Tom could stem from a realization, conscious or not, that her ideal family life would not have existed had Tom not actually been Joey. Without discarding that monstrous identity in favor of a generically Midwestern one, the "perfect" Stall family would never have been. This intricate dependency of idealized Midwestern imagery upon violence – as evident by the fact that

violent Joey is a necessary precondition for activating the archetypal Midwestern figure of Tom – is even more transparent in the other three scenes in which Joey appears.

Tom's violence during the diner scene initially appears to be instinctual, as he simply responds to the immediate threat of death. After Tom efficiently dispatches Leland and Billy, Cronenberg tightly frames the protagonist in a close-up looking around nervously with the gun in his hand. Tom's concerned gaze glances at the gun, but then quickly looks away. He lowers the pistol out of the frame, and his eyes continue darting back and forth, as if troubled by the unanticipated exposure of his violent capabilities. The subsequent appearance of Carl and his men at the Stall home, however, prompts an intentional transformation into "Joey." To defend his family, Tom summons the latent violence that he has worked to suppress within himself. During this scene, Mortensen's utterances are flat and emotionless, and his gaze becomes both vacant and piercing. After the mobsters release Jack, Tom calmly declares, "I think it'd be better if you'd just leave now," and this statement assumes the tone of a warning more than a polite Midwestern request. Here, Tom's Midwestern accent is barely perceptible, and Mortensen appears to be portraying Joey performing "Tom." Even as Joey asserts control of the body, a slight vocal trace of "Tom" persists and reflects the tenuous nature of both identities. Having rehearsed being "Tom" for so long, not even Joey is able to fully destroy this constructed identity. This Jekyll and Hyde oscillatory quality is evident as the "Joey" personality dissipates after Jack shoots Carl. The father trains his intense gaze onto his stunned son and appears to be sizing up Jack; Tom snatches the rifle from Jack's hands, and while flitting his eyes between the weapon and his son, the hardened "Joey" facial expression slides away and is replaced with Tom looking concerned.

The use of voice to denote identity recurs upon Tom's arrival in Philadelphia to meet one of Richie's henchmen at a bar. When asked if he is Joey, Tom's voice again hardens and he passionlessly admits, "Yeah, I'm Joey." Tom unconvincingly adopts his soft-spoken vocal affectations at Richie's mansion while trying to convince the fraternal mob boss that he enjoys the stereotypical Midwestern family life. Richie's men then fail in their attempts to kill Tom, and the Cusack brothers are left staring face-to-face at one another. With the intense, vacant "Joey" demeanor on full display, Tom shoots Richie in the head and softly mutters his brother's name. This sequence indicates, as does the encounter with Carl on the Stalls' front lawn, that Tom is developing the ability to inhabit either personality at will and for strategic purposes. The performance of "Joey" in Carl's presence functions as a warning, an announcement that the potential for violence is present; conversely, by playing up his adopted Midwestern mannerisms at Richie's home, Tom attempts to evade punishment for his violent past by demonstrating that he now is a simple Midwesterner. Nevertheless, the performance of the "Tom" personality rings false in this latter scene through its exaggeration of Midwestern traits, largely on account of the setting. Cronenberg continually emphasizes the duality of Tom within a Midwestern space, where there is a temporal overlap of identities. "Joey" is considered to be "past" and "Tom" is designated as the "present," but they both occupy the same body within the region. In Philadelphia, Tom does not fully exist because the conditions necessary for sustaining that identity are located elsewhere, in Millbrook. At Richie's home, Cronenberg presents – through Mortensen's meticulous performance – Joey playing "Tom," which is yet another indication that only in the anachronistic Midwest may Tom successfully alternate identities.

This spatialized identity dynamic is underscored by the film's next scene. After Tom kills Richie, Cronenberg cuts to a brief scene the next morning that depicts Tom walking to a pond behind the mansion and washing the blood from his body. The cleansing symbolism of this scene may be a bit heavy-handed on the surface, but as Wilson observes, the preceding elliptical edit calls attention to "an uncomfortable lack. Something has occurred during this period that the film is unable to represent, and we spectators . . . do not have the requisite information to fill in this space" (207). This narrative gap illustrates the dependency of the competing Tom and Joey personas on environment. In Millbrook, the Tom identity is visibly restored almost immediately after Joey's violence, as if to justify savage behavior by displaying the "good" identity that has been protected. At Richie's mansion, on the other hand, the Joey persona dominates in his native Eastern environment and even performs as "Tom." Within the simultaneous temporalities of the Midwest, the Tom and Joey identities may switch back and forth rather quickly, while shifting between the two in Philadelphia requires a lengthy transitional period. The drive to and from the east coast further affirms this condition, as the time required to traverse the space between Philadelphia and Millbrook functions as a necessary duration for the alternation of identity outside of the Indiana town. The unseen and delayed restoration of the Tom persona following these final murders in the film ultimately reinforces that identity's dependency on Midwestern spaces.

The ease with which Tom's performance is accepted and the accompanying vigorous defense of it by the townspeople function as an indictment of Millbrook. What enables Tom's past to remain undetected is the community's willingness to embrace imagery and mannerisms that fit idealized perceptions of the region. Tom looks and plays

the part of a generic Midwesterner, so he is accepted as such. This is made explicit when Carl and his men first approach Tom at the diner. Edie phones Sheriff Carney, who stops Carl's vehicle on the outskirts of Millbrook and threatens, "Let me make something clear. . . . This is a nice town. We have nice people here. We take care of our nice people. Do you understand me?" This sentiment is repeated in the ensuing scene at the Stall home, where Sam questions Tom as to whether he is involved in a witness protection program. Tom refutes the notion and thanks Sam for "watching out for us." Sam responds by asserting, "Come on, Tom. You know we look out for our own here." Sam's inclusion of Tom within the categories of "our nice people" and "our own" reaffirms the successfulness of Tom's performance and is indicative of the shared preoccupation with regulating the town's appearance. Visually and aurally discordant elements such as suit-wearing gangsters with Philadelphia accents must be escorted out of Millbrook, but so long as Tom *looks* and *sounds* appropriate, he is able to stay within this idealized space. In this way, Cronenberg reveals the masking properties of Midwestern imagery, which is utilized to obscure violent tendencies. Tom's presence has not clandestinely contaminated the town with violence; instead, violence – particularly that enacted by Tom – is necessary for molding and supporting the image that the community wishes to present publicly.

Tom's surprisingly proficient violence in the diner prompts Wilson to label him as "a figure of extremity" (205) whose "response is both entirely in accordance with the disciplinary dictates of the society he is a member of (both, at a local level, Millbrook and, at a much larger level, the United States), and also entirely in excess of those dictates" (204). Although Wilson's attention to the relationship between violence and

Millbrook's culture is insightful, this reading overlooks the community's general acceptance of Tom following that early scene. Tom's performance of Midwestern-ness is not questioned until outsiders – Carl and his bodyguards – enter the town, and Tom presumably would have been able to maintain his carefully crafted identity without further interruption had there been no media coverage of his violence. Wilson's argument also presumes that Tom is the only community member with a layered identity, a notion that is belied by Edie's performance in front of Sam and even by her playful cheerleader bedroom act. Those additional moments of performativity indicate that Tom's performative nature may not atypical, but perhaps is a prerequisite for being counted among the "nice people" of Millbrook.

Because preserving the illusion of "perfect" Midwestern imagery is the overt purpose of Tom's violent actions after the diner scene, all of those instances are clear examples of nostalgic violence. In particular, the latter two scenes in which "Joey" emerges and kills people – on the Stall's front lawn and at Richie's mansion – do not involve Tom's material wealth being threatened. Instead, that violence is born from a nostalgic desire to sustain the idealized present state of life for the Stalls and the small Indiana community in general. The town, family, and figure of Tom himself all are shown to be dependent on the brutal violence of "Joey," as evident by a cause-and-effect sequence that binds the film's events: the past pre-narrative violence of Joey led to the creation of Midwestern Tom, whose diner violence led to the attempted retribution by Joey's former east coast associates, which led to additional murders by the Tom/Joey hybrid in order to stabilize the appearance of the small town environment in which the Tom identity flourishes. Acts of violence perpetually precede, disrupt, and restore Tom's

desired Midwestern lifestyle, and Cronenberg persistently reiterates that the isolated town's perfection relies upon a non-digital network of collaborating identities that is supported by nostalgic violence.

Much like the post-nightmare scene that introduces the Stalls, Cronenberg concludes *A History of Violence* with a mournful final moment that is borderline parodic. Upon returning from the murderous Philadelphia excursion, Tom reenters his Indiana home while the family is eating dinner. Tom sits, Sarah sets his place, and Jack passes him a tray with meatloaf. Cronenberg's camera lingers over the detailed mise-en-scene, which allows the audience to see the Stalls' stereotypical meal that includes mashed potatoes, peas, carrots, and corn. Tom's nostalgic violence has succeeded in restoring a superficial appearance of normality to the household, but his actions also have made transparent the interdependency of performativity, violence, and nostalgia for propping up an essentialized image of Midwestern normality. Now forced to contemplate the constructed nature of their identities, Tom and Edie silently weep across the table from one another, as the perfection of their idealized family has been shattered, but they are compelled to continue performing their roles, nonetheless.

*A History of Violence* is a key example of representational conventions endemic to films depicting the Midwest at the turn of the twenty-first century. Cronenberg presents a forceful Midwestern counter-narrative that responds to the utopic rhetoric emanating from the discourses concerned with emerging digital technologies in an era of media convergence. Rather than transcending distance within a virtual frontier, the geographically isolated Millbrook remains a willfully closed-off community that compulsively yields to an irresistible sense of nostalgia. As Boym writes, "The nostalgic

feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space” (xiv), and Millbrook’s inhabitants collectively work towards collapsing the past and present with stylized performances of Midwestern-ness. Together, these Midwesterners support the lingering perception of the region as an atemporal museum for lost or antiquated elements of American culture. The threat of nostalgic violence constantly looms behind these regional identity performances, as it strikes down and disciplines individuals who would challenge the surface-level placidity of Midwestern imagery. The convergence era may signal the death of distance for many individuals, but in *A History of Violence*, *Boys Don’t Cry*, and other films from this period, the millennial Midwest stubbornly remains detached and beholden to a conception of itself as a space of nostalgia.

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## Chapter Five:

## “I Used to Live Here”: Locating Sincerity and Midwestern Disillusionment

Svetlana Boym concludes *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) by reflecting on the perils of endurance, and she writes, “Survivors of the twentieth century, we are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic. But there seems to be no way back” (355). Such sentiments reveal a yearning for a moment prior to undesirable historical developments, and this perspective on the passage of time strongly informs one way in which the Midwest was addressed in popular culture around the turn of the new millennium. Increasingly, the Midwest was represented as a space whose present was severely wanting in relation to a past identity that had been heavily mythologized over the previous century. The most commonly reproduced image of the region, as Victoria Johnson articulates in *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U. S. Identity* (2008), presents Midwesterners as a white, middle-class, heteronormative, and conservative mass whose tastes rarely swerve from the most mainstream and mundane options available (5-7, 17-18). Within the context of an increasingly globalized world early in the new millennium, a reevaluation and revision of the Midwest’s popular identity began to emerge.

This chapter examines *About Schmidt* (Alexander Payne, 2002) and *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009), both of which feature white male protagonists who suffer from existential crises because their long held identities falter in response to the Midwest’s twenty-first century status as a degraded and falsely romanticized space within American culture. Both films’ protagonists are shown to have attempted either to resist or to

conform to traditional Midwestern stereotypes, yet these two characters experience a comparable disruption of identity that stems from a shared epiphany regarding the constructed nature of the Midwest's popular image. How these men deal with an encroaching sense of purposelessness serves as a microcosm for the Midwest's general identity during this period. As this chapter will illustrate, these fictional Midwesterners' malaise mirrors an increasingly common portrayal of the millennial Midwest as nostalgically desiring to reenact and restore idealized past images of itself that simply do not correspond to the region's contemporary status.

*About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air* filter the decline of the Midwest and its fluctuating symbolic role in American culture into narratives about an ostensibly privileged group of white, middle-class males who now have become increasingly irrelevant, listless, and burdened with nostalgia. Each narrative acknowledges ways in which fictions about the Midwest ultimately produce discontentment by falsely promising a meaningful existence through conformity to what is constructed as the "ordinary" or "real" version of the region. Even worse, with the declining circulation of the traditional regional images that Midwesterners had used to define themselves – either by embracing or reacting against them – a general sense of loss looms over the region and its inhabitants. The new object of nostalgia across these two films, then, is the moment just before collapsing Midwestern myths could no longer be sustained, the era for much of the twentieth century in which individual identity could be crafted in conjunction with that of the region. To borrow Boym's terms, the protagonists of *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air* yearn for a time when they were not nostalgic. As both films reveal, reconstituting a

sense of self from the shards of a fractured regional image is a daunting proposition full of uncertainty.

A palpable sense of disillusionment in relation to conventional Midwestern images informs the narratives of *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air*, both of which feature protagonists whose identities are constructed in relation to ideals about labor and family that have been linked with the Midwest throughout popular culture. As the films unfold, the stability of such norms is undermined, thus forcing a reassessment of each protagonist's carefully-crafted persona within a region whose identity increasingly is muddled. The shaken Midwesterners on display are forced to reassess how they construct their identities in the face of broader regional and global changes that unsettle the enduring and monolithic qualities that heretofore had defined the Midwest. Interestingly, the challenges of defining the Midwest's meaning in the early twenty-first century briefly became prominent during a contentious cultural debate that arose in the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> and then rapidly faded away.

### **Locating Sincerity**

In 2001, as the United States absorbed the trauma of the terrorist attacks that wrought carnage on the east coast, various media outlets valorized the sincerity and traditionalism long-associated with the Midwest, even if direct references to the region remained oblique. This peculiar and short-lived reaction spread through the popular press, resulting in hyperbolic declarations of a new era in American culture within the initial days and weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>. From high art to the lowbrow, commentators

chimed in with predictions that the tone of American culture and its entertainments had undergone an irrevocable transformation, one that overlapped with qualities perceived as already present in the nation's most central states and, indeed, endemic to those often ignored spaces.

Graydon Carter, editor of *Vanity Fair* and co-founder of the satirical *Spy* magazine, provided perhaps the most cited example of these declarations when he stated, "It's the end of the age of irony. . . . Irony that is cynical and reactive and unserious and detached – I think all of those things will seem foolish and dated" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). The September 24<sup>th</sup> issue of *Time* magazine found Roger Rosenblatt similarly opining, "One possible good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony," a period that the columnist claimed was marked by "detachment and personal whimsy." Another of the most prompt reactions came from Tom Freston, the then-CEO of MTV Networks. In an interview that was published in the September 21<sup>st</sup> issue of *Newsweek*, Freston emphasized the importance of the "tone" of popular culture, particularly in relation to "this new reality" that supposedly had come about in the wake of 9/11. Accordingly, the programming for MTV and VH1 temporarily was altered to reflect this predicted turn away from the ironic by playing music videos from exceedingly "sincere" artists such as Bob Marley, Jeff Buckley, and Indiana-native John Mellencamp, a paragon of populist heartland rock ("The Holy Or The Broken"; "Terror's Cultural Fallout"). Don DeLillo – whose December 2001 article, "In the ruins of the future," marked him as a latecomer to this chorus – wrote, "This catastrophic event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years." Above all, these proclamations of change revolved

around a belief that all Americans were about to embrace a new era of sincerity and serious-minded public discourse that previously had been lacking outside of isolated and culturally irrelevant sections of the country, such as the Midwest.

These prognostications proved to be little more than emotionally charged overreactions to the intense trauma of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and a backlash to the supposed death of irony began emerging almost as soon as it was declared. In an October 9<sup>th</sup> article in *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani reflected on the ways in which past traumas had produced artistic innovations, and she wrote that “the belief that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 will lead to kinder, gentler entertainment belies the historical record of reactions to earlier tragedies, wars and social upheavals. . . . disturbing historical events have tended to elicit not PG-rated displays of inspirational good taste but darker works of art resonating with a culture’s deepest fears and forebodings.” On September 25<sup>th</sup> – one day before a piece titled “The End Of Irony” appeared in *Newsweek – Salon* published an article in which David Beers decried “a cheapened grade of irony” that had supplanted the authentic article in American discourse over the previous several decades. Rather than a defanged concept of irony as “a handy shorthand for moral relativism and self-absorption, for consuming all that is puerile while considering oneself too hip to be implicated in the supply and demand economics of schlock,” Beers hoped for a renewed sense of “engaged irony” to develop and elevate cultural discourse. For Beers, the supposed end of irony was an inherently fallacious claim not only because it was proffered in a moment of trauma, but because “over the past decade ironic farce has been largely consumed as a side dish to sentimental earnestness. . . .” Kakutani expressed similar sentiments when she observed, “As allied air attacks commenced on Afghanistan,

and America braced for a possible second wave of terrorist attacks, it was often the fizzier, willfully light cultural offerings that seemed the most irrelevant.” If both a coolly ironic disposition and an excessively sincere one was inadequate after 9/11, and “engaged irony” required a precarious balancing act between the two, then how was the nation to determine an appropriate path forward? Had the terrorist attacks forced a critical reappraisal of the whole of American culture, or simply reactivated dormant conflicts about what constitutes the most authentic and ideal version of the United States?

Revisiting this short-lived debate from more than a decade later makes it quite clear that the weeks during the immediate aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> were an emotionally heated period in which an upended nation sought to restore its equilibrium through self-definition. As the “irony” commentators circled around questions of what American culture had been and should be, they actually were playing on historical associations with geographically discrete segments of the population and bickering over which region was the most representative of the country. Seemingly for the sake of imagining post-trauma cultural homogeneity, these media figures reproduced a perspective that the nation could only be *either* ironic *or* sincere, rather than acknowledging that each category roughly corresponded to ways in which different but coexistent sections of the country long had been perceived. More precisely, the coasts were considered to be trendy and “ironic” while the middle of the country was staid and “sincere.” Somehow, the supposedly unifying and irony-ending terrorist attacks reactivated a competitive dialogue about regional hierarchy within the nation, yet the voices on both sides of this debate spoke of regional character without precisely using such terminology.

The regional connotations are quite clear, as evident by Johnson's observations about how the Heartland is envisioned in the American consciousness. Johnson approaches the region in terms of its function as a television market, and she writes, "While the midwestern [sic] audience is imagined to be 'low' in terms of taste and cultural sensibility, its 'averageness' is also periodically invoked in ideal terms – as reliably majoritarian, unswayed by fads, and, therefore, allied with stability, traditional values, and the smooth functioning of representative democracy. . . ." (12).

Midwesterners are constructed as an oppositional category to what Johnson describes as coastal "hipsters" who "represent all that is bright, new, and modern in culture," but who "are also simultaneously criticized as inauthentic and conformist in their slavish attention to consumer trends – icons of misplaced energy and non-productive labor" (17). Clearly, such regional associations inevitably are reductive and falsely essentializing, but as Johnson details, they persist nonetheless.

To recap, this exchange began with several major media figures predicting that non-ironic, exceedingly sincere entertainments would and *should* provide the model for American popular culture post-9/11; a subsequent critique of "sentimental earnestness" and "willfully light cultural offerings" by writers such as Kakutani and Beers then reframed such a mindset as exemplifying precisely what the United States *should not* become: a reactionary culture that veers towards conservative values. The anti-ironists engage in a sort of self-flagellation by which they view the terrorist attacks as punishment for their east coast environs disowning "traditional" American ideals, while the opponents of this stance suggest that anti-irony is a regressive position that returns the United States to a past that it has outgrown. Intentionally or not, DeLillo somewhat

straddles these competing perspectives. As DeLillo details a dichotomy between the future-oriented America and the past-desiring terrorists, the literary giant bluntly declares, “The terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past.” Such an antagonistic pull upon the present by the past and future strongly informs numerous Midwestern texts that were produced from the late 1990s through the first decade of the new century, including *About Schmidt*, *Up in the Air*, and the four films that will be addressed in Chapter Six.

For the purposes of my project, the fear of restoring the past (as DeLillo articulates) is the key observation to emerge from this irony debate that surreptitiously interrogates the meaning of American regions. First of all, DeLillo’s reading of the terrorist attacks directed by Al-Qaeda as a past-oriented assault roughly corresponds to the concept of “nostalgic violence” that I detailed in Chapter Four. Although it would require an additional book-length project to fully explore this linkage, for now, it will suffice to say that at its most basic level, nostalgic violence refers to violent acts perpetrated in order to restore an idealized sense of the past within the present. In a highly general way, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> may be understood as nostalgic violence writ large, as acts born from an obsessive desire to physically and ideologically reshape the American landscape. Secondly, fears that the past will be brought back and subsume the present reflect once again on the tensions among how American regions are perceived in relation to one another. For one brief moment, it appeared as though the maligned Midwest might serve as a model for the rest of the nation to emulate in order to cope with an ostensibly transformed culture. Instead, American popular culture generally picked up where it left off, with the facile and vapidly ironic entertainments decried by

Rosenblatt and Freston quickly reasserting their resiliency. Meanwhile, the fleeting praise and near-immediate disregard for idealized Midwestern imagery signaled the indefinite extension of an identity crisis that seemingly has defined the region since the middle of the twentieth century. From the anti-sincerity perspective, to embrace supposed Midwestern values and culture would indicate that the terrorists “won,” as American culture thus would have been returned to a regressive state that it had outgrown. Hence, the Midwest needed to be omitted from the “new” America that had been forged through the trauma of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Following the Midwest’s brief elevation immediately after 9/11, the region’s standing continued to slip. After momentarily being considered as a stable foundation while the American populace reacted to the terrorist attacks, the Midwest rapidly reacquired its status as culturally out-of-touch. Moreover, any complementary understanding of regional identity remaining from the autumn of 2001 dissipated further when communities across the country began to be perceived as victims of east coast trickery via the subprime mortgage crisis. Regional rivalries returned to the fore as the economic crisis unfolded in the latter part of the decade, and the Midwest ultimately filled the role of the nation’s helpless and suffering “Main Street” – as opposed to the predatory “Wall Street” on the east coast – in rhetoric repeated *ad infinitum* during the campaigns and debates of the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.

Even before these worldwide economic crises, the Midwest’s identity was in a state of decay and uncertainty. For instance, in *Caught in the Middle: America’s Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (2008), Richard Longworth suggests, “How we earn our living determines how we live and who we are. This is true for people, and it’s true

for towns, and regions, and countries. The Midwest does two big things for a living – farming and heavy industry – and globalization has turned both upside down” (2). Along with destabilizing developments such as the housing crisis, the issues outlined by Longworth conspire to force yet another reassessment and revision of the Midwest as the twenty-first century begins to unfold. Although *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air* do not directly engage with the impact of the housing crisis, both films feature a fundamental sense of uncertainty regarding purpose, meaning, and identity for the Midwest, particularly in relation to economic instability. On this front, these two films function as testimonials of the degraded connection between labor and Midwestern identity.

### ***About Schmidt***

The opening scene of *About Schmidt* presents insurance actuary Warren Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) sitting motionlessly in his office and stoically staring at the wall clock as it ticks off the remaining minutes before his retirement. Even anticipating the end of this workaday life, it seems, is an act of labor for Warren. In the next scene, the solemn protagonist dutifully and joylessly endures a retirement party, including a congratulatory speech by Warren’s best friend Ray Nichols (Len Cariou), who drunkenly remarks,

What means something, what really means something, Warren, is the knowledge that you devoted your life to something meaningful. To being productive and working for a fine company, hell, one of the top-rated insurance carriers in the nation. To raising a fine family, to building a fine home, to being respected by your community, to having wonderful, lasting

relationships. At the end of his career, if a man can look back and say, “I did it, I did my job,” then he can retire in glory and enjoy riches far beyond the monetary kind. So, all of you young people here, take a good look at a very rich man.

Ray’s platitudes neatly summarize many of the key qualities that have been associated with the Midwest since at least the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner, and they include: productivity and steadfastness in terms of work, the nuclear family as stabilizing force, property ownership, community engagement, and abstract personal “riches” being a goal, rather than financial wealth. Warren has “achieved” all of these goals, yet he seems a defeated man when his office clock ticks around to five o’clock. It quickly becomes evident that once Warren is not a cog in this routinized daily existence, he has no sense of who he is or what his purpose for living might be. With labor no longer a default identity for Warren in the early days of retirement, he quickly becomes aware of the severe emotional distance between himself and both his wife Helen (June Squibb) and adult daughter Jeannie (Hope Davis), who lives in Colorado.

Warren’s existential plight stands in for the Midwest as a whole during this period, as the region’s identity was similarly unsettled due to economic and social changes in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Like the protagonists of many films from this era (such as *Up in the Air* or *Gran Torino*), Warren perceives himself as having aged out of relevance, and this crisis and accompanying search for meaning is representative of a broad reassessment process being undergone by the entire Midwest. In short, the region’s long decline had undermined its image as a site of dedicated labor and family life, as well as its standing as a locus of the United States’

most “sincere” culture. Such shifting in the Midwest’s meaning and popular identity are played out through the dramatic arc of *About Schmidt*’s protagonist.

The regional resonance of *About Schmidt* continues director Alexander Payne’s preoccupation with the daily foibles of Midwesterners throughout his career. A native of Nebraska, Payne used Omaha as the setting for each of his first three films – *Citizen Ruth* (1996), *Election* (1999), and *About Schmidt* (2002) – and he returned to his home state with *Nebraska* (2013). Of particular note is the fact that *Election* and *About Schmidt* each were adapted from novels that originally took place on the east coast. Louis Begley, who wrote the novel *About Schmidt* (1996), responded to the changes in the screenplay by Payne and Jim Taylor with an article in *The New York Times*, in which the novelist noted that his “fancy New York lawyer” version of Schmidt “had surely never set foot” in Omaha. Despite such alterations, Begley acknowledged that he was pleased with the screen adaptation because his “most important themes were treated with great intelligence and sensitivity.” Begley’s comments about the treatment of his novel’s themes are typical of the broad way in which Payne has been understood as a filmmaker who is marked by a distinctly Midwestern sensibility.

Many critics have observed that Payne’s films are distinguished by a strong sense of empathy for his characters, however mundane their desires and trials might be. In *Film Comment*, Scott Foundas describes Payne as a “humanist filmmaker” who is “a humble practitioner of smart, grown-up movies about ordinary men and women, their sizable failings and modest victories” (24). Like so many others, Foundas equates “ordinary” with “Midwestern,” a link that he perceives as integral to the bulk of Payne’s work. Regarding the director’s first three features, Foundas writes that they present “a vision of

flyover America rarely glimpsed in mainstream movies: Midwestern, middle-class (or lower) lives and the bulk groceries, strip malls, and economy cars that populate them, some of it played for laughs, but never at the expense of the characters' fundamental dignity" (25). Foundas even identifies a regional influence on Payne's personality by noting that "in person, the native Nebraskan gives off a disarming sense of the Midwestern parvenu still trying to prove himself worthy of the big city" (24). Such a comment is on the cusp of being patronizing, and Foundas further projects a sense of nondescript Midwestern-ness into the very form of Payne's work, which "benefits from a lack of ostentatious stylistic flourishes (except, as in the case of *Election*, when demanded by the material)" (24).<sup>63</sup> For Foundas, a sense of modesty, averageness, and even self-consciousness about being perceived as unsophisticated are definitive Midwestern traits and evident in Payne's persona, the narratives in his films, and the very formal techniques that he uses.

A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* offers a less reductive assessment of Payne and his films by situating the Nebraska filmmaker within a lineage of literary figures who emerged from the center of the nation to lob critiques back at their places of origin, namely, writers such as Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Seen from this perspective, the "simple change of geography and profession" that the literary Schmidt character undergoes while being adapted for the screen has "a transformative effect," as Payne "has plucked the unsuspecting Schmidt out of one literary tradition and inserted

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<sup>63</sup> In "*About Schmidt: Is That All There Is?*" (2003), Girish Shambu similarly comments on the film's form by noting that it "has an invisible, functional style that does not call attention to itself. . . . This Spartan approach makes every stylistic gesture stand out in bold relief." Whereas critics such as Foundas attribute Payne's modest formal style to his Midwestern roots, Shambu at least considers the possibility that such restraint is used in a strategic manner to enable selected scenes to stand out from the rest of the film.

him into another.” In this regard, the cinematic Schmidt “is the latest in a long line of sad, comical and heroic embodiments of the ordinary man that have, in loneliness, defeat and occasional glory, populated American novels, plays, movies and television shows for much of the past century.” Much like Foundas, the term “ordinary” is used to denote Midwestern-ness, although Scott’s usage of the phrase “average American” encompasses a variety of overlapping categories and figures, including the character of Schmidt, “not-very-rich” Americans, Midwesterners whose general “makeup” includes “a strain of masochism,” and a cultural archetype who is both “an allegorical figment and a person who lives at a specific address, holds a particular job and drives a readily identifiable kind of car.” Scott suggests that the last item in this list roughly corresponds to the enduring “mythic figure” of the titular protagonist in Lewis’s novel *Babbitt* (1922). Again and again, what constitutes an average, common, or ordinary American is reduced to labor, consumption habits, and geographic location – the latter, more often than not, being within the twelve states of the Midwest. If Payne’s version of Schmidt is emblematic of this archetype, then how does *About Schmidt* present the status of this regional figure at the start of a new millennium?

In a review of *About Schmidt* published in *The New York Times*, Stephen Holden describes Schmidt as “a staid Middle American everyman” and claims, “The Warren Schmidts of this world and their friends and families . . . constitute a quietly humming, stabilizing collective engine in American society. An out-of-date term that might still be applied to these decent middle-class folk who work hard, respect their neighbors, attend church and obey the law is the Silent Majority.” Holden’s reference to the myth of the “silent majority” is somewhat apt, but it also undermines his prior statement about the

supposed stability that is produced by this group. As I argued in Chapter Three, many texts depicting the Midwest in the 1960s and 1970s – precisely the period in which President Richard Nixon appropriated the phrase “silent majority” – present the region’s inhabitants as merely reproducing an illusion of cohesion through performances that are built upon idealized images of the region. In this sense, the Midwest’s purported function as the nation’s “stabilizing collective engine” is a fantasy perpetuated by regional performances that obscure a culture of dysfunction roiling beneath the sedate surface. Although still present in *About Schmidt*, such regional performativity is more tragic than deviant, as the film’s protagonist unwittingly has helped to maintain Midwestern imagery throughout his life.

Upon retiring, Warren turns a critical eye to his personal life and finds it severely lacking. His wife Helen habitually irritates him, and his daughter Jeannie is engaged to Randall Hertzell (Dermot Mulroney), a waterbed salesman who proves susceptible to the allure of pyramid schemes. Even more demoralizing, Warren is rebuffed by his youthful replacement at Woodmen of the World Insurance Company, and during an aborted visit, he discovers that his career’s worth of work files have been unceremoniously deposited by the garbage. This disheartening scene is followed by Helen’s abrupt death from a blood clot, but Warren’s grief soon turns to outrage when he discovers a shoebox full of old love letters that reveal an affair between Helen and his best friend Ray.<sup>64</sup> This

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<sup>64</sup> A literal compartmentalization of extramarital sexual desire also appears in Payne’s *Election*, in which schoolteacher Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) hides a stash of pornography inside a trunk in his basement. Both scenes remind viewers that Payne is invested in exposing how the surface of Midwestern imagery may obscure some degree of deviance from the very ideals that such regional images ostensibly embody.

revelation prompts Warren to embark on an existential road trip in the Winnebago that Helen had demanded for the couple's retirement years.

By this point in the film, Warren has begun sponsoring Ndugu Umbo, a 6-year-old boy in Tanzania, through an international charity organization. Along with monthly checks, Warren also sends letters about himself to Ndugu, which are heard in several voiceover sequences that find Warren habitually revising his life's narrative. When departing Omaha, Warren had intended to visit Jeannie to help with wedding preparations in Denver, but she curtly rebuffs this offer. In a letter to Ndugu, though, Warren explains, "Jeannie begged me to come out early and help her with arrangements, but I told her I needed some time to myself. I've decided to visit some places I haven't been to in a long time. So much has happened in my life that I can't seem to remember. Whole sections of my life that are just gone. So, you might say I've been trying to clear a few cobwebs from my memory." The first portion of this statement is one of several moments in the film when Warren offers a revisionist account of personal rejection. These instances reveal a preoccupation with maintaining a dignified public exterior while contending with various humiliations such as being rejected by his daughter or spurned by his replacement at Woodmen of the World. Considered within a regional context, Warren's letters call attention to the broader ways in which idealized narratives are used to gloss over dysfunction, violence, and other deviance the Midwest.

The latter part of Warren's comments about his trip articulate a common nostalgic gesture: turning to the past in order to locate a sense of identity, one that somehow is perceived as more authentic than that which exists in the degraded present. As *About Schmidt* progresses, Payne spatializes Warren's memories by transforming the past into

physical sites of nostalgia that Warren visits on his road trip.<sup>65</sup> I argue that Warren's road trip more clearly functions as a parodic and inadequate replication of the western movement by Turner's valorized frontier pioneers. Warren's sequence of stops continually links his personal history with that of the Midwest itself, and Payne never passes up opportunities to establish ironic juxtapositions between Warren's good-natured curiosity about the region and his obliviousness to the long-lasting repercussions of the United States' western expansion on both Native Americans and the physical terrain itself.

This nostalgic tour of the past – and *into* the past, as it were – brings Warren to the following locales: Holdrege, Nebraska to see the site of his childhood home; Lawrence, Kansas to visit his alma mater and old fraternity; the Custer County Historical Museum in Broken Bow, Nebraska “to see their fine collection of arrowheads”; the Buffalo Bill State Historical Park in North Platte, Nebraska. While in Broken Bow, Warren informs Ndugu that he “happened to meet a real Indian or Native American as they like to be called nowadays. We had a nice chat about the history of the area, and he really opened my eyes. Those people got a raw deal, just a raw deal.” Warren's acknowledgment of Native American trauma immediately is followed by a trip to the home of Buffalo Bill Cody, who Warren blithely describes as “a remarkable man.”

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<sup>65</sup> Regarding this trip, Holden introduces a meta-textual consideration by observing that “it is impossible not to compare this excursion to the cross-country jaunt Mr. Nicholson made in *Easy Rider* 33 years ago,” but whereas that film ventured “into the sunrise of a drug-enlightened future,” Warren's trip is “a psychic journey into the twilight and the past.” The protagonists in *Easy Rider*, it must be noted, symbolically embark on their trip in the west and head eastward, as opposed to the historical expansion of the United States that steadily progressed from the east coast across the continent.

In Holdrege, despite discovering that his childhood home has been replaced with a tire shop, Warren still physically enters the shop and informs the initially befuddled attendant, "I used to live here. . . . My childhood home was right on this spot. In fact, the bedroom would have been right about here, the living room over here, and the dining. . . well, that was a long time ago. Before you were born." In this scene, nostalgic reminiscing at a site of personal significance is shown to collapse barriers between past and present, which Payne accentuates by including sounds from Warren's childhood abruptly appearing on the soundtrack (such as his deceased mother's voice and birthday wishes from a long-past celebration). Tellingly, this moment is one of few throughout the film in which Warren's visage relaxes and he seems to be at ease. Simply visiting a nostalgic site of personal significance, however momentarily, permits Warren to access a time in which his identity was not so muddled.

Midway through Warren's journey to Colorado, he crosses paths with a similarly-aged married couple in an RV park, and they unsettle Warren's superficial positivity. John (Harry Groener) and Vicki Rusk (Connie Ray) share stories about their family and their adventures on the road, while Warren lacks even a photograph of his daughter. When John briefly exits the scene, Vicki presses Warren on his psychological state and observes, "I see something more than grief and loss in you, something deeper. I just met you, but my guess is anger. Yeah, anger and, I don't know, maybe fear, loneliness." Vicki's forthrightness arouses Warren, who responds, "Well, I am kinda lonely. Can I tell you something? I've only known you for an hour or so, and yet, I feel like you understand me better than my wife Helen ever did, even after 42 years of marriage. Forty-two years. Maybe if I'd met someone like you earlier..." Warren follows up this

lamentation by kissing Vicki, who angrily expels him from the RV. This encounter encapsulates Warren's confused state of mind. Vicki identifies Warren as an individual filled with grief, loss, anger, fear, and loneliness, yet her blunt assessment encourages Warren to discard the revisionist narratives that he hides behind and to be forthright about his disappointments and desires.

*About Schmidt* continues with its depressed protagonist attempting to renounce the nostalgic reminiscing that compelled his road trip. Warren calls Ray in order to make amends, apologizes to Helen for being a poor husband during a solitary vigil, and arrives in Denver with the intention of convincing Jeannie to call off her wedding. When Jeannie resists Warren's pleadings, he again is reduced to submerging his true desires beneath revisionist statements, such as during a perfunctory wedding toast in which Warren praises his new revolting in-laws. Deflated and defeated, Warren's trip back to Omaha features only a single stop, but one of great significance: the pioneer museum in Kearney, Nebraska. As Warren tours the facility, Payne includes a close-up of a plaque that reads: "THE COWARDS NEVER STARTED/THE WEAK DIED ON THE WAY/ONLY THE STRONG ARRIVED/THEY WERE THE PIONEERS."<sup>66</sup> Obviously, the supposedly divine imperative of manifest destiny contrasts harshly with Warren's self-absorbed nostalgia trip. Moreover, the "meaningful" movement westward of the pioneers continues to inform the static existence of the millennial Midwest in popular culture.

As I detail in Chapter One, Turner wrote that the effect of the frontier being closed was to produce cultural stagnation and to situate the Midwest as a space of

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<sup>66</sup> Of this scene, Girish Shambu writes, "The parallel with Schmidt's own life, in which the demands of work and family and outward respectability turned him into a passive, remote creature, lacking any meaningful actions of individual will, could not be more clear."

nostalgia because of its one-time status as a frontier in which the *potential* for additional frontiers appeared to be nearly limitless. Essentially, I argue that Turner's nostalgic conceptualization of the Midwest hinges on the region being understood as a space in which lost potentialities are visible and possibly accessible. From this perspective, Warren's quest for meaning neatly dovetails with Turner's perception of the Midwest in the sense that Warren is nostalgic for the moment in his life in which a variety of possible life choices appeared to be available, the period before his identity became overdetermined by standardized Midwestern norms relating to categories such as family, labor, and masculinity. The ultimate purpose of Warren's road trip thus is to access a forgotten version of himself that includes the potential for alternate potential life trajectories. Instead of the "rebirth" experienced in the frontier by pioneers, Warren seeks a nostalgic rediscovery of himself. With no available spatial frontiers, Warren's journey is a temporal one, a nostalgic trip inward to access who he once was and, more importantly, who he *might* have been.

Payne offers a tentative way out of the nostalgic constrictions on Midwestern identity via Warren's letters to Ndugu. After enduring numerous failures and indignities over the course of the film, the conclusion of *About Schmidt* features a despairing letter to Ndugu, in which Warren harshly assesses his life in comparison to the idealized pioneers at the museum in Kearney:

Looking at all that history and reflecting on the achievements of people long ago kind of put things into perspective. My trip to Denver, for instance, is so insignificant compared to the journeys that others have taken, the bravery that they've shown, the hardships they've endured. I

know we're all pretty small in the big scheme of things. And I suppose the most you can hope for is to make some kind of difference. But, what kind of difference have I made? What in the world is better because of me? [...] I am weak, and I am a failure. There's just no getting around it. Relatively soon, I will die. Maybe in twenty years, maybe tomorrow. It doesn't matter. Once I am dead and everyone who knew me dies too, it'll be as though I never even existed. What difference has my life made to anyone? None that I can think of. None at all.

Throughout the narrative, Warren becomes more and more conscious that his adherence to Midwestern ideals has produced only an incomplete identity, and he fixates on missed opportunities to be anything other than the disillusioned figure he now is. What had been the twin pillars of Warren's identity – labor and family – are revealed to be either meaningless or fractured beyond repair, and his attempts to nostalgically cling to the past prove unsustainable.

Upon returning home, Warren receives a letter from a nun who is Ndugu's caretaker that upends his personal despair. Until this moment, Warren's correspondence problematically flowed in a single direction, recreating a colonial dynamic further affirmed by the attachment of charity funds. Yet, this extra-regional discourse with Ndugu proves to be liberating for Warren; even with some degree of revisionist narration, Warren speaks of his desires and fears more honestly in each letter than in any face-to-face encounter with a fellow Midwesterner. With these letters, Payne suggests that transcending regional provincialism might be one way in which the Midwest can escape the limitations of the idealized narratives that constrict its inhabitants. Certainly, this

possibility would require far more complex actions than the troublesome dynamic of a retired white male financially sponsoring an impoverished African youth while simultaneously exploiting that relationship as an outlet to vent about existential problems. Still, the conclusion of *About Schmidt* at least points towards a possible opening up of Midwestern culture through increased participation in a global discourse, more transparency regarding the constructed nature of regional norms, and greater acceptance of deviation from such values. At the same time, a more pessimistic reading might suggest that, whereas Midwesterners such as Warren once found meaning through productive labor, now they only are significant as consumers, as sources of financial support for other locales. In either case, a revision of what the Midwest is and what defines its inhabitants is shown to be a necessity for the region to not just survive the twentieth century, but to flourish in the new millennium.

### *Up in the Air*

The Midwestern narratives that Warren recognizes as having restricted his life are the very same ones against which middle-aged Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) rebels throughout much of *Up in the Air*, most explicitly during his motivational lectures about how to attain professional success. Ryan's presentation (titled "What's In Your Backpack?") uses an overstuffed backpack as a strained metaphor for the various personal attachments and obligations that limit Midwesterners. After detailing a litany of commitments, Ryan concludes, "We weigh ourselves down until we can't even move. And make no mistake, moving is living." Later in the film, Ryan is shown giving a

second presentation, and he adds, “Make no mistake, your relationships are the heaviest components in your life. . . . All those negotiations and arguments and secrets and compromises. You don’t need to carry all that weight. . . . The slower we move, the faster we die.” In these two scenes, Ryan explicitly articulates his guiding philosophy about everyday existence, which revolves around solitary routines: traveling for his job as much as possible<sup>67</sup> and avoiding romantic commitments in favor of casual encounters. Just as with Warren in *About Schmidt*, Ryan builds his identity in relation to stereotypical Midwestern norms, but in *Up in the Air*, Ryan works against such narratives.

Along with Ryan’s single-minded resistance to Midwestern ideals of labor and family, *Up in the Air* also addresses the region’s uncertain identity in the face of what Longworth describes as “white-collar outsourcing. . . . The old globalization dealt with money, goods, and factory jobs; the new globalization deals with all this, and with service jobs, too. . . . Basically, any job that does not require face-to-face contact with a customer can be outsourced” (11). Ryan works as a job “transition specialist” for an Omaha-based company that other companies hire to conduct mass firings, typically in Midwestern cities. In fact, Reitman only includes scenes of people being fired in St. Louis, Wichita, Kansas City, Tulsa,<sup>68</sup> Des Moines, and Detroit. Perhaps most troubling is that Ryan and his coworkers appear to profit from the failure of the region around them. As Ryan’s supervisor Craig Gregory (Jason Bateman) observes, “Retailers are down 20%. Auto industry is in the dump. Housing market doesn’t have a heartbeat. It is one of

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<sup>67</sup> In the previous year, Ryan claims that he “spent 322 days on the road, which means I had to spend 43 miserable days at home.”

<sup>68</sup> According to the United States Census Bureau, Oklahoma technically is not one of the twelve states of the Midwest, but it often is associated with the region and considered to be “Midwestern” in terms of culture. Johnson, for example, includes Oklahoma in her conception of the “Heartland” (175).

the worst times on record for America. This is our moment.” Such economic problems reflect the actual challenges facing the Midwest within the global economy of the new millennium.

Director/co-screenwriter Jason Reitman blurs distinctions between the film’s fictional narrative and its twenty-first century setting by featuring real Midwesterners who have been affected by the region’s declining economy. Near the beginning and end of the film, Reitman includes a montage of white-collar workers responding to notifications that they have been fired. Of these scenes, Reitman explains, “Except for a few recognisable [sic] actors, everyone who gets fired in this movie is someone who lost their job. They’re from St. Louis, Detroit – non-actors who answered an ad in the paper and came in and went on camera. They were incredibly authentic and said the kind of things you never think of as a writer” (qtd. in James 33). Although the onscreen responses to being fired are fictional reenactments, the presence of these individuals lends a heightened sense of veracity to their despair, a quality that characterizes the Midwest during this period (along with the grief, loss, anger, fear, and loneliness detectable in Warren Schmidt). Like *About Schmidt*, *Up in the Air* portrays the Midwest as being in a tumultuous state that offers little emotional or financial security to its inhabitants. Ryan’s willfully-disconnected response to these circumstances sharply contrasts to that of Warren’s nostalgia, but by the end of *Up in the Air*, the firing consultant and part-time motivational speaker also is overcome by the apparently irresistible force of the Midwest’s conforming pressures.

Joseph Natoli writes that Ryan “lives a life of ‘outplacement’: he has consciously placed himself outside the normal itinerary of life, preferring a constantly changing

itinerary that puts him more up in the air than on the ground.” First of all, Natoli’s use of the term “normal” stands out in light of how the word and its companions, “average” and “ordinary,” were used in articles discussing *About Schmidt*. Once again, “normal” is equated with standardized Midwestern imagery, particularly in terms of family. Natoli explains, “To be on the ground in Bingham’s view is to become ensnared in the muddled lives of others, needless stuff and, most feared, the fated trajectory of human life from birth to death. . . . If you’re up in the air most of the time you fly over the serious stuff that wears you out, the stuff that promises to reveal something or settle something or improve something but never does.” When the film begins, Ryan appears content with his lifestyle and becomes casually involved with Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga), a seemingly similar-minded business traveler. Alex eventually is revealed to conform to Midwestern norms more than at first glance, as Ryan discovers that she has a husband and children late in the film. Until then, Alex is presented as the female version of Ryan.<sup>69</sup>

As with so many narratives set in the Midwest during this period, Ryan’s life is upended because of unexpected changes with his work. Twenty-something Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick), a new coworker at Ryan’s company, proposes a redesigned method of firing people that would use computer interfaces, rather physical travel. Ryan is apoplectic about Natalie’s proposal for two reasons, both of which point to deeply-rooted Midwestern values that Ryan ignores or suppresses through his philosophy of detachment. First of all, firing people via computers would ground Ryan in Omaha, something he avoids as much as possible, as he fears disruptions of his detached lifestyle. The second reason that Ryan criticizes the online firing system stems from his

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<sup>69</sup> Alex bluntly informs Ryan, “I am the woman that you don’t have to worry about. . . . Just think of me as yourself, only with a vagina.”

commitment to bringing a particular type of etiquette to the interaction; strangely, Ryan's longtime avoidance of personal attachments is actually a cover for an appreciation of intimate human contact. Ryan himself explains this philosophy to his supervisor Craig: "What we do here is brutal, and it does leave people devastated, but there is a dignity to the way I do it." The threat of altering his methods because of new technologies subsequently prompts an existential crisis in Ryan that is very similar to that of Warren Schmidt. The possibility of losing the shared physical space of the firings changes the dynamic of Ryan's life, and he is forced to reassess the Midwestern norms that he long had rejected.

Even though Ryan claims that he does not "see the value" in getting married or having kids, he still has an intuitive understanding of the significance of physical proximity, especially at times of duress (i.e., when getting fired from a longtime job). Ryan's attachment to a supposedly more dignified face-to-face meeting recalls my arguments in Chapter Four about cinematic depictions of the Midwest's technological status during the 1990s and early twenty-first century. The region often is depicted as being a non-networked space (at least in terms of access to new media), one that still is dependent on geographic proximity for building both communities and individual identities, despite the supposed death of distance and decreased significance of the specificity of locales due to expanding digital technologies. *Up in the Air* thus situates Ryan as an anachronistic figure, much like the stereotypical Midwest that he spurns. If both the ostensibly stable Midwestern foundation against which Ryan rebels and his non-normative lifestyle are being threatened, then how does he situate himself within this new

paradigm? How does Ryan preserve the anti-Midwestern identity that he so carefully crafted?

The short answer is that Ryan does not sustain his contrarian stance towards stereotypical Midwestern norms, a development that begins to occur while traveling with Natalie, who serves as a catalyst for undermining Ryan's sense of identity. Following Natalie's presentation for the new online firing system, Ryan insists that she needs to gain face-to-face firing experience, and boss Craig complies by sending them off together like an ersatz odd couple that specializes in downsizing. Their travels take them through a tour of Midwestern companies ruined by globalization, with several offices in such states of disarray that they recall scenes from post-apocalyptic zombie films. Throughout this section of the film, Natalie challenges Ryan's philosophy of detachment, particularly his casual relationship with Alex. During one especially contentious exchange, Natalie angrily accuses Ryan that he is depriving Alex of "A chance at something real," which prompts Ryan to respond, "Natalie, your definition of real is going to evolve as you get older." Undeterred, Natalie continues, "You have set up a way of life that basically makes it impossible for you to have any kind of human connection. And now this woman comes along and somehow runs the gauntlet of your ridiculous life choice and comes out on the other end smiling just so you can call her 'casual'?"

This rant highlights three key elements intrinsic to Natalie's conception of proper relationships, which is based on idealized Midwestern imagery. Essentially, Natalie yearns to conform to normative relationship formations. First of all, Natalie considers relationships to be developed strategically in order to correspond to broader regional ideals. Earlier in the film, Natalie discusses her ex-boyfriend and how she "could have

made it work. He, um, he really fit the bill.” Natalie proceeds to describe the various qualities that she desires in a male partner and essentially acknowledges that because the ex-boyfriend satisfied many of the items on the list, she could have convinced herself that she loved him. That is, Natalie would have *worked* to make the relationship outwardly *appear* as she desired her life to be.

Natalie’s view of relationships-as-labor is further emphasized with the second element, which is that her conception of an ideal partner seems to be influenced by the generic images that circulate about the Midwest: “White collar, college grad, loves dogs, likes funny movies, 6’1”, brown hair, kind eyes, works in finance, but is outdoorsy, you know, on the weekends. I always imagined he’d have a single syllable name like Matt or John or Dave. In a perfect world, he drives a 4Runner. And the only thing he loves more than me is his golden lab. And a nice smile.” Although the Midwest traditionally has been linked to blue-collar labor in heavy industry or farming, nondescript white collar jobs – the sort of positions that are being outsourced throughout *Up in the Air* – have come to be a more contemporary default image for labor in the region. On the whole, Natalie’s list of desired qualities in a partner reads like a portrait of the generic, an image of masculinity gleaned from a clothing catalogue. This list indicates that, rather than Natalie developing personalized criteria for contentment, she merely is reproducing standardized desires that conform to longstanding regional imagery. Furthermore, such ideals function as performative substitutions for the “traditional” images that circulate about the Midwest. Because the contemporary Midwestern labor presented in the film no longer sustains the perception of rugged individualism instinctual to Turner’s valorized pioneers, Natalie’s ideal male strives to embody that archetype by being “outdoorsy”

during leisure time. Just as Natalie seeks to conform to standardized lifestyle dynamics, so too would her hypothetical partner be a performative subject, one who acts out an idealized, antiquated version of regional masculinity whenever possible.

The third element is Natalie's resolute belief that all other women share the same generic desires that she possesses. This presumption reflects a recurring impulse to normalize and restrict women's desire within many Midwestern narratives. Natalie believes that although Alex has been engaging in a "casual" relationship with Ryan, it is only because Alex ultimately seeks a commitment from the determined bachelor. This assumption is proven to be erroneous late in the film when Ryan surprises Alex at her home in Chicago. Upon opening the front door, Alex frowns, children run around in the background, and her off-screen husband asks who rang the doorbell. To this point, Alex has not divulged any information about having a family, so the abrupt revelation is immensely unsettling for Ryan, and it severely undercuts Natalie's assumption about shared desire among Midwestern women. Because Alex already has a family, her affair with Ryan truly is only casual and was initiated without any desire for an emotional commitment. In fact, that lack of attachment precisely was what made Ryan so appealing to Alex. During a phone conversation the next day, Alex chides Ryan about his impudence and states that he "could have seriously screwed things up for me. That's my family. That's my real life." Alex elaborates, "I thought our relationship was perfectly clear. I mean, you are an escape. You're a break from our normal lives. You're a parenthesis."

In this brief scene, Alex's critique of Ryan is typical of the film's excessively precise dialogue; the main characters regularly articulate their beliefs so explicitly that

they act as sentient representations of distinct value systems rather than complex individuals. Despite the less-than-subtle viewpoints expressed throughout *Up in the Air*, Alex's comments reveal some complexity regarding how the Midwest is constructed in the film. First, there exists the possibility that Alex is not cheating on her husband, but that the pair has a mutual understanding that permits casual flings, so long as extramarital partners do not intrude upon the domestic home space. Alex's accusation that Ryan almost "screwed things up" leaves open the potential for this interpretation of her marriage, although the statement also could mean simply that Alex had been deceiving her husband. Regardless, there is at least a veiled possibility that Alex's marriage may be non-normative.

Second, even as Alex is revealed to have been balancing a traditional family life with a casual sexual affair, she expresses a strong commitment to values that are similar to those held by Natalie. Alex's identification of her family as her "real life" echoes Natalie chastising Ryan earlier about coldly foreclosing a "chance at something real" with Alex. For both Natalie and Alex, then, to be "real" means conforming to the normalized Midwestern imagery that long has circulated in popular culture. Significantly, this conception of a Midwestern "real" excludes Ryan, who repeatedly discusses and enacts his resistance to such stereotypical lifestyle choices for most of the film's duration. As defined by Natalie and Alex, the Midwestern "real" also perpetuates the idea that the region's "average" or "ordinary" inhabitants are only those who are involved in heteronormative relationships. Although *Up in the Air* engages with the changing labor identity of the Midwest, the film relentlessly reasserts the primacy and necessity of traditional relationships in the face of such economic uncertainty.

This reaffirmation of the Midwest as a site of at least superficially stable relationships introduces a fascinating temporal dynamic that configures deviance from stereotypical regional norms as operating outside of time. Alex labels Ryan as “a parenthesis” in relation to her “normal” life, and Natoli similarly observes that Ryan chooses a life of “outplacement” that keeps him removed from “the normal itinerary of life.” While Natoli’s description is accurate, I further argue that Ryan’s interstitial status is a result of more than merely diverging from Midwestern lifestyle norms: in short, Ryan is temporally out-of-synch from his fellow Midwesterners for much of the film, and his temporal status ultimately shifts from elliptical to nostalgic.

Ryan’s disillusioning encounter at Alex’s doorstep is the end result of the solitary protagonist gradually warming to the Midwestern ideals he habitually had rejected. Earlier in the film (and immediately following an emotionally-charged set of job reductions in Detroit with Natalie), Ryan invites Alex to his sister Julie’s (Melanie Lynskey) wedding in Wisconsin. As Ryan explains, “Look, I’m not the wedding type, right? But for the first time in my life, I don’t want to be that guy alone at a bar. I want a dance partner, I want a ‘plus one.’” Initially appearing horrified, Alex reluctantly consents to joining Ryan on what becomes a personal nostalgic trip very similar to Warren’s in *About Schmidt*. In both films, each protagonist’s personal history becomes spatialized within a set of physical sites that house portions of forgotten fragments of identity. In Ryan’s case, visiting his hometown in northern Wisconsin shifts his personal alignment in relation to the Midwest. Both the context of the visit – that of a family wedding – and the space itself activate a repressed affinity for “traditional” Midwestern values within Ryan. At one point, Ryan’s older sister Kara (Amy Morton) even enlists

him to chat with Julie's fiancé Jim (Danny McBride), who has cold feet on the wedding day. In a near-complete reversal of the "backpack" lectures, Ryan observes that individuals are never alone during their "favorite memories" or "most important moments" in life, and he concludes, "Life's better with company." After years of extolling the benefits of non-conformity, the nostalgic return home leads to Ryan endorsing generic platitudes. Moreover, Ryan appears to have convinced himself of monogamy's appeal, which he long had dismissed.

Due to the philosophical change undergone during Ryan's trip to Wisconsin, he becomes a nostalgic subject with two desires that emerge in succession from one another. The first desire is for participation in the traditional Midwestern norms relating to committed relationships and family life. Prior to the Wisconsin visit, Ryan's identity revolved around his detached lifestyle, but with the adoption of Natalie's online firing technology, he is forced to live in Omaha when they return from touring the region. Although Ryan has not lost his job, he has lost the ability to identify with the labor that he performs; technological changes have alienated him from work and made his preferred face-to-face interactions obsolete.

Ryan's personal trajectory in the film mirrors that of the many anonymous workers who are shown near the beginning and end of *Up in the Air*. These two montages feature non-actors who recently had been terminated from jobs in real life speaking to the camera as if they had just been fired. While the first montage finds the workers lamenting new financial and emotional challenges – one man remarks, "On a stress level, I've heard that losing your job is like a death in the family. But, personally, I feel more like the people I worked with were my family and I died" – the second montage reaffirms the role

of family in terms of forging an identity and finding meaning in life. For instance, the final individual in the latter montage concludes that “my kids are my purpose, my family.” Ryan simply does not have such attachments, which explains why his professional upheaval prompts him to transition the casual relationship with Alex into one that is more committed. From bringing Alex to a wedding to Ryan’s “romantic” surprise of appearing unannounced at her doorstep, it is clear that Ryan fully desires to have a stereotypical Midwestern relationship around which he might reconstruct his identity.

Ironically, once Ryan embraces the regional values that he hitherto believed were unnatural constructions imposed on Midwesterners, he discovers that those ideals are as false as he long had suspected. This exacerbates Ryan’s personal crisis and produces a second nostalgic desire: to return to the moment before his identity was altered, the period in which Midwestern norms appeared to be substantive and worth resisting. By the end of the narrative, Ryan is unable to sustain both his longtime resistance to normalized Midwestern ideals and his newfound desire for them. The realization of the patent falsity<sup>70</sup> of such Midwestern imagery makes rebelling against it as meaningless as embracing it.

Much like the conclusion of *A History of Violence* (2005) that I discuss in Chapter Four, Ryan – like the Stall family in David Cronenberg’s film – is left with the

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<sup>70</sup> The status of the following individuals completely shatters the pretense that such values are attainable: Kara, who Ryan labels as the “glue” of the Bingham family, is separated from her husband; Natalie, the most vocal advocate of relationships providing “something real” has been dumped by the boyfriend for whom she first moved to Nebraska and now is pursuing a career in San Francisco; Alex, the casual partner who became Ryan’s object of monogamous desire, has revealed herself to be both exemplary of Midwestern domesticity and a brash refutation of such values through her very relationship with Ryan.

recognition that Midwestern norms are propped up through performative gestures that obscure a lack of cohesion beneath the surface. Just as Natalie describes, to become aligned with such ideals entails a determination to “making it work” by identifying the image of normality that one wishes to project and then adjusting one’s behavior accordingly. Without a belief that such images are “real” and not merely the visible effects of subjects performing regional norms, Ryan now has no foundation upon which or against which he might build his identity.

The final shot of Ryan in *Up in the Air* features the same unwanted awareness of the flimsiness of idealized Midwestern images as in *A History of Violence*. In Cronenberg’s film, the Stall patriarch has been revealed to be a man capable of extreme acts of violence, but such actions helped to preserve the family’s image of normality. At the film’s conclusion, the Stalls are aware that their idyllic lifestyle is a mirage contingent on violence, yet they persist in an almost-parodic display of Midwestern family unity. Ryan recognizing the false nature of Midwestern images coincides with him being sent back out on the road as a traveling career transition specialist, due to the failure of Natalie’s online firing system. The final scene of *Up in the Air* features Ryan entering an airport terminal and staring at the departure listing with an ambiguous expression on his face. Although this moment potentially could be read as Ryan having decided to embark on a personal trip to a random destination, I suggest that the scene reaffirms his deep ambivalence about being forced to continue enacting his contrarian bachelor lifestyle. Like the Stall family, Ryan has witnessed the collapse of the Midwestern norms he resisted and then embraced, yet he is compelled to continue behaving as if such regional imagery is not merely a surface-level construct.

In *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air*, both protagonists desire *something* outside of what has been reified as an ideal range of desires based on Midwestern stereotypes, but the two men regularly find themselves stymied and frustrated, regardless of whether they attempt to conform or revolt. To varying degrees, both Warren and Ryan are cognizant of the fictional myths about the region and the discontent that they produce, but they also lack an alternative sense of identity outside of such values. Once they shatter the Midwest's illusory surface image, an identity crisis follows, even as the false sense of stability produced by regional images is desired anew. This recognition leaves few cultural traits to cling to, aside from embracing both the trauma of losing past markers of identity and an overall sense of encroaching decay. Turner imagined Western frontiers as providing a "perennial rebirth" (14) for the pioneers who ventured into such territories. By contrast, the nostalgic journeys of Warren and Ryan in the early twenty-first century offer no such restoration. Instead, traveling across the region reveals the ultimate failure of Midwestern myths; where once a region of plain, hardworking, family-oriented folks presumably resided, there now is perceived to be nothing more than disillusioned individuals clumsily attempting to prop up unsustainable and outdated images of themselves.

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## Chapter Six:

### Paranoid Frontiers and Nostalgic Restorations

Midway through David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999), a young man asks Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth) to explain "the worst part about being old." Without a pause, the septuagenarian protagonist replies, "Well, the worst part of bein' old is rememberin' when you was young." The film is a fictionalized account of the true story of Alvin's lengthy journey across two states on a riding lawnmower to reconcile with his estranged brother. In a broader sense, though, *The Straight Story* is about coming to terms with the present via a nostalgic reappraisal of and engagement with the past. At age 73, Alvin is near death, but he nonetheless persists on a laboriously paced mission to correct the personal history that looms over his flawed present and to reconnect with his nostalgically remembered childhood.

Alvin's decrepit state reflects that of the similarly-aged Midwest as it slogged into the twenty-first century. According to James Shortridge, the regional label "Middle West" attained popular usage around 1912 (24), only a decade or so before Alvin's birth. Like Alvin's failing body, years of criticism and decay had led the region's creaky and strained image to falter around the dawn of the millennium. In Chapter Four, I discussed ways in which *Boys Don't Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999) and *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005) present the Midwest as a performative space that was bound to its geographic territory. Such representations imagine the Midwest as a space that forever is temporally out-of-synch with contemporary American culture and which is dependent on a nostalgia-infused image of itself to carve out meaning in the increasingly digital world

from which the region seemingly had been left behind. Chapter Five similarly explored a deep sense of disillusionment towards traditional Midwestern imagery in *About Schmidt* (Alexander Payne, 2002) and *Up in the Air* (Jason Reitman, 2009). The protagonists of both films ultimately despaired at the prospect of attempting to perpetuate Midwestern stereotypes relating to labor and family in the face of a failing regional economy and a growing skepticism towards normative relationships.

This chapter continues to examine films produced during the years surrounding the turn of the twenty-first century, a tumultuous and traumatic period that found the Midwest scrambling to forge a new identity in American culture. Here, I turn my attention to Lynch's *The Straight Story*, *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999), *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), and *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011), and I situate these four films into two loose categories: "Paranoid Frontiers" and "Nostalgic Restorations."

In the "Paranoid Frontiers" section, I consider *Gran Torino* and *Take Shelter*, which both feature protagonists whose fear of regional change is filtered into, respectively, racist antipathy towards a group of Hmong immigrants and general delusions of impending apocalyptic doom; these paranoid individuals ultimately commit compulsive acts of self-destruction. In the "Nostalgic Restorations" category, I focus on *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Straight Story*, two films whose protagonists fetishize an idealized conception of the past and the youthful versions of themselves believed to occupy that fictionalized temporality; these two narratives are inundated with nostalgically altered memories and a persistent belief that, for the protagonists, a meaningful existence in the present may be achieved only by accessing the lost identities that are perceived to be located solely in the past. With these latter two films, I also

address the formal aesthetics that are utilized to visually represent nostalgia, particularly the pervasive use of dissolves. Overall, this chapter expands on the arguments detailed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five by continuing to unravel the complicated and often contradictory representations of the Midwest produced during an extended period of crisis for Midwestern identity and the region's meaning in American culture.

### **Paranoid Frontiers**

*Gran Torino* and *Take Shelter* both present troubling outcomes stemming from reactionary fears in the wake of ongoing challenges to the Midwest's stereotypical image as a space comprised solely of white, heteronormative, middle class nuclear families. The protagonists of each film desperately attempt to preserve the region's falsely reductive identity with a paranoid fervor. Both Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood) and Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon) are white, middle-class Midwesterners – the group long privileged as the “real” Midwest across a century's worth of texts in American popular culture – who experience delusions of persecution. As *Gran Torino* begins, Walt believes that an influx of Hmong immigrants to his neighborhood and the negligible work ethic of his family undermine conventional notions of masculinity and Midwestern-ness that the retired machinist embodies. In *Take Shelter*, Curtis imagines his family being threatened by an impending “something” that takes the form of a foreboding storm in recurring dreams that are increasingly violent and disturbing. Unlike *About Schmidt*'s Warren Schmidt and *Up in the Air*'s Ryan Bingham, both of whom ultimately acknowledge the futility of attempting to conform to faltering Midwestern ideals, the protagonists of *Gran*

*Torino* and *Take Shelter* become even more entrenched and invested in sustaining the normalized lifestyles that they believe are under assault. As I will detail, such narrative developments point toward a reactivated frontier mentality, which serves to close the temporal gap between the twenty-first century Midwest and Frederick Jackson Turner's influential theories about the primacy of the frontier in shaping American culture. Faced with an unstable identity in the new millennium, Walt and Curtis both engage in a problematic nostalgic turn to the past in order to find meaning by embodying Turner's frontier archetypes of the rugged individual and the self-sustaining family.

Clint Eastwood directs and stars in *Gran Torino*, and he sets about rather explicitly defining ideal criteria both for masculinity and no less than what it means to be an American. Against a backdrop of racial tensions, urban decay, and violence in modern-day Detroit, the film focuses on former autoworker Walt, who lives in a neighborhood that once was occupied by white residents and now is populated primarily by African-Americans and, increasingly, Mexican and Hmong immigrants. When the Vang Lor family moves into the house next to Walt during the wake for his wife Dorothy, the crotchety protagonist swiftly labels the Vang Lor family as "damn barbarians." Partly because of contentious relationships with his adult children, Walt becomes more and more entwined in his new neighbors' lives, particularly teenage siblings Thao (Bee Vang) and Sue (Ahney Her). Their cousin Spider (Doua Moua) coerces Thao into attempting to steal Walt's *Gran Torino* as a gang initiation; after this theft fails, Spider later tries to abduct Thao, but Walt wards off the gang at gunpoint while warning, "Get off my lawn." This scene is perhaps the most emblematic of the recurring frontier-like territorial mindset that results in the violent delineation of property

lines. Sue declares that he is “a hero to the neighborhood,” and shortly thereafter, Walt rescues Sue from a random encounter with three aggressive African-American youths by again brandishing a gun as an intimidation tactic.

Sue and her mother Vu (Brooke Chia Thao) decide that Thao must work for Walt in order to restore the family’s honor because of the attempted robbery of the Gran Torino. Walt initially resists, but he soon relents and becomes a father figure to Thao, complete with instructions on how to “man . . . up a little bit” through physical labor and being more assertive with Youa (Choua Kue), a girl who Thao desires. As Walt methodically masculinizes Thao, Spider’s gang continues harassing the Vang Lor family. Following several violent clashes, Walt confronts the gang unarmed and compels them to shoot him so that they may be arrested and the Vang Lors may, hopefully, live in peace. A few final scenes show members of the Vang Lor and Kowalski clans attending Walt’s funeral, and it is revealed that Walt has willed his prized Gran Torino to surrogate son Thao, which disappoints Walt’s vapid granddaughter.

Given the loaded racial and gendered subject matter of *Gran Torino*, it should not be surprising that the reaction to this ideologically muddled film is full of contrasting viewpoints in both popular reviews and academic sources. Perhaps partly because *Gran Torino* was rumored to be Eastwood’s final screen performance,<sup>71</sup> nearly every review and article about the film makes at least a passing reference to the Walt character serving as a meta-commentary on the screen legend’s career, particularly his iconic roles as “The Man With No Name” in Sergio Leone’s spaghetti Westerns from the 1960s and as the titular protagonist of *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) and its four sequels.

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<sup>71</sup> This rumor was proven false by Eastwood’s starring role in *Trouble with the Curve* (Robert Lorenz, 2012).

For instance, Antonio Machuco broadly observes, “It is as if *Gran Torino*’s narrative structure summarized the careers of the characters once played by Clint Eastwood,” and Kate Stables specifies that the film

is a fascinating if flawed revisiting of the themes and persona of Eastwood’s urban crime movies of the 1970s. [“Dirty” Harry] Callahan’s aggressive inviolability, that terse disdain for the politically correct, and his obsession with getting the job done, all resurface here, their alpha male resonance laid over elements that Eastwood has explored throughout his long body of work: questions of race, masculinity, and the uses and abuses of violence. (61)

I do not suggest that such a reading of the film is inaccurate; rather, I argue that in addition to Eastwood’s self-reflexive nods, the Detroit setting firmly grounds the film within the regional discourse that unfolds across the films I address in this chapter. As such, the characters, narrative, and ideology of the film must be understood not simply as citing elements from Eastwood’s career, but as drawing upon standardized conventions for representing the Midwest on film. My interest in *Gran Torino* revolves around how Stables’s three categorical questions concerning race, masculinity, and violence are inextricably linked to the film’s Michigan setting and what it means to be a Midwesterner as the region reacts to its degraded status in the early twenty-first century.

Paul Verhoeven’s satirical *RoboCop* (1987) remains one of the most – if not *the* most – iconic cinematic portrayals of Detroit. The film’s cyborg protagonist polices a decaying city at the mercy of Omni Consumer Products (OCP), a corrupt corporation that privatizes the police department and seeks to raze the city. OCP collaborates with a band

of criminals to accelerate the decline of Detroit so that a fantastical and consumer-oriented “Delta City” might be erected in its place. *Gran Torino* retains this sense of Detroit as a lawless environment in need of violent regulation. Indeed, as ineffectual as the human police force is throughout *RoboCop*, in *Gran Torino*, the police are unseen until near the film’s climax in which Walt is shot and killed by the Hmong gang. Machuco suggests that this conspicuous absence is intentional on the part of Eastwood in order to show “*that all action takes place within a pre-judiciary order in which there are no rules and no mediating entities that could prevent the rising level of violence*” (italics in original). Machuco describes Walt’s eventual unarmed sacrifice of himself as a “denunciation of all forms of violence,” but such an interpretation is rather shortsighted. The film seems designed to elicit such a reading – especially with Eastwood’s Christ-like pose after being shot – but the climactic scene belies all that precedes it. Prior to that point in the film, Walt eagerly embraced Detroit’s “pre-judiciary order,” as it enabled him to indulge his violent tendencies while demonizing the ethnic “others” surrounding him. Walt’s ostensibly nonviolent self-sacrifice is possible only because the gang expects him to be armed and aggressive, and this self-serving strategy permits Walt to die as a white savior of the ethnically diverse neighborhood. Understood in this light, Walt’s plan is a nostalgic attempt to perpetuate a racial hierarchy in which whiteness is presented as a necessary element to maintain social order. This racialized power structure points to a further intrusion of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier mythology within the contemporary urban Midwest.

Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Hosle present an intriguing reading of Walt’s proactive behavior based on his status as a veteran, and they write, “Military life has

aspects of the frontier mentality, including the need for courage, the willingness to sacrifice, and the temptation to use violence beyond a reasonable measure. Walt still lives that model” (668). While the conception of “military life” offered by Roche and Hosle is a bit simplistic, their brief linkage of *Gran Torino* to the mythic American frontier is quite significant. To expand on their passing observation, Turner’s writings retain a significant influence on depictions of the Midwest, especially in relation to race, labor, and masculinity. In Chapter One, I reread Turner’s writings on the frontier and American regions as nostalgic literature in which he valorizes the archetypal figure of the white male pioneer, situates the space of the frontier as an Americanization factory, and establishes a dichotomy between “savagery and civilization” (14). More than one hundred years after Turner famously declared that the American frontier was closed, *Gran Torino* presents the logic of the frontier’s social order as still present in the decayed urban spaces of the Midwest. So how does the film reflect Turner’s views?

Turner describes the frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (14), with the latter term representing European culture and the former term designating all other groups. This racialized dichotomy strongly informs the narrative events of *Gran Torino*. By the late nineteenth century, traveling westward into what Turner labels as the “vacant spaces of the continent” (186) – a description that casually elides all American Indian history – supposedly is no longer possible after the closing of the last frontier. More than one hundred years later, *Gran Torino* revisits Turner’s racist clash between savagery and civilization by problematically presenting the former frontier space of the Midwest as having been vacated by its supposedly “civilized” white inhabitants in the early twenty-first century. Consequently, this regional environment is

susceptible to becoming “primitive” once again, due to an influx of immigrants who do not have European ancestry.

To use Turner’s racist terms, instead of white settlers bringing civilization to savagery in frontier spaces, Walt must re-civilize his urban neighborhood that has declined into a state of violent chaos, a development that situates the contemporary urban Midwest as a frontier-like environment in need of taming. Moreover, this status requires the return of Turner’s archetypal pioneer figure who embodies the “traits of the frontier” (39). For Turner, these traits include: “That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism. . . .” (38). In short, *Gran Torino* establishes Walt as a latter day incarnation of Turner’s European settler, albeit one who is defiantly immobile and inactive until his neighborhood is threatened with violence by members of the newly arrived Hmong community.

Eastwood imbues Walt with a certain degree of indestructability – until he chooses to sacrifice himself, that is – and Walt’s violent efficacy plays upon a fantasy of white masculinity. Walt is configured as the only male character who is capable of responding to the conflicts unfolding in the neighborhood. The adult Kowalski sons indulge in leisurely suburban lifestyles, while local priest Father Janovich (Christopher Carley) vacillates between encouraging forgiveness and instigating violent retribution. Such contradictory stances effectively undermine Father Janovich’s masculinity, as the film elevates the single-minded and action-oriented Walt as a male ideal. Even more significantly, with the exception of the violent gang members, all of the other Hmong

characters are shown to be ineffectual and in need of saving by Walt. *Gran Torino*'s elevation of Walt is dependent upon this highly problematic gendered presentation of Hmong culture.

Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj observe that *Gran Torino*'s "main cast of characters skirts around one markedly absent presence – that of the mature, productive Hmong man. The story revolves around an infantilized good boy opposite a demonized set of gangsters" (14). Early in the film, the Vang Lor family's grandmother (Chee Thao) even laments this male absence: "I'm just so brokenhearted. I want my daughter to find another husband. If she married again, there would be a man in the house. . . . Look at [Thao] washing dishes. He does whatever his sister orders him to do. How could he ever become the man of the house?" Such scenes reflect the film's contradictory gendering of Hmong culture. On the one hand, Schein and Va-Megn identify a "dominant discourse" that defines the Hmong as "perpetual warriors" throughout the media (2-5). When such "hypermasculine warriorhood" appears in the United States – either via real life events such as a 2004 incident in which a Hmong male killed "six white hunters in Wisconsin" (2) or the depiction of a Hmong gang committing acts of violence in *Gran Torino* – then Hmong masculinity is "reviled as anachronism and failed assimilation" (16). On the other hand, the youthfulness of most of *Gran Torino*'s male Hmong characters "affirms a kind of newcomer greenness to Hmong Americans in general," while "the lack of productive Hmong men works toward creating the profile of refugee helplessness that sets Thao up for saving" (15-16). This version of Hmong culture is one in which "docility and assimilative desire are what remains legible, encoding Hmong Americans as feminine, vulnerable and in need of rescue" (16). Building on the observations of Schein and Va-

Megn, I see the purpose of attributing feminized vulnerability to the Hmong characters in *Gran Torino* as a necessary condition for validating Walt's white savior status. The film indicates that "white" Midwestern culture is threatened with extinction once Walt no longer is present, which creates the imperative for his mentoring of Thao. Even without Walt physically occupying the neighborhood, his values will linger.

Despite the specificity of the Hmong stereotypes that Schein and Va-Megn argue are utilized in *Gran Torino*, the film's pretense of verisimilitude easily unravels. In an interview, Bee Vang, the actor who played Thao, outlines a wide critique of *Gran Torino* and claims that "there's no real reason for us to be Hmong in the script. We could be any minority" (6). Vang acknowledges being "repulsed" by how Thao and other Hmong characters were depicted in the script (3), and he also responds to viewers who feel that the film "rings true": "Well – 'rings true' for who? Maybe to people who live in a world where whites are the only heroes. Or to those who take the film as a documentary about Hmong culture. Even other Asians do this a lot. . . . Meanwhile, what a lot of us Hmong feel is that the film is distorting and *un-true*" (6 emphasis in original). Vang's comments expose how the Hmong characters are used in an inherently generic manner within the narrative, despite instances of apparent cultural specificity in the film.

An overt example of Hmong cultural distortion occurs when Sue and Thao depart for Walt's funeral while wearing "full Hmong festival costume" (Schein and Va-Megn 29). As Schein and Va-Megn explain, the seemingly authentic attire is undercut by the absolutely inappropriate context, which confused many Hmong viewers who thought that "Sue was being forced to marry the gangbanger who had taken her virginity, and that the dress was part of the wedding ritual" (29). Hence, the ostensibly "authentic" specificity

of the Hmong culture on display in *Gran Torino* is little more than window dressing used to obscure the fact that the narrative requires only a generic ethnic “other” to set against Walt’s whiteness. So long as that group is distinguished by skin color, language, or attire, then they capably fill the role of a group that needs to be rescued and Americanized.

As I have observed throughout “Nostalgic Frontiers,” the most widespread images of the Midwest in popular culture frequently lack all but token references to any ethnic group that is not white, and Eastwood’s film once again affirms this regional stereotype, even with the large number of Hmong cast members. Much as the film offers a fantasy of aging male potency, the reductive portrayal of the Hmong characters serves to maintain the primacy and relevance of a white Midwestern culture that itself is essentialized in terms of labor and gender, among other categories. Again and again, Eastwood highlights these problematic depictions of both Hmong and white culture across several scenes that explicitly outline categorical definitions of what it means to be American and Midwestern.

Along with many audience members and critics alike, Roche and Hosle erroneously claim, “In its depiction of the Hmong community, Eastwood’s film completely avoids the temptation of idealizing the other culture – which is often simply an instrumentation of the other for one’s own purposes” (652). On the contrary, *Gran Torino* indulges in this precise mode of instrumentation regarding the Hmong characters within a Midwestern context. The film’s Hmong community is idealized as othered dependents who are in need of rescuing by a white savior figure. Walt believes that without his efforts to protect the Hmong neighbors and instruct them on how to obtain order in society, a status as fully American, and (in the case of Thao) traditional

masculine traits, then the Vang Lors will not “find peace in this world.” Such reasoning is contingent upon presenting the Hmong characters as incomplete, but eager to conform to Walt’s values.

Early in the film, Walt and the Vang Lor grandmother exchange glares and muttered insults that the other presumably does not understand. Eastwood provides subtitles for the grandmother, who wonders, “Why does that old white man stay here? All the Americans have moved out of this neighborhood. Why haven’t you gone?” Here, the phrase “old white man” is used almost as a synonym for “American,” which is a notable syntactic slippage that serves to omit nearly every character but Walt from being classified as American, despite the fact that the Vang Lors are legal immigrants to Detroit. A later scene further advances this limited definition of “American.” Sue and Walt chat in the foreground of the frame while Thao washes the Gran Torino in the background, and this composition provides perhaps an unintended commentary on the obscured contributions of immigrant groups on Midwestern culture. Sue declares, “It’s nice of you to kinda look after [Thao] like this. He doesn’t have any real role models in his life. . . . I wish our father would’ve been more like you. . . . He was really hard on us, really traditional, and really old-school.” Walt protests that he too is “old-school,” and Sue replies, “Yeah, but you’re an American.” Here, the conspicuously absent Hmong father – who presumably is deceased and a “perpetual warrior” type – is offered as a clear justification for Walt to proceed in his instruction of Thao regarding how to be an American male.

Sue’s comments also touch on a contrast between the Vang Lors and the Kowalskis that reappears throughout the film. Unlike the selfish Kowalskis, the Vang Lor

family supports one another and respects its aged members. Even Walt crudely and despondently acknowledges sharing values with the Vang Lors while gazing at his reflection in a mirror: “God, I’ve got more in common with these gooks than I do my own spoiled rotten family.” Regarding family unity, then, the marked traditionalism of the Vang Lors synchs them with the “older” values that Walt represents and seeks to preserve. Hence, this is one additional way in which *Gran Torino* features muddled assessments of its characters. As evident by scenes depicting “traditional” garb or rituals, the borderline fetishization of the Vang Lors’ past-ness generally is presented as a spectacle to mark their difference from Walt. Yet, even though the importance that they place on family also is understood as antiquated, that value is “old school” in a way that corresponds to Walt’s views. Recognizing the ongoing fluctuation between shading past-ness as positive or negative in *Gran Torino* is crucial to comprehending the conflicting interpretations that the film provoked, as well as its update of Turner’s frontier conflict between civilization and savagery.

*Gran Torino* presents intriguing revisions of the racialized expansion narrative articulated by Turner. Whereas the “savage” frontier occupied by American Indians became “civilized” through an onslaught of European settlers, the sole remaining white presence in *Gran Torino*’s urban Midwest – Walt – is compelled to restore order within a space that has slid from stable to chaotic because it now is populated by minority groups. According to the narrative’s problematic logic, Walt’s “white” violence echoes the “civilizing” efforts of the pioneers and thus is acceptable, while the Hmong gang’s violence recalls the savage perpetual warrior image that must be abandoned in order to become the correct version of “American.” Walt is tasked with not just fighting the gang,

but also indoctrinating youth such as Thao into embracing nostalgic ideals relating to labor and masculinity in the Midwest. This latter activity prompts Schein and Va-Megn to describe the film as a “drama of ethnic succession” (30), a description that somewhat corresponds to Turner’s writings about the trials of western expansion; where white settlers once displaced Native Americans, now *Gran Torino*’s Hmong immigrants displace white “natives,” while still retaining elements of that supposedly vanishing white culture.

Given the clear surrogate father/son subplot in the film, many commentators note a theme of “succession,” but assessments of this plot point feature a great deal of variance. In popular reviews and academic articles, the mixed reactions to *Gran Torino* reflect broader anxieties about the shifting identity of the Midwest during the early twenty-first century. In general, responses to the film roughly adopt one of three positions: ambivalence or outright anger over the essentialized and blatantly false presentation of Hmong culture; an uncritical endorsement of the film’s superficially liberal multiculturalist ideology; or racist anger over the displacement of white culture due to multiculturalism in the United States. The first position is evident through Bee Vang’s insightful criticisms of *Gran Torino*, as well as in the article co-written by Schein and Va-Megn. I already have quoted at length from both texts, and the primary arguments are based on recognizing that *Gran Torino*’s depiction of Hmong culture depends upon stereotypical, false, or misleading imagery.

The second position is a bit more complex and stems from a blithe presumption of verisimilitude regarding *Gran Torino*’s portrayal of ethnicity. Basically, the fictionalized depictions of Hmong culture are taken to be objective, and the film’s conflicts are seen as

representative of the growing pains that Midwestern communities are believed to experience when various ethnic groups encounter one another within the region. From this perspective, the coexistence and mutually influencing relationship between Walt and the Hmong community points towards a peaceful future with shared values. As discussed earlier, such coexistence depends on an uneven power structure, with the Hmong characters still requiring validation through the dominant white culture represented by Walt.

Examples of this superficial reading of the film are detectable in Machuco, who labels Eastwood as an “accomplished anthropologist,” as well as in Roche and Hosle, who write that *Gran Torino*’s “multiculturalism is not naïve” (670). This latter comment follows a passage in which the two authors claim that the film “shows a time of transition” in which it is “the old America that is still bigoted and exclusive and the new America that is multicultural and diverse; an old America that still needs heroes and a new America that is seeking through institutional strategies to ensure peace and order” (669). Their interpretation of the film overlooks plot developments such as “new” Thao pleading to “old” Walt for violent retribution, and it again elides the racial hierarchy upon which the “new America” is built. Roche and Hosle themselves even highlight this power disparity earlier in their article when writing,

The film suggests that what is valuable in America can continue only if the cultures of the European immigrants are enriched by pre-modern cultures, which are guided above all by tradition. Immigration can rejuvenate America, widening its vision, but only if the old citizens interact with those other cultures and learn to understand and appreciate

them and if the immigrants are willing to accept basic American principles, such as the rule of law and the dignity of labor. Eastwood remains committed to these principles, but he recognizes that a society based on them alone will be shallow and lack meaning. . . . (656)

Throughout their article, Roche and Hosle continually fall back upon oversimplistic binaries to make sense of the film. Roche and Hosle use oppositional pairings to distinguish between American/not American (i.e., European immigrants/immigrants from elsewhere), and this basic binary is dependent upon the following sub-distinctions: old/new; modern/traditional (or “pre-modern”); order/disorder; hardworking/shiftless; bigoted/multicultural; “exclusive”/“diverse.” This article praises the film’s “not naïve” presentation of multiculturalism, yet a closer reading of Roche and Hosle exposes how *Gran Torino* preserves the supremacy of whiteness within Midwestern culture. Again, the film achieves this preservation by either conditioning individuals such as Thao to enact supposed “white” values or asserting the fundamental otherness of various Hmong characters due to superstitious beliefs or savage violence. It is not surprising, then, that an overtly racist interpretation of the film may be based upon nearly the same components.

A clear example of the third position is a review of *Gran Torino* that appeared in *American Renaissance*, a magazine with an explicit white supremacist stance that claims “race realism” as a guiding principle for the views that it publishes. Titled “Elegy for the White Man,” Stephen Webster states that Walt “shames [the Vang Lors], because they cannot do what he can,” and the reviewer summarizes *Gran Torino* by writing, “Since [Walt] can’t make his neighborhood more white, he tries to make his neighbors more white, and that is what the film is really about: white America graciously giving way to

its non-white future” (12). Clearly, Webster offers a racially intolerant interpretation, but in doing so, he does not really distort the details of the film. What stands out is that Webster’s reactionary reading of *Gran Torino* is not particularly far removed from that of Schein and Va-Megn, who describe the film as a “drama of ethnic succession” (30). Both texts use the same evidence to support interpretations of the film from diametrically opposed positions on the political spectrum. As such, *Gran Torino*’s depiction of Detroit might best be understood as something of a Rorschach test that permits viewers to select which meanings they wish to take from the film, a quality shared with the Midwest itself.

Although Eastwood offers highly stylized and fictitious images of the Midwest, the open interpretability of the film mirrors the very manner in which the region’s meaning fluctuates in American culture. Like *Gran Torino*, the Midwest’s identity constantly is contended and revised, depending on the context. In the twenty-first century Midwest of *Gran Torino*, the iconography of Turner’s frontier is reasserted in the face of changing demographics; the loss of Walt’s white “civilizing” presence is mourned even as the film suggests that such stability will be perpetuated through the instruction of Thao. Although Walt’s antiquated white culture is presented as being threatened with extinction, a future is predicted in which those cultural values will persist and flourish. Change is feared and only welcomed if newcomers uphold the version of the Midwest that Walt nostalgically yearns to preserve. By the conclusion of the narrative, the Hmong community has adopted the “correct” traditional values through Walt’s guidance and, echoing Turner, the Americanizing space of the Midwest itself, which is shown to require and reward particular types of labor, family formations, and gender performance.

*Gran Torino* reveals the contentiousness involved in defining the Midwest, and the conflicting reactions that the film provoked exemplify the malleability of the region's imagery, which may be appropriated in support of any number of views. As detailed in Chapter Five, since the dawn of the millennium, the Midwest's stature rapidly has oscillated from being considered a non-ironic American ideal in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> to being the hopeless victim of global economics and Wall Street malfeasance. The films addressed in this chapter offer illuminating portraits of the Midwest's conflicted status during this period. Across these regional narratives, nostalgic protagonists struggle with changing Midwestern imagery, and this reactionary fear is distilled to its most paranoid essence in *Take Shelter*.

Even more so than *Gran Torino*, writer-director Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter* is ideologically ambiguous and lends itself to being interpreted in a number of contradictory ways. The minimalist narrative is set in a small Ohio town, where middle-aged construction worker Curtis begins having nightmares and waking hallucinations about an apocalyptic storm that rains a strange brownish liquid. Throughout the film, Nichols cuts to these dream and fantasy sequences without clearly indicating that they are subjective images from Curtis's mind, which imbues the Midwestern setting with a sense of uncertainty and menace. As Curtis's dreams become more and more horrific – in different visions, he is attacked by the family dog, anonymous people assault him, the family's living room briefly loses gravity, and even wife Samantha (Jessica Chastain) transforms into a threatening figure – he expands and fortifies a storm shelter in the family's backyard. This increasingly erratic behavior creates tension between Curtis and Samantha, especially after she discovers that he has taken a risky home improvement

loan from the bank to fund purchases for the shelter without consulting her. Curtis eventually is fired from his job for borrowing heavy machinery without permission, which jeopardizes Samantha's efforts to procure a corrective surgery for their deaf daughter Hannah (Tova Stewart). In addition to the overt drama of Curtis's growing paranoia, Nichols is attentive to the daily economic struggles of Midwestern families.

Following the onset of Curtis's dreams and visions, he begins to question his own sanity because his mother had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia when she also was in her 30s. Still, this self-doubt does not deter Curtis from compulsively completing the shelter and stockpiling survival supplies, such as canned food and gasmasks. A strong storm eventually strikes the Ohio town, prompting Curtis to herd Samantha and Hannah into the shelter. Curtis is reluctant to leave the next morning, but upon exiting, Curtis discovers clear skies and minimal damage from the storm. A brief scene depicts Curtis and Samantha in a psychiatrist's office, and the doctor suggests that taking a trip would be beneficial in order to be physical distant from the storm shelter. Nichols then cuts to Curtis and Hannah making sand castles on a desolate stretch of Myrtle Beach, where all three members of the LaForche family observe the apocalyptic storm from Curtis's dreams approaching from the sea. The brownish rain from Curtis's earlier dreams begins to fall, and Samantha acknowledges to Curtis that she sees the storm with a solemn nod. In a medium shot, the members of the LaForche family are shown gazing offscreen towards the storm, and the film concludes with a flash of lightening and a roll of thunder as the screen fades to black.

To a large degree, the ideological slant of the entire film hinges on this intentionally ambiguous final scene.<sup>72</sup> At least three interpretations appear plausible. First, it is possible – and perhaps even likely – that this final scene is yet another dream. Throughout *Take Shelter*, Curtis’s dreams are presented in an objective manner; that is, Nichols does not use any stylistic flourishes to denote a “dream,” aside from the strange phenomena that occurs within them. Because of this objective presentation of the dreams, many scenes take a few moments before they are revealed to be “reality” or merely visions while Curtis sleeps. There are even some instances in which it is unclear if Curtis is hallucinating or not, such as when he pulls over to gaze at an electrical storm on the horizon while Samantha and Hannah sleep in the backseat of the car. Other vehicles continue driving on the highway in the background of the shot, and Curtis wonders aloud, “Is anyone seeing this?”

The final scene exudes a similar uncertainty, partly because of an abrupt shift in locale after a period of uncertain duration. To this point, the narrative remained within its small town setting in Ohio, and the film’s timeline appeared to depict each passing day without large jumps forward in time. With this final scene, though, an elliptical edit transfers the LaForche family from Ohio to Myrtle Beach without providing a clear sense of how much time has passed from the psychologist’s office to the beach house, thus setting the scene apart from the temporal and spatial rhythms of the editing featured throughout the rest of the film. Additionally, the film began by depicting one of Curtis’s dreams, and ending in a similar fashion would provide symmetrical bookends for the

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<sup>72</sup> On the DVD commentary track by director Nichols and star Shannon, neither individual offers a definitive statement about the scene. Nichols coyly states, “People would probably want us to talk about this ending, but I don’t think, uh, I don’t think we should say anything other than, ‘Yeah, this is the ending.’”

narrative. This potential interpretation suggests that Curtis actually does suffer from paranoid schizophrenia or some other mental illness. If this were the case, then the film is largely apolitical, since it merely depicts the struggles of one man contending with the onset of mental illness. Understanding the final storm solely as Curtis's dream or hallucination means that it simply is a symptom of an individual's illness, rather than a symbol.

A second possibility is that the storm is ontologically real, and that all of Curtis's prior dreams and hallucinations were premonitions about this apocalyptic event threatening to bring about mass destruction. If the final storm is "real" within the diegetic world of the film, then it opens up to broader interpretation than if it merely is a symptom of mental illness. In a review of the film, Nick Bradshaw observes that Nichols "began writing [*Take Shelter*] in the summer of 2008 – when America was first fixing for the possibility of economic breakdown (to say nothing of manmade climate chaos). . . ." Regarding this latter concern, the onscreen visualization of the storm itself barely feels like an exaggeration of the extreme weather events occurring around the nation over the past decade, including Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, as well as the massive tornados that have ravaged Midwestern communities such as Joplin, Missouri. If the storm is taken as an allusion to the nation's economic crisis, then the issue of financial security assumes prominence in the film. Of the scene beside a highway in which Curtis wonders if anyone else is seeing a storm in the distance, Bradshaw writes that "it's a question that resonates with the less represented crises of money and morale that isolate struggling people throughout the capitalist world." For Bradshaw and other reviewers, the storm is

representative of the daily hardships facing middle class families, particularly after the collapse of the housing market.

Significantly, Curtis jeopardizes his family's economic foundation in multiple ways in order to alleviate his anxieties. Both the bank loan and Curtis's unapproved use of work equipment introduce risk into what would otherwise be stable elements for the LaForche family: their home and Curtis's regular income with an accompanying comprehensive insurance policy. Curtis thus sacrifices financial security for the mental security provided by the storm shelter, and this substitution reveals his substantial valuation of symbolic currency. It is not enough for Curtis merely to provide financially for his family; instead, he must assume an antiquated protector role. Just as Turner describes his mythical frontier pioneers, Curtis uses his physical labor to carve out a secure space for his family within a harsh and threatening environment. By fortifying the storm shelter, Curtis gains a more immediate sense of purpose from his labor, and, similar to *Gran Torino*, this shift indicates a desire to return to frontier survival conditions within the twenty-first century Midwest. Such a willful regression to past regional archetypes leads to yet another possible reading of the film's concluding scene.

A third interpretation of the final storm is that the entire LaForche family now is suffering from the delusions that plagued Curtis throughout the narrative. This option would indicate that Curtis's illness somehow is contagious and that he has infected his family with obsessive paranoia. On the commentary track, Nichols states, "I'll say this – and I say it in every interview – but, for me, the most important thing about the end of this film is that shot . . . that look between [Curtis and Samantha]. That, to me, is the true resolution in the film, and what happens after that, beyond that, I leave open to

interpretation.” The “look” referenced by Nichols is when Curtis and Samantha meet one another’s gaze, and she clearly affirms seeing the apocalyptic storm that only Curtis had witnessed to this point in the film. Yet even this seemingly straightforward acknowledgement is clouded in ambiguity emerging from the unclear status of the scene as dreamscape or diegetic reality. If it is the former possibility, then Curtis’s unconscious mind simply is inventing familial support for his delusions; if it is the latter option, the question still remains as to whether the storm actually is or is not present. The potential exists that while the LaForche family actually is at Myrtle Beach, they may be experiencing a shared hallucination, and this would indicate that the storm is representative of a reactionary persecution complex afflicting Midwesterners.

Certainly, Curtis’s behavior appears to be excessive and irrational for much of the film. When attempting to describe his frightening visions, Curtis babbles about an imprecise “something” that is coming to threaten everyone. Midway through the film, Curtis has a seizure in bed, prompting him to admit having visions to Samantha. Curtis explains,

I’ve been having these dreams. I guess they’re more like nightmares. It’s why I’ve been acting like this. They, um, they always start with a kind of storm. Like a real powerful storm. And there’s always this, uh, this dark, thick rain, like, like fresh motor oil. And then the things, people, it just makes them crazy. They attack me. . . . It’s, it’s, it’s hard to explain because it’s not just a dream. It’s a feeling. I’m afraid something might be coming. Something that’s not right. I cannot describe it. I just need you to believe me.

Later in the narrative, Curtis angrily erupts at a community social and warns, “There is a storm coming like nothing you have ever seen! And not a one of you is prepared for it!” In both of these scenes, Curtis is unable to articulate precisely what this storm is, beyond the fact that it is a portentous harbinger of “something.” Significantly, this non-specific threat is imagined as a disruption of the white, heteronormative, middle-class lifestyle enjoyed by the LaForche family. Understood in this way, Curtis’s paranoia somewhat aligns him with *Gran Torino*’s Walt.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, *Gran Torino* depicts Walt instilling “white” values in the new ethnically-diverse inhabitants of his formerly homogenous neighborhood. Walt perceives that the “old school” ideals he embodies – those relating to masculinity, labor, family dynamics, and sexual orientation – are threatened by a highly specific racial “other” represented by the Hmong characters. In *Take Shelter*, Curtis is so damaged that a threat only needs to be imagined (and not literally present) in order to throw his life into complete disarray. Delusional paranoia is all that is required for Curtis to embrace a contemporary version of frontier survivalist ideals relating to self-sufficiency and isolation. Much as the contributors to publications such as *American Renaissance* fantasize about an ongoing assault on “white” America, so too does Curtis fabricate a vague “something” that necessitates asserting his masculine protectionist abilities in the twenty-first century.

The ideology of *Take Shelter* is quite unclear as a result of Nichols’s intentional ambiguity. Depending on how viewers read the final scene, *Take Shelter* could be understood as generally apolitical, as a liberal-leaning warning about the repercussions of the global economy on middle class families and environmental irresponsibility, or as a

paranoid and reactionary conservative fable about an imprecise “something” threatening the region’s traditional image as a white, heteronormative space. It is difficult to determine which, if any, of the above interpretations is most appropriate. Like *Gran Torino* and the Midwest itself, *Take Shelter* permits viewers to extract whichever meanings they choose from the film. Such is the nature of the twenty-first century Midwest, as its imagery is malleable enough to support any number of conflicting ideological positions; that is, mere belief in a particular incarnation of the Midwest is all that is required to appropriate the region’s identity for purposes across the political spectrum in American discourse. Accordingly, *Gran Torino* and *Take Shelter* suggest that a paranoid belief regarding illusory Midwestern images being threatened – rather than already vanished or never even existent – is enough to sustain their cultural effects indefinitely and ward off the extinction of those long held perceptions about the Midwest, however false they may be.

### **Nostalgic Restorations**

In contrast with the disillusionment and paranoia detectible in so many Midwestern films around the turn of the millennium, *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Straight Story* present nostalgic attempts to transcend the Midwest’s fractured identity during this period. These two films, both released in 1999, feature complex spatial and temporal dynamics that result from their respective protagonists actively seeking to return to idealized versions of the past. Both films depict nostalgia-laden landscapes being

scrutinized by characters who consider the present to be evacuated of all meaning beyond its status as a degraded artifact that reminds of what has been lost.

The beliefs and behaviors of these characters in *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Straight Story* correspond to Svetlana Boym's discussion of how the nostalgic subject wishes to spatialize the flow of time so that it might become navigable:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

As discussed throughout “Nostalgic Frontiers,” the Midwest long has been considered to be an anachronistic space that contains past elements of American culture that no longer are present elsewhere, if they ever truly existed at all. The narratives of *The Virgin Suicides* and *The Straight Story* engage with the conceptualization of the Midwest as a nostalgia “museum” on an individualistic level, rather than in a national context. In these two films, the Midwestern landscape functions as a space in which time may be revisited and where the past is made visible and accessible, albeit with various limitations.

Bree Hoskin describes director Sofia Coppola's *The Virgin Suicides* as “a meditation on longing and suburbia” (214). Adapted from Jeffrey Eugenides's 1993 novel of the same title, *The Virgin Suicides* depicts the unreliable collective recollections of an unseen group of men reminiscing about growing up in a Detroit suburb during the

1970s. Although teenage versions of these men appear in the film, they collectively are represented by a single, unnamed narrator<sup>73</sup> (voiced by Giovanni Ribisi), whose commentary often reflects on the absolute unknowability of the past, despite the attempts by he and his nostalgic peers to make sense of their shared history. In their youth, these men developed a lifelong fixation on the Lisbon sisters: 13-year-old Cecilia (Hanna Hall), 14-year-old Lux (Kirsten Dunst), 15-year-old Bonnie (Chelse Swain), 16-year-old Mary (A.J. Cook), and 17-year-old Therese (Leslie Hayman). This obsession intensifies during adulthood, as the grown men shift from adolescent infatuation to ruminating on why the five girls committed suicide. The boys' fascination also extends to the Lisbon parents. Mr. Lisbon (James Woods) is a math teacher at the local high school, while Mrs. Lisbon (Kathleen Turner) is the family's religious matriarch who severely restricts her daughters' social development.

As the film opens, Coppola's camera lingers over the mundane routines of the suburban neighborhood (such as watering the lawn or grilling food in a driveway), until a

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<sup>73</sup> Throughout the film, it is unclear precisely which, if any, of the teenage boys is the younger version of the adult narrator. The group of boys shifts in number and composition, although some of them garner more screen time and appear more frequently than the rest: Tim Weiner (Jonathan Tucker), Chase Buell (Anthony DeSimone), Peter Sisten (Chris Hale), and Parker Denton (Noah Shebib). This lack of a specific referent suggests that the narrator is a voice representing the boys' collective memory in their adulthood. In a 2009 article, Debra Shostak discusses the "unusual first-person plural narrative voice" (808) featured in Eugenides's novel, and her comments also are applicable to the voiceover narration in Coppola's adaption. Shostak writes,

Eugenides's use of the collective voice enables a kind of perspectival vertigo. Because the voice is plural, it promises to offer a more reliable point of view than one might expect from a single voice, and the assumptions that determine its interpretations would, for the same reason, seem to have social legitimacy. Yet the authority conferred by numbers is undermined by the narrators' confession of their common puzzlement. . . . Indeed, rather than merging the multiplicity of conflicting interpretations through an implied coincidence of viewpoints, the "we" exacerbates the indeterminacy of the text. (809)

jump cut to the inside of the Lisbon home reveals Cecilia in a bathtub with slit wrists. Although Cecilia is resuscitated, she later succeeds in killing herself by plunging from a second-story window onto a spiked metal fence in the front lawn. When school resumes in the fall, high school hunk Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett) becomes smitten with Lux, and he convinces the Lisbon parents to permit their daughters to attend the homecoming dance. After the dance, Trip seduces and then abandons Lux, causing her to miss curfew. Mrs. Lisbon subsequently pulls all of the girls out of school and cloisters them in the house. The group of boys and the Lisbon girls begin communicating via Morse code and telephone calls, and they eventually devise a plan for a midnight rendezvous. When the boys arrive at the Lisbon house, they wander into the basement and discover that one of the sisters has hanged herself. As the boys rush from the house, they pass another of the girls with her head in the oven. The narrator explains that the four girls each killed themselves that same evening, and soon after, the boys “began the impossible process of trying to forget them.”

For the vast majority of *The Virgin Suicides*, Coppola depicts stylized recollections of the 1970s, but the film actually does not take place in that decade. Hoskin explains that “the film’s representation of the sisters, and the past in general, reside in the collective memory of the boys, a memory that both informs and is informed by their subjective longings in the present, manifested in their dreams” (216). As such, the true temporal “present” of the film is the year of the film’s release. After the opening scene and title sequence, “MICHIGAN 25 YEARS AGO” appears across the screen, and the narrator states,

Everyone dates the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped-out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry. Even then, as teenagers, we tried to put the pieces together. We still can't. Now, whenever we run into each other at business lunches or cocktail parties, we find ourselves in the corner going over the evidence one more time – all to understand those five girls, who, after all these years, we can't get out of our minds.

Here, the unspecified identity of the narrator suggests that he represents the collective perspective of the boys shown in the film by noting their shared nostalgic obsession in adulthood. More importantly, the disembodied narrator's commentary situates the onscreen imagery as being located in the past, rather than the film's images and "present" sharing the same temporality.

The film's true present – the time during which the adult men "still" cannot process the events of their childhood – only makes a brief, but highly significant appearance onscreen. Twice during the film, Coppola cuts to a scene with an older version of Trip Fontaine (Michael Pare) sitting at a table in a rehabilitation clinic. In addition to the juxtaposition of actors Hartnett and Pare, the formal elements used to depict the present are jarring in relation to all of the film's other scenes. Throughout most of *The Virgin Suicides*, nondiegetic noises intrude upon the soundtrack, from pop songs to ambient rumblings. When shifting to the present, though, all nondiegetic music abruptly drops from the sound design, with only diegetic background noises at the rehabilitation facility detectible. Similarly, Coppola uses a variety of fluid camera

movements to capture the past (or at least how the narrator remembers the past), as well as a mixture of shot types, including many extreme close-ups. In the present, the older Trip is shown only in a stationary medium shot that recalls a talking head interview in a documentary. The literally and figuratively sobering quality of this brief view of the present reflects the nostalgic subject's perspective on the progression of time. Once an emblem of youthful beauty, now Trip exists as a reminder that everything and everyone decays as time passes; for the nostalgic individual, the present can only be a drab, empty husk of the vibrant past, where the authentic and idealized version of one's self is believed to be located. Transcending the degraded present thus is the goal of the narrator and nostalgic subjects in general.

In the present, Trip appears haggard while recounting his memories of Lux, and both cuts to this scene disrupt the stability of the nostalgic visualization of the past that constitutes the majority of *The Virgin Suicides*. Although there are several overt fantasy sequences in the film, those moments are presented as concurrent with the past; that is, the fantasies are established as being imagined by the boys in the past, rather than the fantasy scenes being constructed by their adult selves. By contrast, the first instance in which Coppola cuts to middle-aged Trip reveals the existence of a tangible present outside of the narrative events located in the past. Although the narrator clearly is temporally distant from the onscreen proceedings,<sup>74</sup> the first cut to the rehabilitation

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<sup>74</sup> Coppola occasionally includes voiceover narration by the older Trip, but in these instances, his commentary is used as a sound bridge during edits that shift from the past to the present scene in the rehabilitation center. In addition to the regular narrator and middle-aged Trip, there is one other instance in which a temporal moment outside of the film's imagined past is presented: a brief bit of voiceover by Mrs. Lisbon near the end of the film. After all of the Lisbon girls have killed themselves, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon are shown leaving their house and driving away. In voiceover, Mrs. Lisbon says, "None of

center confirms that there is an exterior to the film's immersion in nostalgic memory.

Cutting to older Trip simultaneously configures the imagined past as a fictive construction and as a more preferable spatial and temporal locale than the dreary present.

Due to its placement in *The Virgin Suicides*, the second cut to the present further undermines the coherence of the film's generally nostalgic narrative and visuals. Prior to this scene at the rehabilitation facility is the 1970s homecoming dance scene, after which Trip is shown seducing Lux on the football field, while the other Lisbon sisters and their dates return home. Coppola then cuts to Lux waking up alone on the football field and taking a taxi back to her house. Despite nearly the entirety of the film being a nostalgic flashback, prior to this moment, the past had been presented in what appeared to be a chronological order. After Lux arrives at home, however, Coppola cuts backwards in time to the moment in which Trip abandoned his date. As Trip is shown exiting the football field alone and then sitting in his bedroom, older Trip's voiceover appears on the soundtrack, and a cut returns viewers to the rehabilitation facility in the present. The sequence in which these scenes are edited together introduces a flashback within the flashback that constitutes the majority of the film. This disruption of narrative linearity reemphasizes that all of the film's images (except for the depictions of older Trip) are

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my daughters lacked for any love. There was plenty of love in our house. I never understood why." This intrusion of Mrs. Lisbon's ruminations into the film's voiceover track is peculiar. Aside from the narrator, it is the only voiceover in the film that is not attributed to an individual located in a specific time and place (i.e., older Trip in the rehabilitation facility). The film's audience is given no information about when or where Mrs. Lisbon makes these statements. Did the narrator (and the collective group of adult men from the neighborhood) interview the mother? Did these men gain access to an archived recording of a deposition by Mrs. Lisbon? Do these statements come from the same "present" as occupied by the narrator and adult Trip? If not, are they made in the interim between the present and the 1970s? No definite resolution is provided by Coppola, which further muddles the narrative's overlapping temporalities.

nostalgic reconstructions of the past that are determined by subjective perspectives and unreliable memories. Yet, this clearly false portrait of the past – a product of misinformation, uncertain recollection, and nostalgic yearning – is presented as an object of desire for the narrator, one that is acknowledged as unattainable.

To satisfy this desire to occupy the imagined past, the boys (and their adult selves) fetishize mementos once possessed by the Lisbon girls. Hoskin writes, “This process of locating authenticity in material objects is . . . a legitimate means of attempting to satisfy nostalgic desire, acting, like dreams, as a medium through which the temporal disjunctions that constitute nostalgia are resolved through their dissolution. For an instant, desire is fulfilled” (217). Although examining the Lisbon girls’ personal property temporarily functions as a salve for nostalgia, Coppola shows that such objects direct the boys away from lived experience and into a realm of fanciful imagination.<sup>75</sup> Every scene in which one or more of the boys scrutinizes an item owned by the Lisbon girls is accompanied by an onscreen fantasy.

During an early scene, for instance, Peter Sisten is invited to the Lisbon household for dinner. Peter excuses himself to use the bathroom, where he examines the girls’ personal beauty and health products. While smelling a lipstick tube, Peter closes his eyes and Coppola cuts to a close-up of Lux waving her hair around in bright sunlight and tilting her head back as if experiencing pleasure. This fantasy, tellingly, is interrupted by

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<sup>75</sup> One key exception to this dynamic is the figure of middle-aged Trip, who himself exists as something of a nostalgic object. As “the only reliable boy who actually got to know Lux,” the narrator explains that the boys turned to Trip for clarification about their memories and who the girls were. Crucially, old Trip’s inability to explain his motives for abandoning Lux on the field reinforces the interpretability of the past; even with Trip talking about situations in which he was involved, the motivations for his younger self’s behavior remain inscrutable, just as with every other past event shown in the film.

Lux herself knocking at the door. Similarly, the boys acquire Cecilia's diary after her death, and the narrator explains that by reading it, they came "to hold collective memories of times we hadn't experienced." As the boys read the diary onscreen, Cecilia's voice provides narration from beyond the grave, and Coppola inserts a montage of shots that overlap and rapidly dissolve into one another. The material in these shots includes the boys reading the diary, what appears to be a home video of Lux, the girls in a golden field of wheat with warm lighting, and other images inspired by Cecilia's writings, including a unicorn. The content of this montage blends the adult men's memories of reading the diary with the fantastical impressions of the Lisbon girls that they concocted as teenagers. These images of memory and fantasy dissolve into one another in a decidedly cinematic representation of nostalgia.

Coppola's use of the dissolve as an editing device in *The Virgin Suicides* – particularly in the scene described above – produces a superimposition of images that highlights the film's intersecting temporalities. The recurring uncertainty as to which images represent a memory, a fantasy, or an actual occurrence illustrates the men's futile attempt to reconcile their faulty memories and projected desires into a coherent narrative. Even at the film's end, this project remains unfinished, and the narrator reflects,

So much has been said about the girls over the years, but we have never found an answer. It didn't matter in the end how old they had been or that they were girls, but only that we had loved them, and that they hadn't heard us calling, still do not hear us calling them out of those rooms, where they went to be alone for all time, and where we will never find the pieces to put them back together.

Much like the nostalgic journeys undertaken by the protagonists in *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air*, in this voiceover commentary, the narrator spatializes the temporally removed location of the Lisbon girls. Paradoxically, he explains that the girls still reside in the space of the Lisbon home, but remain out of reach when the men search it for artifacts that might produce a singular and ordered narrative of the past. In this way, the Lisbon home and its surrounding Midwestern suburb are configured as an environment that does not correspond to the linear flow of time. Instead, those who enter this regional space are doomed to exist within the in-between temporality of nostalgia, forever apart from what is desired. Even when sharing a space with an object of desire, the inability to occupy the same temporal moment ensures the indefinite perpetuation of nostalgic longing.

Coppola's aesthetic choices for the film's various fantasy sequences reinforce this sense of overlapping but discrete temporalities within the Midwestern setting. On the cusp of the new millennium, *The Virgin Suicides* presents the region as so wanting and degraded that the only recourse is an inward turn, an inverted temporal retreat into uncertain memories inflected by nostalgia.

David Lynch's *The Straight Story* depicts an attempt by its aged protagonist to restore the present to an idealized past state, and this nostalgic imperative is quite similar to that of the narrator (and the numerous men who he represents) in *The Virgin Suicides*. In addition, Lynch's film revolves around a nostalgic journey across a portion of the Midwest that resembles those undertaken by the protagonists of *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air*. To some degree, *The Straight Story* depicts a hopeful outcome to the regional nostalgia that pervades all of the films considered in this chapter and throughout "Nostalgic Frontiers." Whereas other Midwestern films released around the dawn of the

twenty-first century each feature white male characters grasping for meaning and either failing or embracing an all-consuming paranoia, *The Straight Story*'s Alvin Straight successfully reoccupies the past state he nostalgically desires via a deceptively linear trek through Iowa and Wisconsin.

Inspired by actual events, *The Straight Story* presents the superficially simplistic story of 73-year-old Alvin traveling well over 200 miles<sup>76</sup> on a riding lawnmower to visit his estranged brother Lyle (Harry Dean Stanton). At the start of the film, Alvin's doctor speculates that the septuagenarian may have diabetes and emphysema, and the physician warns that "serious consequences" will result if Alvin does not alter his lifestyle. Near death, Alvin learns that Lyle has suffered a stroke, which prompts Alvin to devise a plan to visit his ailing brother with whom he has not spoken in a decade. Despite "being blind and lame at the same time," as Alvin later describes himself, he dismisses his daughter Rose's concerns with a simple explanation: "I've gotta make this trip on my own." Midway through Alvin's journey, this sentiment is repeated when his mower breaks down. Danny (James Cada) and Darla Riordan (Sally Wingert) befriend Alvin and offer to drive him the rest of the way. Once again, Alvin insists on completing the journey alone and replies, "Well, I appreciate that, but I wanna finish this one my own way." In *Film Quarterly*, Tim Kreider describes Alvin's insistence on visiting Lyle without assistance as "an ordeal ritual, its rigors and privations rigidly maintained as a form of

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<sup>76</sup> The precise distance of the journey varies according to the source. The DVD packaging lists the distance as 260 miles, while in the revised edition of *Lynch on Lynch* (2005), Chris Rodley cites the distance as 300 miles (245). Within the film, Alvin's adult daughter Rose (Sissy Spacek) estimates that Lyle lives 370 miles away, and a 2004 article in the *Des Moines Register* identifies the distance traveled by the real-life Alvin as 240 miles. Given the film's nostalgic abstraction of space and time, the specific mileage is incidental and merely a point of trivia.

self-flagellation” (31).<sup>77</sup> Clearly, the arduous and deliberate nature of Alvin’s journey is intended to display his contrition for the past conflict with Lyle, who indeed is moved to the point of speechlessness when Alvin appears outside his Wisconsin home. Yet, I contend that there is an additional nostalgic impetus for this trip across the Midwest beyond mere atonement: Alvin’s journey transcends its ostensibly “straight” spatial trajectory and reverses linear temporality by functioning as an excursion into the nostalgically constructed past.

Throughout Alvin’s time on the road, he encounters a variety of Midwesterners who more or less embody the positive stereotype of the region’s inhabitants as being fundamentally friendly, decent people. Lynch’s idyllic portrait of the Midwest sharply deviates from other depictions of the region during this period, as evident by the troubled Midwesterners on display in other millennial films that depict the region. In *The Impossible David Lynch* (2007), Todd McGowan outlines a theory about the nature of these positive regional images, and he writes, “Lynch presents his mythical image of the heartland not as reality, but as the result of an extreme fantasmatic distortion” (179). Essentially, audiences perceive “the physical beauty of Iowa fields and the moral beauty of the American small town. . . . not because [the beauty] actually exists but because, as

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<sup>77</sup> Kreider offers a distinctly dark reading of the film based upon the revelation that Rose’s children were taken away by the state. During an encounter with a runaway teen, Alvin explains, “One night, somebody else was watchin’ the kids, and there was a fire. Her second boy got burned real bad.” For Kreider, Alvin’s stories about his past are “full of conspicuous gaps and contradictions” (27), which leads Kreider to extrapolate that Alvin’s negligence is what caused Rose to lose her children – that he is the “someone else” in the story. From this perspective, Alvin’s “journey . . . of atonement” is not simply undertaken for Lyle; it is an act of penance for the entirety of Alvin’s lifetime of regrettable behavior, including accidentally killing an American soldier in World War II, his subsequent alcoholism, and the possibility that he caused his grandchildren to be injured and taken from Rose (31).

viewers of the film, we are looking through the lens of Alvin's fantasy" (190). McGowan suggests that Alvin transforms the space of his physical journey – those very images that Lynch offers as the film's reality – into "the world of fantasy" (184) because the aged protagonist "embodies the full commitment to one's fantasy" (185). For McGowan, "The relatively tame and habitable public world depicted in *The Straight Story* results from Alvin's complete commitment to his fantasy. By committing himself to his fantasy, Alvin alters the way that he perceives and interacts with the external world, and this has the effect of changing it" (192). This notion of commitment recalls that of the males whose collective recollections produce the onscreen images of the past that comprise most of *The Virgin Suicides*; however, their nostalgia does not actually transform their physical environment, as evident by the exceedingly drab nature of that film's brief scenes with old Trip in the "present."

McGowan's argument about the fantasmatic nature of the landscape in *The Straight Story* is compelling, but he neglects to consider the temporal dimension of Alvin's personal and nostalgic revision of the Midwest. As a millennial-era film depicting the Midwest, *The Straight Story* is one of many texts presenting regional imagery through a nostalgic prism, and the distinctive temporality of nostalgia strongly informs the narrative and form of Lynch's film. *The Straight Story* is distinguished by the fact that Lynch depicts Alvin's fantasy world in what appears to be an objective manner – that is, there are almost no formal gestures indicating that the regional imagery onscreen is distorted in some way. By contrast, in *The Virgin Suicides*, the color scheme and sound design constantly remind audiences that the film's images are, in fact, nostalgic representations of unreliable memories. Additionally, Coppola utilizes dissolves in order

to represent an atemporal blending of memory, fantasy, and the actual past, but only in scenes during which the boys' imaginations are activated by objects owned by the Lisbon girls. Lynch, on the other hand, regularly uses dissolves throughout *The Straight Story*, and this editing device produces a curious sense of overlapping spatiality and temporality in the Midwest.<sup>78</sup>

The dissolve corresponds to ways in which Boym indicates that nostalgia might be represented on film, and she writes, "A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface" (xiii-xiv). Rather than omitting stretches of time via elliptical cuts, the dissolve blends images into one another and collapses time into brief moments of simultaneity: what would otherwise be clearly discrete shots and scenes occupy the same frame, however fleeting that instant might be. In this way, the basic desire of the nostalgic subject – the wish to restore the past within the present – momentarily is realized through the merging effect of the dissolve. Throughout *The Straight Story*, the repetitive use of dissolves disrupts the apparent linear physical trajectory of Alvin's journey by imbuing the Midwest with nostalgic spatial and temporal properties that suggest uncertain physical parameters and a distorted experience of time; thus, Lynch renders Midwestern temporality as comprised of an indeterminate duration and nonlinear flow.

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<sup>78</sup> Both McGowan and Kreider highlight particular scenes in which dissolves are used. McGowan writes about a scene depicting Alvin waiting for an undefined period of time after his mower stalls just before reaching Lyle's home (189), while Kreider notes that Lynch illustrates one of Alvin's stories about his past with "a series of dissolves from one allusive image of abandonment and emptiness to another" (27). Neither author, though, calls attention to the persistent use of dissolves throughout the entire film.

Alvin appears to be traveling across the regional landscape, but this movement actually is a nostalgic manipulation of time. Upon entering Wisconsin near Lyle's house, Alvin camps out in a cemetery and explains to a local priest (John Lordan) the nostalgic impetus for embarking on his slow journey:

[Lyle] and I used to sleep out in the yard every summer night if it wasn't pourin'. Nine months of winter, and we couldn't get enough of the summer. We'd bunk down when the sun went down, and we'd talk to each other until we went to sleep. We'd talk about the stars and whether there might be somebody else like us out in space, and places we wanted to go, and it made our trials seem smaller. Yeah, we pretty much talked each other through growin' up. . . . [we] haven't spoken in ten years. Well, whatever it was that made me and Lyle so mad, it don't matter anymore. I wanna make peace. I wanna sit with him, look up at the stars like we used to do so long ago.

The ultimate goal of the journey is not simply to make amends with Lyle, but for the two brothers to recreate the experiences that Alvin nostalgically associates with their childhood relationship. In the film's final scene, Alvin achieves this desire, and the elderly siblings sit beside one another and gaze at the sky with tearful eyes. Lynch frames Alvin in a close-up, and the camera tilts upward; at this moment, one final dissolve is used as a transition to a shot of a starfield, and the camera slowly begins to move forward into this celestial space. This sequence of shots is notable for multiple reasons. First, the reunion between Alvin and Lyle occurs while it is still daylight, and so the shot of stars cannot be an eyeline match, as would often follow a shot of a character gazing at

something. Again, the dissolve indicates an uncertain duration between these two shots. Second, the film opens with a nearly identical shot of a starfield, although the camera's movement forward through this space is a bit slower than in the final shot. Beginning and ending the film with these two shots has the paradoxical effect of establishing bookends for the regional narrative, even while opening it up to a cosmic scale.

In early pressings of the DVD edition of *The Straight Story*, an insert is included with a quote from Lynch to explain why there are no "chapters" on the disc: "I know that most DVDs have chapter stops. It is my opinion that a film is not like a book – it should not be broken up. It is a continuum and should be seen as such. Thank you for your understanding." Putting aside Lynch's preferences regarding how films should be experienced, his choice of the word continuum is especially significant in relation to this particular text. In addition to the first and last shots of *The Straight Story*, Lynch prominently sprinkles shots of stars – and, importantly, shots of Alvin gazing at them – throughout the film, and these instances link the vast cosmos with what ostensibly is a highly provincial environment (and narrative). Stargazing is an inherently nostalgic practice, or at least an excellent metaphor for nostalgia. Due to the speed of light, to look at the night sky is literally to gaze upon the past, to see a glow that no longer matches the present state of the stars which long ago emanated the light that only now is perceptible to the human eye. By connecting the expanse of outer space to a precise geographic territory, Lynch establishes that Alvin's Midwest exists as a continuum, a self-contained universe in which the past is visible in the present. Any borders placed upon the suddenly nebulous Midwest are as arbitrary as the film frame around a random selection of the night sky; in the nostalgic domain of *The Straight Story*, neither realm has earthly spatial

and temporal boundaries. Once Alvin takes to the road in *The Straight Story*, he occupies a nearly uninterrupted nostalgic state, habitually stargazing at night while fixating on his ultimate destination: a reunion with Lyle in which the brothers will reenact their childhood contemplation of the night sky.

The Midwest of *The Straight Story* is a space that exemplifies James Shortridge's discussion of the region as a nostalgia museum, albeit one filled with personal history in addition to being "a repository for traditional values" (67). In response to a millennial sense of Midwestern decay, Alvin attempts to reoccupy the past and succeeds in doing so, unlike the narrator and his peers in *The Virgin Suicides*, all of whom are trapped within a present characterized by unrelenting nostalgic longing. By having Alvin avoid this paralysis, Lynch takes the conception of the Midwest as a space of nostalgia (with an anachronistic culture) to its logical extreme and presents the region as an embodiment of what numerous texts across the past century metaphorically have accused this territory of being: an atemporal space in which the spatio-temporal logic of nostalgia deeply affects that lives of Midwesterners. In *The Straight Story*, the Midwest is a site of simultaneous, overlapping temporalities. For Lynch, the region's innate nostalgic character dispels the disillusionment, paranoia, and impotent longing that affect the fictional Midwesterners found in other films from this period. This more positive version of the nostalgic Midwest – or at least a less negative take on the cultural effects of nostalgia – restores significance to movement across the region's surface, a renewed meaningfulness that had been lacking since Frederick Jackson Turner's nostalgic frontier writings. This development leads to a surprising twenty-first century connection between an unusual

pairing of figures who first gained renown in the late nineteenth century: Turner and French philosopher Henri Bergson.

In Chapter One, I argued that Turner's geographic model of western expansion corresponded to the temporal model of nostalgia: a steady, linear progression to a certain point – for Turner, this point is when there are no longer any unexplored spaces within the United States – and then a looping turn backwards or inwards, as the case might be. By virtue of the Midwest's central location, the region operates as the fulcrum for Turner's claim that the nation "is now thrown back upon itself" (186) in the late nineteenth century, and this positioning situates the region as a space of nostalgia in American culture. Remarkably, over one hundred years after the last western frontier purportedly was closed, the rejuvenating qualities of Turner's spatial frontiers are reborn in a new "nostalgia frontier" on display in *The Straight Story*. Alvin's slow journey across a segment of the Midwest resets his damaged relationship with Lyle and, more importantly, ends with both brothers gazing contemplatively at the light emitted long ago by stars. This final image of the Straight brothers suggests a positive outcome for nostalgic desire, one that is somewhat analogous to Bergson's notion of duration.

Bergson first outlines the complex conditions of duration in *Time and Free Will* (1889), and he writes that duration, when "restored to its original purity, will appear as a wholly qualitative multiplicity, an absolute heterogeneity of elements which pass over into one another" (229). As such, "real duration is made up of moments inside one another" (232). The overlapping and blending temporality of Bergson's duration clearly is evident through the way in which Lynch depicts the Midwest in *The Straight Story*. Lynch consistently blurs clear distinctions between particular locations and obfuscates

the passage of time with the repetitive use of dissolves. Furthermore, the final scene with Alvin and Lyle sitting together silently corresponds with Bergson advocating that

[we] carry ourselves back in thought to those moments of our life when we made some serious decision, moments unique of their kind, which will never be repeated. . . . if these past states cannot be adequately expressed in words or artificially reconstructed by a juxtaposition of simpler states, it is because in their dynamic unity and wholly qualitative multiplicity they are phases of our real and concrete duration, a heterogeneous duration and a living one. (238-239)

On a fundamental level, Alvin's quest to reach Lyle and to reenact their childhood stargazing is a nostalgic attempt to recreate the experience of duration that Alvin remembers from his past. At film's end, Alvin has successfully carried himself "back in thought" to a past state that is not a repetition, but is a renewal. The disconnect that Alvin felt from his ideal childhood self has been surpassed, and Lynch leaves audiences with an image of the aged protagonist contentedly nestled within the durational convergence of his past and present.

Throughout *The Straight Story*, Alvin strains to account for what caused the rift with Lyle, yet a precise explanation never is provided. In general, Alvin recounts moments from his past that are meaningful to him, but these instances (such as staring at the starry sky) resist clear justification for their resonance, beyond simply having occurred in Alvin's youth. The true objects of Alvin's nostalgia ultimately are revealed to be moments of duration in which he experienced a cosmic elevation from the burdens of provincial spaces and homogenous time. As is often the case in Lynch's logic-defying

films, Alvin's nostalgic trek across the Midwest permits him to access a fantastical space of overlapping temporality in which a state of duration is achieved. Moreover, Lynch presents a transformation of the entire region into something approaching a realm of pure duration by the end of *The Straight Story*.

Whereas the millennial Midwest often had been perceived as a void in the middle of the country, in *The Straight Story*, the region is transformed into an arena within which the effect of nostalgia is to permit the actual restoration of the past, rather than merely perpetuating nostalgic longing in the present. For more than a century, the Midwest's identity was constrained by an oppressive sense of nostalgia projected onto the regional terrain and its inhabitants across a variety of popular texts. This nostalgic and reductive version of the Midwest was defined as a past-oriented region with little or no value in the present. With *The Straight Story*, Lynch both embraces and exceeds such regional associations, as the film paradoxically suggests that a nostalgic perception of space and time is endemic to Midwestern identity while also being the very mechanism that transcends geographic limitations.

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### Conclusion: Disappearances and Rediscoveries

Throughout “Nostalgic Frontiers: Violence Across the Midwest in Popular Film,” I have worked to identify the transformative effects of nostalgia on how the Midwest is understood in American culture. By examining the various permutations of nostalgia in Midwestern narratives, I sought to frame the region as a cultural construct that remains in flux, rather than retaining a stable meaning over more than one hundred years. Although I primarily analyzed filmic representations of the Midwest, the region’s ever-shifting meaning is detectible across numerous mediums. As a way to recapitulate some of the primary themes in “Nostalgic Frontiers” while also highlighting a few additional Midwestern texts of note, I briefly will survey three works that further illustrate the complex relationship between nostalgia and the Midwest.

Michael Lesy’s *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973) remains a captivating and unnerving rediscovery of a damaged Midwest from the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Composed of period photographs, newspaper articles, and other archival documents, Lesy’s reclamation and repurposing of these materials rebuffs any claims to the Midwest being a pastoral paradise during this era. Yet, in the introduction to *Wisconsin Death Trip*, Lesy reveals a purpose beyond merely shining a light on a forgotten Midwestern community. Of his book, Lesy writes,

Its primary intention is to make you experience the pages now before you as a flexible mirror that if turned one way can reflect the odor of the air that surrounded me as I wrote this; if turned another, can project your anticipations of next Monday; if turned again, can transmit the sound of

breathing in the deep winter air of a room of eighty years ago, and if turned once again, this time backward on itself, can fuse all three images, and so can focus who I once was, what you might yet be, and what may have happened, all upon a single point of your imagination, and transform them like light focused by a lens on paper, from a lower form of energy to a higher.

In this passage, Lesy ascribes a remarkable function to what is, essentially, a collection of curated objects: that of a “flexible mirror” which somehow has the ability to converge the past, present, and future. This sense of temporal simultaneity that Lesy hopes to achieve is both nostalgic in its connection to the past and beyond nostalgia’s circular mode of desire. Through recontextualizing artifacts from the past, Lesy imagines that his project produces a temporal collapse that is transformative and constructive.

Unlike Lesy intentionally exhuming the past, Tim O’Brien’s novel *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994) presents a Midwestern couple dealing with the fallout from history unexpectedly intruding into the present. The narrative begins after John Wade’s political career has been destroyed by revelations about his involvement in the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. To deal with the professional and personal repercussions, John and his wife Kathy retreat to Minnesota’s isolated Northwest Angle, where she promptly disappears. John, too, vanishes while searching the maze-like network of lake channels and islands.

O’Brien’s novel is not a detective story, though, and it provides no answers for its mysteries. Instead, *In the Lake of the Woods* is, in part, a reflection on how history lingers and the ways in which the Midwestern landscape both conceals the past and makes it

present. Similar to Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973), O'Brien presents the Northwest Angle as a realm with abstract properties, and he writes, "And in the deep unbroken solitude, age to age, Lake of the Woods gazes back on itself like a great liquid eye. Nothing adds or subtracts. Everything is present, everything is missing. . . . Thickly timbered, almost entirely uninhabited, the Angle tends toward infinity. Growth becomes rot, which becomes growth again, and repetition itself is in the nature of the angle" (286-287). Once again, the Midwest is configured as a realm imbued with a nostalgic impulse to look into the past and contemplate the progression of time. The landscape itself is described as a space with confounding properties where, paradoxically, everything is simultaneously perceptible and absent. This is a perilous environment in which nostalgia's repetitive desire circuit permeates both Midwestern culture and the region's physical territory. The Midwest swallows up lives, clouds the future, and is set apart from the unfolding contemporary time that is located elsewhere.

Finally, with a nod towards symmetry, I close "Nostalgic Frontiers" as I began by circling back to the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*. In this project's introduction, I discussed an article that humorously announced the "discovery" of the Midwest in the late 1990s. After six chapters in which I have worked to rediscover how the Midwest's identity has been shaped through a variety of texts that span more than a century, I return to *The Onion* for further insight regarding popular perceptions of the region.

Similar to Lesy and O'Brien, a 2011 article in *The Onion* establishes the Midwest as an atemporal space that entraps individuals who pass within its nebulous borders. Titled, "30 Years Of Man's Life Disappear In Mysterious 'Kansas Rectangle,'" the article recounts the story of a Chicago man who vanished within the Midwest after being

“drawn there to investigate tales of cheap tuition.” This victim hardly is unique, as he “is only one of hundreds of people who, for unknown reasons, have had years or even decades of their lives utterly fade away in the mystifying region. . . . The few known photos from inside the rectangle show only a flat, blank emptiness, stretching unremarkably to the horizon.” Even individuals who have successfully passed through this mysterious region describe sensory confusion: “The most frequent occurrence reported by those who have survived the Kansas Rectangle is extreme disorientation and an unsettling perception of time distortion.”

As these three texts demonstrate, portrayals of the Midwest as a blank space serve to mask the complex spatial and temporal conditions that are intrinsic to its identity. The past-oriented fixation that pervades Midwestern culture – at least as depicted in popular texts – contributes to the reductive conception of the region as a static, unchanging domain. Nostalgia, however, is a dynamic force, and its effects may be violently regressive (*Boys Don't Cry*), frustratingly ambivalent (*Gran Torino*), or potentially transcendent (*The Straight Story*). Across a diverse range of narratives, the relationship between the Midwest and nostalgia is modulated in response to historical circumstances. Ultimately, by being attentive to the operations of nostalgia within Midwestern narratives, the constraints upon regional identity might be loosened so that a Midwest worth desiring can emerge. While the nostalgic desire for simultaneity often is equated with temporal collapse, perhaps the state of simultaneity might be reimagined as, to appropriate Turner's phrase, a mode of “perennial rebirth” that opens up the Midwest's identity beyond the foreclosures of meaning that long have defined the region.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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BA, Dual Major in English and History, and Certificate in Creative and Professional  
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### PUBLICATIONS

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“The Millennial Midwest: Nostalgic Violence in the Twenty-First Century.” *Quarterly  
 Review of Film and Video*. 32.5 (forthcoming)

Curated Post: “‘Show-Me State Hello’: Greetings from the ‘Unnatural’ Midwest.” *In  
 Media Res* (January 2014).

Review of *Becoming Jack Nicholson: The Masculine Persona from Easy Rider to The  
 Shining* by Shaun R. Karli. *Screening The Past* 37 (October 2013).

### PRESENTATIONS

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“‘Stay Here Till We Rot!’: Temporal Resistance and Nostalgic Memory in *Meet Me in St.  
 Louis*.” Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Vancouver, BC, Jan.  
 8-11, 2015. (proposal accepted)

- “The Aesthetics of Nostalgia: Dissolves and Simultaneity in *The Straight Story*.” Annual Conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Seattle, WA, Mar. 19-23, 2014.
- Panel Respondent, *Deathly Life*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, Milwaukee, WI, Feb. 20-22, 2014.
- “*Gran Torino*: Contradictory Reconciliations of the Urban Midwest with ‘Authentic’ Regional Imagery.” Annual Convention of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Milwaukee, WI, Nov. 7-10, 2013.
- Panel Chair, *The Historical Avant-Garde of the 1960s and 1970s*. Annual Conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago, IL, Mar. 6-10, 2013.
- Panel Respondent, *Systemic Failure*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, Milwaukee, WI, Feb. 15-16, 2013.
- Panel Respondent, *Futurity and Format*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, Milwaukee, WI, Feb. 24-25, 2012.
- “‘You Betcha!’: Playfulness and Violence within Midwestern Identities.” Annual Convention of the Midwest Modern Language Association, St. Louis, MO, Nov. 3-6, 2011.
- “The Nostalgia Frontier: Mourning the Midwest in *About Schmidt* and *Up in the Air*.” Midwest Popular Culture Association and Midwest American Culture Association Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI, Oct. 14-16, 2011.
- Panel Chair, *Reflecting Unrepresentability: Ambivalence on Screen*. Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, Milwaukee, WI, Feb. 25-26, 2011.
- “Expert and the City: Issues of Authority and Authenticity in *Chan is Missing*.” Midwest Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference, Milwaukee, WI, Feb. 20-21, 2009.
- “(Form)ulating a New Genre: Tim O’Brien’s Composite Novels.” Annual Convention of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Chicago, IL, Nov. 9-12, 2006.
- “Call and Response: Emerging Conflicts as Students ‘Perform’ Composition Goals.” Annual Graduate Student Conference on First-Year Composition, Milwaukee, WI, Dec. 5, 2005.

## TEACHING

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Graduate Teaching Assistant, Film Studies Program/Department of English, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2005-2012

Courses independently designed and taught:

English 286: Writing about Film and Television (spring 2011).

Film Studies 212: Violence and Disorder in the Midwest (fall 2009, spring 2011, spring 2012)

Film Studies 212: Introduction to Horror (spring 2010, fall 2010, spring 2012)

Film Studies 212: Cinematic Surveillance: Spies, Voyeurs, and Exhibitionists (fall 2011, cross-listed with the Women's Studies Program).

English 111 Online: Introduction to Entertainment Arts: Film, Television, and Digital Media (fall 2011)

English 102: College Writing and Research (spring 2007, spring 2008, fall 2008, spring 2009)

English 101: Introduction to College Writing (fall 2005, spring 2006, fall 2006, fall 2007)

Discussion section leader and course grader:

English 290: Introduction to Film Studies (fall 2008, fall 2009)

English 111: Introduction to Entertainment Arts: Film, Television, and Digital Media (spring 2009, spring 2010)

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Global Studies 202: Introduction to Global Studies III: Globalization and Technology (fall 2010, spring 2011, fall 2012)

## FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Graduate Student Travel Award, Graduate School, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, March 2014

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Graduate Student Travel Award, Department of English, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, February 2012

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Media Review Editor, *Middle West Review*, University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

Project Assistant, Center for International Education, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2013-2014.

Duties include: providing research support for the Vice Provost for International Education; performing rubric assessment for the Global Studies and International Studies majors; planning and facilitating the CIE annual conference of international scholars; expanding outreach to international students.

Film Studies Collection Archivist, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 2009-2014.  
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Curriculum Development Committee, Film Studies Program, University of Wisconsin–  
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#### COMMUNITY WORK

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“The Pictures Get Smaller,” Riverwest Radio, 2012-2013. Founder, producer, and host of  
 weekly online radio program and podcast. This show provided a public forum for  
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 professional interests in film, television, and digital media.

“Conversations” Leader, Milwaukee Film, 2011-2013.

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#### MEMBERSHIPS

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Society for Cinema and Media Studies, 2012-2014

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