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*Parks and Recreation* (review)

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as the end credits roll, Payne's film insists on the always in progress nature of our lives, up until that final moment when we take our last breath.

This is something the cinema is the perfect art form to convey: when the camera is turned off, a certain kind of death occurs. The magic box has brought people to life by projecting their images on a screen. When the light ceases, the characters cease to exist; for all practical purposes, they die. As much as Mount Rushmore tries to indicate otherwise in monumental granite, the cinema is a machine of the ephemeral, of that which is always in motion, always doomed to incompleteness. In short, the movies are the perfect art form for telling our stories, and some of those tales concern those of us who live and love in between New York and Los Angeles.

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*Parks and Recreation*. NBC. NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2009–15.

Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler), the protagonist of NBC's primetime sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, obsessively loves the small midwestern town for which she serves as deputy parks director and, briefly, city councilwoman. The show, set in fictional Pawnee, Indiana, revolves around the daily work of a parks and recreation department. Seasons four and five provide a closer look at the intricacies of local politics as Leslie campaigns for office and serves as councilwoman during this multiseason narrative arc. Pawnee itself takes on a substantive role throughout the series, as much of the show's humor emphasizes the stubbornness of the town in response to Leslie's determined yet reasonable brand of progressive politics.

The show operates on a contradictory logic that sympathetically portrays Leslie's excessive love for her small hometown while simultaneously offering Pawnee up as the butt of many jokes. While Leslie is quoted on "multiple occasions" as saying that "only a moron would ever live anywhere other than Pawnee, Indiana," the show relies on stereotypical notions of the Midwest as a conservative cultural wasteland.<sup>1</sup> *Parks and Recreation* reinforces such negative regional associations with its portrayal of Pawnee, especially in its representation of futile town hall meetings. In their introduction to the Midwest, scholars Joseph Slade and Judith Lee discuss the public's understanding of the Midwest as either "Heartland" or

“Hinterland.”<sup>2</sup> As the “Heartland,” the Midwest stands in as the idealized version of pastoral Americana; as the “Hinterland,” the Midwest is conceived of as a “backwater” that is “populated by rubes and suburbanites.”<sup>3</sup> *Parks and Recreation* dabbles in both sides of this binary and renders them excessive and comedic.

The show’s centering around a parks department allows for a focus on pastoral Americana, a point made evident through the opening credits which briefly showcase images of iconic American life. The credit sequence begins with an overhead shot of a plowed field, and the screen then splits to reveal side by side images of a basketball entering a hoop and a lot being developed into usable land. Among the images that accompany the upbeat theme music (composed by Gaby Moreno and Vincent Jones) are a child catching a baseball, a statue of a Native American man, a canoe, a wheat field, a buffalo, a cardinal, a couple riding bikes over a bridge, and American flags. Furthermore, through the character of parks director Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman), the series presents an extreme version of heartland ideals to the viewer. A libertarian who believes in as little government involvement as possible, Ron makes furniture by hand, attempts to disconnect from all technology, and eats only meat. Although Ron is not vilified for his beliefs and lifestyle, he is situated as being representative of the excessive codes of the midwestern heartland image. In order to make Ron’s version of conservative masculinity legible to viewers, the midwestern setting functions as a space that is “hopelessly rooted” in “outdated American past life and values,” to borrow Victoria E. Johnson’s descriptions of the Midwest’s derided image.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side of the Heartland/Hinterland binary, the show uses the Pawnee constituency’s love of sugary Sweetums products to reinforce public conceptions of midwesterners as unhealthy people with poor taste in both food and culture. Slade and Lee note that “the great Midwestern agricultural machine, whose corn, wheat, and beef fed the nation” has been charged with causing “evils ranging from epidemic obesity to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.”<sup>5</sup> “In this view,” Slade and Lee claim, “abundant, cheap Midwestern corn makes the cheap, supersized soft-drinks and hamburgers that have expanded waistlines wherever the American diet prevails.”<sup>6</sup> This viewpoint is reinforced through Leslie’s fight with Sweetums to recall their unhealthy “Nutrium” bars that have been marketed as nutritious despite being filled with high fructose corn syrup. Similarly, in “Soda Tax,” Leslie works with Ann Perkins (Rashida Jones) to put a tax on soda in order to stop fast food chains such as Paunch Burger from offering enor-

mous sodas to their customers—such as the “Sweetums’ Sugar Splash,” a sixty-four ounce soft drink that is sold as a “small” serving. The town habitually resists Leslie whenever she rallies against Sweetums or Paunch Burger. Pawnee is identified as “the fourth most obese city in America,” but the locals still meet Leslie with anger following her attempts to tamper with their consumption of fatty corporate food.<sup>7</sup> Pawnee’s obesity and unhealthy habits become a punch line throughout the series; for example, when indie rock band the Decemberists guest star in the season six finale, the lead singer announces that he loves Pawnee because he “ordered a small cheeseburger, and both the buns were pizzas.”<sup>8</sup>

Though she also loves food (and waffles specifically), Leslie judges the townspeople for their habits. She says in exasperation, “I love Pawnee, but but sometimes its sucks. People can be very mean and ungrateful, and they cling to their fried dough and their big sodas, and they get mad at me when their pants don’t fit.”<sup>9</sup> In addition to poor diets, the show calls attention to Pawnee’s lack of cultural capital as exemplified in their other tastes. When Ann Perkins and April Ludgate (Aubrey Plaza) visit the much larger town of Bloomington, Indiana, Ann is surprised to find an organic baby shop and a bike trade program, and she notes that the only baby store in Pawnee is “attached to a chemical refinery.”<sup>10</sup> Through the depiction of these tastes and consumption practices, the series offers up a rather culturally isolated vision of the small town Midwest, a town that Leslie Knope and her partner Ben Wyatt (Adam Scott) must save from itself.

Though strengthening the Midwest’s conservative image in some respects, the show does slightly trouble cultural associations with the region as “a white heteronormative familial space.”<sup>11</sup> In particular, *Parks and Recreation* features three primary cast members who belie conceptualizations of the region as white: Tom Haverford (Aziz Ansari), Donna Meagle (Retta), and Ann. Beyond these nonwhite characters, however, the show itself fails to fully engage in a dialogue about race aside from calling attention to the region’s problematic relation with the colonization of Native American land. In a rather noncommittal way, the show has Leslie note Ann’s “ambiguous ethnic blend,” which “perfectly represents the dream of the American melting pot” without fully exploring issues of race in America or the Midwest.<sup>12</sup> *Parks and Recreation* also remains safely within heteronormative boundaries, with April’s season one boyfriend Derek (Blake Lee) and his boyfriend Ben (Josh Duvendek) as the only openly gay characters.

As a network series that showcases strong women in power and uses fast, quippy dialogue, *Parks and Recreation* is often a refreshingly progressive

sitcom. Still, the show—like much of popular culture—is contradictory in its progressiveness. Despite Leslie’s unwavering belief in the superiority of Pawnee, the series ultimately relies on stereotypical notions of midwestern backwardness for comedic mileage to propel the plots of individual episodes and season-long arcs.

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#### NOTES

1. *Parks and Recreation*, “Moving Up,” episodes 111–12 [season six, episodes twenty-two and twenty-three], dir. Michael Schur, NBC, originally aired Apr. 24, 2014 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2014).
2. Joseph Slade and Judith Lee, “Introduction,” in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Cultures: The Midwest*, ed. Joseph Slade and Judith Lee (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2004).
3. Ibid.
4. Victoria E. Johnson, *Heartland tv: Primetime Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5.
5. Slade and Lee, “Introduction.”
6. Ibid.
7. *Parks and Recreation*, “Soda Tax,” episode seventy [season five, episode two], dir. Kyle Newacheck, NBC, originally aired Sept. 27, 2012 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2012); *Parks and Recreation*, “Sweetums,” episode twenty-one [season two, episode fifteen], dir. Dean Holland, NBC, originally aired Feb. 4, 2010 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2010).
8. *Parks and Recreation*, “Moving Up.”
9. *Parks and Recreation*, “London: Part 1,” episode ninety-one [season six, episode one], dir. by Dean Holland, NBC, originally aired Sept. 26, 2013 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2013).
10. *Parks and Recreation*, “Win, Lose, or Draw,” episode sixty-eight [season four, episode twenty-two], dir. Michael Schur, NBC, originally aired May 10, 2012 (NBCUniversal Television Distribution, 2012).
11. Johnson, *Heartland tv*, 18.
12. *Parks and Recreation*, “Win, Lose, or Draw.”

*Two American Families*. PBS Frontline [season thirty-one, episode fourteen], originally aired July 9, 2013. Public Broadcasting Service, 2013.

“Do you feel like a failure today?” Near the conclusion of *Two American Families*, Bill Moyers poses this question to Jackie Stanley, a resilient, hardwork-