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Introduction

A Revival and a Burial

Since about the midpoint of the twentieth century, the study of the American Midwest has steadily lost appeal, while the scholarly subfields of the US South and West have boomed. Today, no fewer than ten institutions of higher learning boast centers dedicated to the historical study of the American West and Southwest, and numerous universities in southern states support comparable institutes focused on the US South.¹ Conversely, only three such centers exist for the study of the Midwest, none of which have the esteem or the historiographical influence enjoyed by institutes for southern and western studies.² To be sure, scholars still research and write about people and places within the Midwest, but generally they do not explore the region in the same way that studies focused on, say, Atlanta situate that city firmly within the South. Further, while colleges and universities in the western US, for instance, regularly offer courses in the history of the West, few—if any—academic institutions in the Midwest train their students to think critically about the region in which they live.

Recently scholars from various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have endeavored to redress these discrepancies in regional treatment. Earlier this year, the Humanities Without Walls (HWW) consortium, comprising fifteen major research universities throughout the Midwest, received a generous \$3 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to fund inter-institutional research on the “global Midwest” and its economic and cultural salience. Scholars at the HWW schools are now in the midst of developing projects about the region in which they reside—and its international impact. Historian Jon K. Lauck has garnered atten-

tion from renowned historian Richard White and others for his new book *The Lost Region*, which seeks to stimulate a “revival” of midwestern history.³ Further, the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies at the University of Iowa hosted a symposium in 2012 on the Latino Midwest, and faculty at the university are presently working to develop a Latino/a studies minor to reflect the population’s expanding imprint on the state of Iowa. To proffer just one more example, a recent special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, entitled “Queering the Middle,” interrogates the subjectivities of LGBTQ individuals living in the American Midwest. Its diverse essays—which touch on everything from Chicana lesbian activism in Chicago to masculinity and gender nonconformity on the Great Lakes—seek to queer the Midwest and challenge pervasive conceptions of the region as “normative.” The *Middle West Review* belongs within this broader project of reenergizing and reimagining the study of the American Midwest.

But we must be wary of what we purport to be reviving. A renewed emphasis on midwestern studies should not replicate the silences and omissions that marred some earlier scholarship on the region. It should not privilege the privileged or depict a romantic past ostensibly disrupted by rabble rousers from below. It should not obscure the racial, class, gendered, and religious tensions within the Midwest or shy away from difficult questions about identity, historical memory, and oppression both past and present. It should not treat the Midwest as a site of uncontested progress, a region invariably on the “right side of history.” It should not pretend that Jim Crow never reared his ugly head in Wisconsin or Iowa. It should not hesitate to interrogate what it means to be black, Latino/a, Muslim, queer, Asian American, Native, or white in the Midwest. It should not recapitulate the myths that cast the Midwest as a yeoman’s dream, a blank rural canvas. It should not valorize conquest. It should not paper over the violent colonialism that gave the region its color and shape. But, at the same time, it should not ignore the region’s virtues—which have contributed to its unique character—or the “dailiness” of midwestern life.⁴ We therefore seek a broad and inclusive field, one that serves as an open forum for scholarly and deliberative discussion from various points of view; one that focuses on the history and contemporary experience of the American Midwest as a region; one that dares to innovate; and one that transcends the limitations of prior writing and thinking about the Midwest.

In this inaugural issue of the *Middle West Review*, we see in stark relief the contested meanings of the midwestern past and scholars’ exciting efforts

to recover and reconstitute that history. John E. Miller offers a cogent call for new scholarship on the American Midwest by examining the fraught legacies of historian Frederick Jackson Turner's academic career. Turner's much ballyhooed and justly criticized frontier thesis, Miller affirms, should only partly define his legacy. In Miller's view, Turner's vision of sectional history might inform a new strain of midwestern studies to compete alongside the lively fields of southern, western, and, to a lesser degree, New England history.

Doug Kiel calls for a reappropriation of Turner's frontier and sectional theses. Though he agrees with recent new western historians who have rendered the "frontier" as a deeply problematic, antiquated, and hegemonic construct, Kiel implores scholars to refashion the frontier concept for use in new studies of the Midwest. In his sweeping essay, Kiel argues that the frontier and conceptions of the frontier have structured the region we now know as the Midwest. For Kiel, the frontier should thus serve as a medium through which to narrate the region's contested and multiethnic history. "The American Midwest is a zone of exclusionary erasure and closure," he writes, "and historians cannot tell the story of this region without the concept of the frontier." Kiel's important contribution simultaneously builds upon and challenges the precepts on which the so-called new western historians developed their field, and it will no doubt provide a strong foundation for a revived midwestern scholarly tradition.

Next, Kay Golden keys into the experiences of midwestern immigrants with her engrossing biographical account of her great grandfather, T. V. Golden. In doing so, she reveals the political, economic, and, indeed, personal forces that contributed to the making—and unmaking—of O'Neill, Nebraska. Like Kiel, Golden also gestures toward the divergent uses and abuses of ethnicity and identity in the American Midwest. She astutely suggests that O'Neill's emergence as the "Irish capital of Nebraska" precluded the development of a more inclusive, multiethnic space. The "world's largest shamrock" around which the town revolves, then, serves as a symbol of the simultaneously diverse yet often exclusionary midwestern past. Golden's compelling history also reminds us of the myriad complex stories waiting to be excavated in even the tiniest towns of "flyover country."

Zachary Michael Jack probes the political importance of the American Midwest as he recounts his experience at the 2011 Iowa Straw Poll. Jack pays particular attention to the Midwest's disputed meanings in the popular political imagination as both a cluster of inconsequential states and as a

site of reactionary politics that impinges on national progress.⁵ As Jack argues, though, Iowa's position as a tastemaker in presidential politics stems from its residents' fervent commitment to civic engagement—something, Jack holds, east coast voters do not share, in the main. Yet Jack's analysis should not be taken as a celebration of the Midwest's "traditional" political spirit. Indeed, he implies that midwestern provincialism sits in tension with the region's vibrant progressive past and present, and neither dominates the other. By acknowledging these frictions, Jack demonstrates that the Midwest defies facile characterization and categorization.

Tobias Higbie supplies us with a fascinating cultural history of the term "heartland." Higbie traces the etymology of the politically potent appellation and explains how it came to refer to the states of the American Midwest. As a "regional signifier," Higbie insists, "heartland" is freighted with racial, gendered, religious, and spatial meaning, even though it only recently—in the latter half of the twentieth century, Higbie shows—came to define the Midwest. The article thoughtfully asks us to reconsider many of our preconceived notions about the midwestern experience and the very words we use to describe it.

Finally, Jon K. Lauck's interview of eminent historian Allan Bogue approaches Turner and the frontier from a different vantage than Kiel or Miller. Compared to Kiel, both Lauck and Bogue seem more sympathetic to Turner and critical of recent scholarship on region and westward expansion. To wit, Bogue rejects the novelty of the new western history, much of which calls into question the fixity of region and modernist understandings of borders, race, ethnicity, and nation. For Lauck and Bogue, Turner omitted certain actors—that is, nonwhites—from his tableau, but his findings still animate contemporary historical scholarship and, in turn, ideas about "the West," in all of its shifting permutations. Thus, Lauck, Bogue, Miller, and Kiel all take Turner as their point of departure and find value in his vital work on region and the American character, yet they derive disparate "lessons" from Turner's scholarship and disagree on the directions in which new studies of the American Midwest should move.

Taken together, these contributions shed light on the American Midwest as a heterogeneous and complicated space worthy of further scholarly exploration. These and other works to be featured in future issues of the *Middle West Review* will strive to answer persistent questions about the Midwest that, lamentably, have been ignored by scholars for far too long: What is the Midwest? What distinguishes it from other regions of the Unit-

ed States? Why does the Midwest function as a “normative” site in the national consciousness? How do these broader conceptions of “normativity” shape midwesterners’ self-image? Why do popular depictions of the Midwest focus on its rurality and obscure the existence of the region’s urban spaces? Is the Midwest politically progressive or orthodox? Is there something “the matter” with Kansas or other midwestern states?⁶

Such questions provide a window onto a region that is, at once, commonly understood as the “heartland”—the prototypical American space—and misunderstood as a region bereft of its own past apart from the national metanarrative. The *Middle West Review* rejects this view, and it therefore brings the Midwest, appropriately enough, to the center.

Before we turn to the fine work within this inaugural issue, some acknowledgements are in order. This project would not be possible without the hard work and thoughtful assistance of many people. First and foremost, the diligence and enthusiasm of the *Middle West Review* editorial board—especially of associate editors Shannon Murray and Jon K. Lauck—warrants special praise. Our editorial reviewers and anonymous external readers proved incredibly helpful in evaluating the submissions we received for this inaugural issue. On that point, all of the authors who took the time and energy to provide such superb content—for an unproven debut journal, no less—deserve high praise. The wonderful folks at the University of Nebraska Press, especially Manjit Kaur and Terence Smyre, have been instrumental in bringing the journal to fruition. Finally, those offering advice, technical assistance, scorn, and encouragement related to this project, which (we hope) will only evolve and improve with time, helped tremendously at every stage in the process. Among many others, special thanks goes to Catherine Cocks, Colin Gordon, Lisa Heineman, Nikki Dudley, Landon Storrs, Tyler Priest, Glenn Penny, Jon Winet, Eric Zimmer, Marv Bergman, Jason Heppler, and Christopher Cantwell.

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NOTES

1. Stanford University; the University of Colorado, Boulder; Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Casper College in Casper, Wyoming; the University of California, Berkeley; Southern Methodist University; the University of Texas, Arlington; Texas State University; the University of New Mexico; Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado; and the University of Utah all host centers for the study of the western and

southwestern US. This list does not include institutes—like the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico; the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming; or the Seaver Center for Western History Research at the Los Angeles County Natural History Museum—that are not directly affiliated with colleges and universities. It also does not refer to centers interested in western or southwestern art, folkways, or other cultural traditions.

For scholarly institutes dedicated to southern studies, see the Center for the Study of the American South and the Southern Oral History Program, both at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill; the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi; the Summersell Center for the Study of the South at the University of Alabama; and the Pearlstine-Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture at the College of Charleston.

2. The University of Wisconsin–Madison hosts the Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures; Ohio University sustains the Central Region Humanities Center; and Monmouth College in western Illinois supports the Midwest Matters Initiative. Although not a scholarly center like the others detailed in this essay, Monmouth's program deserves inclusion for its promotion of a midwestern studies curriculum and its affiliation with a broader movement to consider the Midwest as a *global* site.

3. For recent press coverage of Lauck's book, see "'Flyover Country' is an Insult to Midwesterners Like Me. So is 'Heartland' Sentimentality," *New Republic*, Mar. 22, 2014, newrepublic.com/article/117113/midwest-not-flyover-country-its-not-heartland-either, accessed Mar. 25, 2014; Bill Savage, review, *The Lost Region* by Jon K. Lauck, *Chicago Tribune*, Mar. 21, 2014, chicagotribune.com/features/books/chi-lost-region-jon-lauck-20140321%2c0%2c7861073%2cprint.story, accessed Mar. 25, 2014; Michael Dirda, review, *The Lost Region* by Jon K. Lauck, *Washington Post*, Feb. 5, 2014, washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-lost-region-toward-a-revival-of-midwestern-history-by-jon-k-lauck/2014/02/05/55e90e08-8a90-11e3-833c-33098f9e5267_story.html, accessed Feb. 10, 2014.

4. For "dailiness," see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

5. Perhaps the most influential exponent of the latter view is Thomas Frank. See Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2004).

6. *Ibid.*