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*Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the American City* (review)

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Middle West Review, Volume 2, Number 1, Fall 2015, pp. 131-133 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0056>



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(1864), featured in the “Women’s Work” segment, and the last painting in the exhibit, Sanford Robinson Gifford’s *Hunter Mountain, Twilight* (1866). While neither clearly represents the Midwest, they both beautifully capture the nature of the relationship between the home front and the battlefield. The former depicts a young boy watching over his family’s land, with a red flag hanging from a long branch held in his hand, while the latter shows a family farm trying to continue its work after being devastated by battle. These two images, along with numerous others in this exhibit, illustrate how the war touched the lives of everyday Americans and how those lives were transformed no matter their distance from the actual field of battle.

Overall, the exhibit does not claim a midwestern identity specifically. Because it intends to represent the North, the images span the Union from New England through the West. However, Newberry’s location in Chicago lends itself to the inclusion of more sources that were published or created in Chicago, featured mainly in the “Chicago in the War” segment, but also throughout the other topics. While historians of the Midwest will have to look purposely for images that they feel illustrate the impact of the war in the Midwest, there are plenty of options to consider even though they might not explicitly be labeled as depictions of the region. What the exhibit does succeed in doing is making it clear to any visitor that an understanding of the North in the American Civil War does necessitate a consideration of the Midwest as well, and that midwesterners were as engaged, both physically and emotionally, in the work of war and were also as invested in its outcome. This exhibit from the Newberry Library will lend itself to a variety of purposes and will provide users with a beautiful visual representation of American culture during the Civil War era.

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*Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the American City*, Colin Gordon,  
University of Iowa, [mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu](http://mappingdecline.lib.uiowa.edu).

*Mapping Decline* provides users with an in-depth look into racial segregation and the severe urban decline of St. Louis, Mo over the past sixty years. Historian Colin Gordon provides information on these topics through four interactive maps, each of which touches on a major theme from Gordon’s

book of the same title.<sup>1</sup> Gordon's four themes and maps are titled: "White Flight," "Race and Property," "Municipal Zoning," and "Urban Renewal." Aside from the interactive maps, the website also includes several links showing sources used in the study, as well as links to other historical projects that use geographic information system (GIS) mapping.

*Mapping Decline's* scholarship is current and exceptional, and its form stands as an effective example of a hybrid digital history website. Gordon uses a new media format in order to present his findings to users in an interactive medium, and the website has characteristics of both an online exhibit and an online archive. *Mapping Decline* undeniably fits into the mold of an online exhibit because Gordon made the maps for the web and has a specific argument with his four themes. At the same time, the website also stands as an example of an online archive through links to the primary documents that Gordon used in his research. Regardless of how *Mapping Decline* is classified, a visitor may experience the decline of St. Louis through the interactive maps or peruse the documents Gordon used in developing his findings.

On the main page, users are presented with the option of either going to the maps or choosing one of three other tabs that provide background information about the maps and Gordon's sources. Although it takes an hour or so to read through all of this material, the navigation of the website itself is relatively easy. Visitors will have no trouble exploring *Mapping Decline*, as Gordon has done an excellent job of taking a complex subject and simplifying it through GIS analysis. Herein lies the potential of GIS maps, which make complex data accessible to people with average computer skills. Before GIS technology, Gordon's maps would have been presented in a traditional analog format. Although a viewer could grasp the findings from a traditional map, the interactivity would have been impossible without the GIS, which makes patterns visual.

Gordon's intended audience is clear. He wants to attract scholars from multiple disciplines, as the themes found in *Mapping Decline* have implications for several academic fields. The maps provide the basis for arguments about race, property, zoning, and urban renewal programs in St. Louis. In addition, the website could target another audience: people interested in GIS. *Mapping Decline* serves as an example of the future of GIS in the study of history. Anyone interested in exploring the possibilities of GIS mapping should start their search by browsing the *Mapping Decline* website and then following Gordon's links to a diverse selection of other web-based his-

torical GIS projects. Aside from scholars and GIS-interested researchers, post-secondary educators also could use *Mapping Decline* as an educational tool. The interactive maps do an excellent job of showing how St. Louis has spread from the city center, as well as the effects that municipal zoning and urban renewal programs have had on the urban decay in St. Louis. Clearly, a broad array of educators and researchers potentially could use Gordon's site, including historians, geographers, political scientists, economists, and public administrators.

Overall, Gordon does an excellent job of making the scholarship of his study available to the public. Users are able to search all of the documents Gordon drew upon while conducting his study and creating his maps. The openness of Gordon's sources allows *Mapping Decline* to serve as a guide for future studies on urban decay and racial issues in other midwestern cities. For instance, by considering the *Mapping Decline* exhibit in relation to locales throughout the Midwest, interested scholars might discover that Gordon's findings are regional in nature, rather than limited solely to St. Louis. Therefore, Gordon's sources are quite relevant for furthering scholarly debate on racial issues and urban decline within broader regional contexts, and *Mapping Decline* stands as a prime example of the potential for GIS projects to contribute to the study of history.

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#### NOTE

1. Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

*Mysterious Skin*, dir. Gregg Araki, 2004

Set in Hutchinson, Kansas, *Mysterious Skin* (2004) problematizes conventional depictions of the Midwest as a site of idealized nuclear family structures and perceived immunity from sexual violence. In the film, director Gregg Araki chronicles the lives of two young men, Brian Lackey (Brady Corbet) and Neil McCormick (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), as they come to terms with the trauma of being molested by their Little League baseball coach (Bill Sage). As young adults, Brian and Neil internalize the event in