

About This Volume

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This volume brings together fifteen original essays with thorough coverage and innovative exploration as the main goals. Three overview essays survey the historical and cultural context of Midwestern literature, present how critical commentary on the literature took shape over time, and explore Midwestern plays and playwrights over three centuries. A comparative essay examines similarities in certain techniques of Toni Morrison and Richard Powers, and Sarah Warren-Riley turns the critical lens of Freud's views of melancholy and mourning on Godfrey St. Peter in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*.

Major writers studied closely include Cather, Morrison, and Carl Sandburg. Cather is looked at in a new way: as an outsider who discovers the Midwest after being reared elsewhere. Morrison "invokes Africa" from Ohio and—in Maureen Eke's terms—"Africa is constantly transforming, being transformed, negotiated, interrogated or recast or reconstructed" in Morrison's "performance of Africa in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*." Carl Sandburg, for Phillip A. Greasley, developed *Chicago Poems* from his power as a journalist, biographer, children's author, and figure of considerable political importance, both nationally and internationally.

The essays that follow take a new look at what it means to be a Midwestern writer as well as what revisiting regionalist studies brings to the study of literature. Marcia Noe introduces new questions in her historical and cultural overview of Midwestern writers. Sara Kosiba explores the critical contexts in which these questions have been nurtured and have evolved. David Radavich reviews the history of Midwestern plays and playwrights, showing how the Midwestern treatments of drama differ from other regions.

Alternative views on what it means to be Midwestern are abundant. For Patricia Oman, the Midwest as Nowhere allows Toni Morrison and Richard Powers to project their stories on empty space in the way of classical *topos*, or the location of topics for

material. Oman sees these two authors as Midwestern in a way not often discussed. Marilyn Atlas explains a similar conflict in Patricia Hampl's ambivalence about whether her writing would have fared better if she had written memoirs about a place considered to be *somewhere* rather than *nowhere*. Hampl struggled with the internalized oppression when one is considered to be "less because one is in the wrong place"—until she banishes that oppression and accepts and celebrates her Minnesota home. John Rohrkemper suggests that native Virginian Cather came to see the Midwest like one of her own pioneers "as a place of difference rather than familiarity," bringing to her work "the exuberance of the novelist as discoverer."

In yet another take on what it means to be Midwestern, Jurrit Daalder locates David Foster Wallace's generally overlooked Midwestern roots in his first novel *The Broom of the System*. In the face of Foster's fictionalizing of the places he had called home, Daalder traces Wallace's ambivalent attitudes toward his childhood memories in the region. In *Broom*, Wallace both fears and loves the region of his origin, a paradox Daalder suggests makes the Midwest at once peripheral and central to Foster's work. This conflict accounts for much of the "geographical and spiritual loneliness" in Wallace's work on the whole.

From another point of view, the self-effacing humor noted by Christian Knoeller in Mike Perry's "trope of poking fun at ourselves" creates a distancing effect about the links between identity and the sense of place of one's region. Providing many examples of typically Midwestern, self-deprecating humor as a device for negotiating the ambivalence of identification with place, Knoeller allows us to see clearly that the double-edged weapon of poking fun at oneself is a particularly effective—if at times overlooked—Midwestern trope.

Guy Szuberla provides yet another perspective, this one on how immigrants to the Midwest negotiate their new identities through complex uses of humor. Szuberla probes "immigrant inferiority" in Peter DeVries' comic treatment of regional differences in a "map of desire characters use to escape their origins." DeVries' "parodic treatments of the myth of origins" are central to his characters' "comic

efforts to escape” their feelings of inferiority as the characters use humor to both “flee from” and eventually accept the importance of their origins. Eventually, they find peace and understanding in “an indelible imprint and forged pattern of the Midwest.” Throughout its long history and up to what being Midwestern means now in a postmodernist context, the essays in this volume raise questions about a regional identity that we are only beginning to explore.

Several essays also take note of groups whose identities as Midwesterners have been ignored or distorted. William Barillas shows how Tomás Rivera expands on who is included as “Midwestern” by subverting the more romantic conceptions of conventional Midwestern pastoral literature. ...*And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* moves significantly away from pastoral conventions of Willa Cather or Jim Harrison in its emphasis on social class, race, and ethnicity. Rivera’s Mexican-American migrant workers are not accepted as Midwesterners by folks in the upper Midwest. The migrant workers do not own land and are exploited by employers with their labor receiving no recognition toward earning an identity. Rivera thus undermines the conventional take on the Midwestern pastoral and moves toward a realism that embraces politics, like the Chicano rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, Matthew Low emphasizes major differences between Native America’s and white America’s accounts of the bison hunt. Low compares the Euro-American texts to the technique of *mise en abyme* in works by Zitkala-Ša, Standing Bear, James Welch, and others in the context of Gerald Vizenor’s concept of “survivance” in Native American narratives. The Anglo-American accounts distorted the story of the bison hunt into elaborate colonized narratives that promoted “settlement, enterprise, and commerce” at the expense of people and the land. Low notes that, at the end of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, images of slaughtered bison are “superimposed upon the preceding images of massacred human beings to reinforce the theme that the Euro-American settlement of the trans-Mississippi West was a supremely violent and senseless enterprise for both human kind and the natural world.”

Many of these essays reexamine how we define Midwestern literature, consider whether the region is somewhere or nowhere (and why that matters), and how authors might use absence itself as a location for settings not possible elsewhere. Some authors born in the Midwest are not considered to be writing Midwestern literature. Others, born and reared elsewhere, become Midwestern in special ways as they grow into the roles. The essays also expand the bounds of what we usually think to be literature in a more narrow sense by including humor and sports as essential ingredients in an author's repertoire. Scott D. Emmert rereads the Iowa pastoral through the idyllic lens of baseball books, finding both nostalgia and self-mockery in the Midwestern literature of sports books and films. Emmert's commentaries on a number of books, films, and a musical demonstrate how "Iowans use sports, most emphatically baseball, to project and protect the conception that their optimism, cooperation, and unity are sustained by a pastoral heritage."

From widely varied perspectives, the scholars' work collected here offers corrective readings of several authors and more expansive ways to see others. The contributors ask new questions, reinforce the way in which traditions are both sustained and undermined, and provide much evidence that Midwestern literature remains a subject of endless fascination and importance.

“A Place to Fear and Love:” The Imagined Heartland of David Foster Wallace’s *The Broom of the System* _____

Jurrit Daalder

“A writer must have a place where he or she feels this, a place to love and be irritated with.” (Louise Erdrich, “*A Writer’s Sense of Place*”)

Considered by many to be the voice of an entire post-postmodern generation, a voice that Don DeLillo described as both youthful and distinctly “American,” David Foster Wallace nonetheless spoke with the “hard-earned Rural Midwestern” accent of his Illinois home (DeLillo 24; Wallace, “Authority” 99). Yet, there is a substantial body of critical commentary that has fruitfully examined the author’s national contribution to American letters and his general artistic origins in American postmodernism, while a mere handful of critics have tentatively suggested examining Wallace’s geographical roots and classifying him as a regional writer, too, albeit a somewhat unusual one. Only recently have scholars begun to conduct sustained research on “Wallace’s topography,” proposing that Wallace’s writing may be an example of a new kind of “American regionalism” (Quinn 87; Giles, *Global* 175).

Taking its cue from these new studies of Wallace’s regionalism, this essay will focus very closely on the Midwesternness of the author’s debut novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987). The Midwesternness of this first novel is complicated in very interesting ways by both the young Wallace’s ambition “to try and sing to the next generation” of all-American readers, on the one hand, and his loyalty to the specific, oft-neglected region of his Midwestern childhood, on the other hand (Wallace, “Westward” 348). Wallace ended up stuck in the middle between literary ambition and regional loyalty, so to speak, which led to a sense of dislocation that manifests itself in *Broom*’s deeply ambivalent portrait of the Midwest. It is this ambivalence that, finally, bears on the prominent theme of geographical and spiritual loneliness that began to take shape in

Broom and runs through all of the author's subsequent works, a loneliness that reflects, at once, Midwestern life as Wallace knew it as well as the existential dread of his all-American reader, whom Wallace dubbed "Joe Briefcase" ("E Unibus" 23). Some insightful biographical comments made by the writer's sister, Amy Wallace, will serve as a useful point of departure into this discussion about the author's imagined Midwest.

In an interview with Paul Quinn and Geoff Ward, Amy Wallace draws attention to her brother's perpetual geographical outsidership. She explains that, because their parents were transplanted East-Coast academics, she and her brother were never treated as natives by the Midwestern children, with whom they grew up (qtd. in Quinn 95). Strictly speaking, David Foster Wallace was indeed no native Midwesterner. Born in Ithaca, New York, where his father, James Welch, was finishing a PhD in philosophy at Cornell University, he was six months old when the Wallaces relocated to Champaign-Urbana, twin cities in the state of Illinois (Max 1; J. Wallace qtd. in Harris 186). There, the author grew up amid, on the one hand, the cornfields of the towns' rural community and, on the other hand, the academic institution of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the flagship campus of the state's most prominent public university (Max 1). Curiously, however, Amy Wallace also notes that, when her brother had eventually moved to the East-Coast to attend Amherst College in Massachusetts, his new classmates saw him as an outsider and "treated him like a hayseed," which finally led the young author to the realization that maybe "he was from a place no one else was" (qtd. in Quinn 95). The novelist's Midwest must have been "*somewhere in the middle*," says Amy Wallace, "*neither here nor there*" (Ibid).

This realization may explain Wallace's inclination to write about an imagined heartland, which, according to his father, was supposed to reflect "a better truth" (J. Wallace qtd. in Harris 186). For instance, in his first article for *Harper's Magazine*, "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes: A Midwestern Boyhood" (1991), Wallace claimed that he did not grow up in Urbana but in the nearby town of Philo, Illinois, and he maintained this claim even in his posthumous

novel, *The Pale King* (2011). This piece of biographical invention has, understandably, found its way into the first wave of Wallace scholarship, where it lingered on until James Wallace, in an e-mail to Charles B. Harris written in 2010, clarified once and for all that “[n] one of us, including David, ever set foot in Philo” (J. Wallace qtd. in Harris 185). In the same e-mail, James Wallace speculates that his son may have considered Urbana too ordinary or unsophisticated a place and may have been attracted to Philo for its ancient Greek place name, which means “love.”

But if his father is right, why did David Foster Wallace not opt for the much grander and slightly more biographically correct Ithaca, with its obvious potential for high-cultural, Homeric allusions to “home”? The author’s postmodern precursor and fellow Midwesterner William H. Gass certainly had no reservations about making such direct allusions to ancient Greek cities: in the title story of his first collection, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* of 1968, Gass exaggerates the backwardness and ordinariness of the rural town of Brookston, Indiana, and contrasts it with the intellectual city of Byzantium as depicted in W.B. Yeats’s 1928 poem, “Sailing to Byzantium”. Considering that, after Wallace’s death in 2008, both Gass’s story collection and his 1996 debut novel, *Omensetter’s Luck*, were found in the author’s personal library, why did he not follow in Gass’s footsteps? The short answer is that, according to James Wallace, “Ithaca is a name to conjure with, but David,” despite the region’s supposed provincialism and cultural insignificance, “felt a very close connection with Illinois” (qtd. in Harris 185). In comparison, Gass has stated in an interview with *The Paris Review* that, “though people try to label me as a local Midwestern writer [, ...] I never had roots: all my sources (as a writer) were chosen” (“The Art”).

The above comparison between Wallace’s views and Gass’ is useful for getting a clearer understanding of Wallace’s conflicted attitude toward his Illinois home. Unlike Gass, Wallace still seemed, as he wrote of one of his fictional characters, “married to the land” of his Illinois childhood, despite having felt like an outsider there (“Westward” 300). Similar to Gass, however, Wallace did make

frequent attempts to adorn or overcompensate for what he feared was his ordinary or unsophisticated Midwestern home. From the earliest stages of his career, Wallace was keenly aware of the Midwestern self-effacement that seemed necessary for reaching a broad American readership, as evidenced by the cover letter he sent to literary agent Bonnie Nadell, who eventually took on *Broom*. Its prominent Midwestern setting notwithstanding, Wallace described his first novel to Nadell by likening it to the popular “new, young writing” of the literary Brat Pack, a group of jaded East-Coasters that was primarily centered on Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Tama Janowitz (qtd. in Max 65). The young novelist was apparently willing to downplay his Midwesternness in exchange for the opportunity to reach the same broad “generation X” audience as these East-Coast writers.

This ambivalent attitude toward the Midwest complicates critics’ claim that Wallace’s fiction signals a transition to a new American regionalism that entails a different “phenomenology of place,” a claim made, most notably, by Paul Giles (“All Swallowed” 10). Giles writes that a new era of post-postmodernist literature has “moved beyond the spatial dialectics” of center and periphery that structured twentieth-century culture (“Sentimental” 327). In particular, he suggests that “David Foster Wallace’s work [...] tends to flatten this distinction entirely” and that Wallace “envisages American space as a level playing field” (327, 328). But, as the abovementioned cover letter illustrates, Wallace did not adopt any particular attitude toward the Midwest in order to flatten this center-periphery dialectics. On the contrary, *Broom*, as well as many of his subsequent works, meditate self-consciously on this spatial dialectics and make clever use of the power relations embedded within it.

Like Wallace’s non-fiction, *Broom* is a product of the author’s first impulse to write about an imagined heartland instead of his real Illinois home. Helen Dudar already identified this inclination in her 1987 feature on the 25-year-old Wallace, then in his final year of the MFA in creative writing at the University of Arizona. In her article for the *Wall Street Journal*, Dudar made the astute observation that

Wallace may have set *Broom* in Cleveland, Ohio, a city that, like Philo, he had never set foot in because “he wanted a heartland city that he could imagine instead of describe” (10). In order to see how such an imagined heartland might match Amy Wallace’s description of her brother’s Midwest as a location that is neither here nor there, but somewhere in the middle, it is helpful to examine the novel within the biographical context from which it emerged. This should offer especially useful insights, given the author’s own description of the book as his “coded autobio” (“An Expanded” 41).

Wallace started *Broom* as one of his two undergraduate theses at his father’s *alma mater*, Amherst College, where he majored in both philosophy and English. The fact that Wallace was working on two theses means that there may have been some interesting cross-pollination between his creative and his philosophical writing. Indeed, the presence of the Austrian logical positivist Ludwig Wittgenstein in the novel is commonly ascribed to Wallace’s undergraduate work in philosophy. This philosophical presence will be discussed shortly, but first, it is important to take a closer look at Wallace’s college life, of which there is now a detailed reconstruction, thanks to D.T. Max’s recent biography. The image that emerges from Max’s book is that of a mostly quiet and devoted student, an image that is consistent with Wallace’s own remarks, made in an interview with *Amherst Magazine*, that Wallace was “cripplingly shy” and, therefore, did not enjoy or “have much to do with the life of the College” (“Brief Interview”). Nevertheless, Wallace would once in a while surprise his roommates by opening their windows in the morning and shouting into the quad, “I love it here!” (Max 17). These bursts of happiness were, however, overshadowed by Wallace’s homesickness. The Wallaces remember that their son missed the Illinois farmland of his Midwestern boyhood and once wrote them that “the mountains in Massachusetts were ‘pretty’ but the terrain wasn’t beautiful ‘the way Illinois is’” (Ibid).

These mixed feelings about his time at Amherst would eventually find their way into *Broom*, in which one of the main characters, an Amherst alumnus by the name of Rick Vigorous, reflects on his time at Amherst in a journal entry: “I hated it here.

And I have never been as happy as when I was here. And these two things confront me with the beak and claws of the True” (207). But, interestingly enough, Rick also says about his Midwestern childhood that he can remember “being young and feeling a thing and identifying it as homesickness, and then thinking well now that’s odd, isn’t it, because I was home all the time. What on earth are we to make of that?” (78). What his therapist, Dr. Curtis Jay, makes of this is that Rick is “the watcher, the observer, looking on from a spatial-dash-emotional elsewhere” (344). He tells Rick, “you are intrinsically Outside, here” (Ibid). Of course, Dr. Jay’s diagnosis and Rick’s comments about his outsiderness bear a striking resemblance to Amy Wallace’s description of her brother’s not belonging to either his Midwestern rural community or the East Coast academic community of Amherst. It is no surprise, then, that the imagined heartland of *Broom*’s Cleveland setting constitutes Wallace’s most direct attempt to reflect on these feelings about the Midwest, its relation to the East Coast, and the author’s place within it.

To be exact, Wallace completely invented two other Midwestern geographies for the purpose of this critical reflection, namely the suburb of East Corinth and the man-made Great Ohio Desert. East Corinth is the hometown of the novel’s main protagonist, Lenore Beadsman, Jr., a young switchboard operator fresh out of Oberlin College, Ohio, whose family is a major player in Cleveland’s corporate game and whose grandfather, Stonecipher Beadsman II, is the actual founder of East Corinth. The novel follows Lenore as she attempts to resolve a series of personal crises that eventually contribute to the *Bildung* that Wallace referred to when he described *Broom* as a “sensitive little self-obsessed *Bildungsroman*” (“An Expanded” 41). The first and most important of these unfortunate events is the disappearance or “mislocation” of Lenore’s grandmother, Lenore Beadsman, Sr., from East Corinth’s Shaker Heights Nursing Home, whose administrator, a character by the telling name of *David Bloemker*, offers some of the novel’s most thought-provoking observations about the Midwest and its ambivalent relation to the rest of the United States (*Broom* 36). The following quotation is from a conversation between Lenore and Mr. Bloemker about the

regional roots of the patients or “residents” of the Shaker Heights facility, which, throughout the novel, is significantly referred to simply as “Home” or “the Home” (34, 74, 99):

‘They are also Midwesterners,’ continued Mr. Bloemker. ‘As a rule, almost all of them are Midwesterners.’ He stared off. ‘This area of the country, what are we to say of this area of the country, Ms. Beadsman?’

‘Search me.’

‘Both in the middle and on the fringe. The physical heart, and the cultural extremity. Corn, a steadily waning complex of heavy industry, and sports. What are we to say? We feed and stoke and supply a nation much of which doesn’t know we exist. A nation we tend to be decades behind, culturally and intellectually. What are we to say about it?’ (141-142)

“Both in the middle and on the fringe” is the phrase that is key to understanding how, at the start of his writing career, Wallace mapped the “*cultural* location” of his Midwestern home and feared the insignificance of its cultural and intellectual contributions to the nation (Quinn 95). The author’s reflections on the Midwest’s in-betweenness are consistent with a general trend in critical thinking about the Midwest as “the nation’s middlescape” and about Midwesterners as “being lost in the middle” (Barillas 4; Barlow and Cantonwine 12). Observations comparable to Mr. Bloemker’s can be found in many geographical and socio-cultural studies of the Midwestern region. The historian Jon C. Teaford, for instance, writes that the term “Middle West,” besides its topographical denotation, also “implic[s] the dual sense of centrality and isolation characterizing the region” (254). What is more, William Barillas remarks that Midwesterners take pride in identifying as “Americans,” which, on the one hand, bespeaks a certain level of confidence, while, on the other hand, it “betrays a weak sense of regional identity” (19). The problem for Wallace, then, revolves around the question of how to define himself when the Midwest he grew up in is itself so hard to define.

Additional Works of Midwestern Literature

Novels

- The Man with the Golden Arm* (50th anniversary ed.) by Nelson Algren (1999)
- Winesburg, Ohio* (with variant readings and annotations) by Sherwood Anderson (1997)
- The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow (1953)
- Dandelion Wine* by Ray Bradbury (1957)
- The Farm* by Louis Bromfield (1933)
- Once Upon a River: A Novel* by Bonnie Jo Campbell (2011)
- Bop* by Maxine Chernoff (1987)
- The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros (1991)
- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: An Authoritative Text Contexts and Sources Criticism* by Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) (1999)
- The Girl Who Ate Kalamazoo* by Darin Doyle (2010)
- An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser (1925)
- Love Medicine: New and Expanded Version* by Louise Erdrich (1993)
- So Big* by Edna Ferber (1924)
- The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)
- Main-Travelled Roads* by Hamlin Garland (1899)
- Legends of the Fall* by Jim Harrison (1979)
- Lake Wobegon Days* by Garrison Keillor (1985)
- Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis (1920)
- The Field of Vision* by Wright Morris (1956)
- In the Lake of the Woods* by Tim O'Brien (1994)
- Windy City Blues* by Sara Paretsky (1995)
- Galatea 2.2: A Novel* by Richard Powers (1995)
- Driftless* by David Rhodes (2008)
- Impotent* by Matthew Roberson (2009)
- Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson (2004)
- The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1906)
- A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley (1991)

Poetry

- Diminished Fifth* by Jeffrey Bean (2009)
- Death Dance of a Butterfly* by Melba Joyce Boyd (2012)

About the Editor

Ronald Primeau, professor of English at Central Michigan University, has published extensively on Midwestern literature. He is the author or editor of books on Edgar Lee Masters, Herbert Woodward Martin, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and American road literature. He has also received several teaching awards. Working with filmmaker David B. Schock, he has been associate producer for the films: *Distinct and Midwestern* (2008), an interview with David D. Anderson, founder of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature (SSML); *Jump Back Honey: The Poetry and Performance of Herbert Woodward Martin* (2009); and the prize-winning *Star By Star: Naomi Long Madgett, Poet and Publisher* (2011), about Detroit's poet laureate. He is a recipient of SSML's MidAmerican Award for Distinguished Scholarship on Midwestern Literature and the editor of Salem Press' Critical Insights series volume *American Road Literature* (2013).