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Histories

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Untaming the Mild Frontier

In Search of New Midwestern Histories

When invasion is recognized as a structure rather than an event, its history does not stop . . . when it moves on from the era of frontier homicide.

—Patrick Wolfe¹

Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot²

Since 1976, the Wisconsin Historical Society has been “bringing the frontier to life” at Old World Wisconsin, located in Eagle, a quiet town with a few thousand residents on the edge of a state forest in the southeastern portion of the state.³ According to their guidebook, Old World Wisconsin is “a living museum where interpreters, steeped in traditions of particular ethnic groups, carry out the tasks that made up the daily routine of brave souls who accepted the challenges of frontier life from the 1840s into the early years of the twentieth century.”⁴ If you were to stroll through the 546 acres of this outdoor museum, you would notice that the grounds are segmented into ethnic “areas,” including Yankee, African American, German, and Norwegian, and the Crossroads Village where they come together. Old World Wisconsin’s “frontier,” however, is one without Native people. There is no Native American area; in fact, there are no Indians on the premises at all. The only trace of American Indians at Old World Wisconsin is in the gift shop: a basket of arrowheads and two Native history books.⁵

Some might argue that it is unfair and nitpicky to criticize the absence of Native people at Old World Wisconsin since the museum is focused on nineteenth century immigration (though Oneida, Stockbridge-Munsee,

and Brothertown Indians were all immigrants to Wisconsin during the nineteenth century, too). The museum chooses to depict the lives of Euro Americans and African Americans who settled in Wisconsin—not Native communities—presenting Old World Wisconsin as a place where virtually everyone but Indians has a voice in interpreting the state’s nineteenth century heritage. Such a framework is not simply exclusionary; it is a colonial narrative of absolute replacement. Although Euro Americans had consolidated hegemony and established a majority population by the 1840s, to characterize the story of Wisconsin as solely a settler narrative in which Indians played no part is to obscure the influence of Native people in the region’s history. Old World Wisconsin implies, for instance, that a Finnish perspective on the state’s history is of greater significance than a Native American perspective. This ignores the fact that settlers such as Finnish farmers in the cutover region of northern Wisconsin would have no stories to tell were they not beneficiaries of the United States appropriating Native land and resources.

The problem with the museum lies in the deep-seated notion that the Midwest and its history belong to Euro Americans, that Wisconsin’s nineteenth century rural history can be aptly portrayed as only an immigrant history, and that it is justifiable to tell stories about life in a colonized place and neither include Native people nor acknowledge that their territory was usurped. Indeed, Old World Wisconsin does not attempt to explain the glaring absence of Native people. It blithely begins its story in the period after the US government (at times with the aid of militias) confined many tribal groups to reservations or drove them west out of Wisconsin. The museum never asks, “Where did the Indians go?” If you were to walk through the town of Eagle and its environs, you would notice that it shares much in common with Old World Wisconsin: it is rural and agricultural, almost entirely Euro American, dotted with old barns and farm houses, and populated by a fair number of horses and dairy cattle. The museum, then, suggests that this place’s most significant changes have been advancements in agricultural, industrial, and domestic technology. Of course, there is much more to the story of Wisconsin—and the Midwest at large—than technological change.

Lamentably, Old World Wisconsin’s narrow vision of the American Midwest is all too commonplace, and the museum embodies much of what is wrong with accounts of the midwestern past. Indeed, Old World Wisconsin is in part a problem of historiography. The historical reality is far messier



Fig. 1. The Great Seal of the Territory of Wisconsin (1836), which states in Latin, “Civilization Succeeds Barbarism.” Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society, image ID 64629.

than whitewashed pioneer tales in the vein of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s children’s books *Little House on the Prairie*, and more textured than the image of Grant Wood’s iconic painting *American Gothic*, both so deeply etched into the American imagination.⁶ Wisconsin’s territorial seal (fig. 1), for instance, serves as a reminder that midwestern frontiers were not as mild and tame as they are often remembered. Indeed, the Midwest is a region whose history is in need of considerable revision. Not only would the introduction of new histories of the American Midwest open a wider space for American Indian histories, but also in the process, these new midwestern histories could broadly reframe the region as the outcome of many contested frontiers. Already there exists an important body of scholarship focused on multicultural encounters in what is today the American Midwest, but as of yet, comparatively little of this work has extended past the 1840s.⁷

Jon K. Lauck’s *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* has recently issued an important call for US historians to focus more attention on the Midwest and its role in the nation’s story. Hopefully that call will be

heeded. Returning to a past golden era and resurrecting the work of historians from previous generations, however, will not invigorate midwestern history, as Lauck suggests. He notes that, “the history of the Midwest, in short, is not especially compatible with the main trends in historical research in recent decades.” Rather than bemoan that fact and insist that there is a need for more histories of midwestern farm boys, and that readers simply ought to care more about them, the field needs to offer something new. Midwestern history can only be enlivened through the promulgation of bold twenty-first century interpretations of the region. The field needs a new generation of monographs, syntheses, articles, and dissertations that are focused on race, indigeneity, class, colonialism, gender, and sexuality and their significance for a diverse and inclusive midwestern history. Frontier histories—a historiographical tradition with origins in the Midwest—are well suited for doing much (but not all) of that work.⁸

Before historians can begin recasting the region and untaming its frontier past, scholars need a working definition of the Midwest—not an easy task for a place that is largely characterized by liminality.⁹ This essay aims to begin a conversation about further revising standard narratives of midwestern history, offers a framework for how the region might be conceptualized as a cultural geography of colonial amnesia, and demonstrates how historians can begin complicating the stories of the American Midwest in ways that place the region in a productive scholarly dialogue with the fields of western history and global settler colonialism, namely through an emphasis on a sequential frontier process. Indeed, the time has come for the American Midwest to have a “longer, grimmer, but more interesting story” of its own, in much the same manner that the new western historians advanced in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰

From a historiographical standpoint, the Midwest hardly exists as a region, at least in comparison with the West, South, and Northeast. To be clear, scholars *have* been writing about midwestern places, but they have most often self-identified with the fields of immigrant, rural, environmental, early American history, and so on. Many important works center on the Midwest, and historians have produced a rich body of scholarship on everything from the “middle ground” to the Rust Belt. The fact remains, nonetheless, that attempts to articulate how those varied works are part of a coherent regional field have so far had limited success. Even though history does not unfold regionally, we need regional abstractions; they are useful conceptual frameworks for organizing knowledge. “Midwestern

history” is not a widely recognized genus in the classification of scholarly works. There is no “midwestern history” shelf upon which to place the numerous books that have been published.

At the start of the twentieth century, the prospects for midwestern regionalism were bright. In 1907, historians of the Mississippi Valley region founded the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (MVHA), partly in response to the eastern-focused American Historical Association. Seven years later, the MVHA began publishing regional scholarship in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. At first a driving force for the study of midwestern history, the MVHA transcended regional boundaries as it matured, and by 1965 it became the national association known as the Organization of American Historians. The *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, in turn, was renamed the *Journal of American History*. In 1969, as national history was in the process of absorbing midwestern history, the newly formed Western History Association began publishing work on frontier history in the *Western Historical Quarterly*. By the late 1980s, the shift toward a new western history left the Midwest without an association or journal and without a clear place in US historiography. The emergence of the *Middle West Review* represents an important moment, and now three university presses—Indiana University Press, Ohio University Press, and the University of Iowa Press—publish series on this region. Still, scholars rarely self-identify themselves as historians of the Midwest, there are no academic programs in midwestern history, and faculty are not routinely recruited as midwestern specialists.¹¹

Nevertheless, many historians do not see the absence of a scholarly field devoted to midwestern history as especially worrisome. Although place matters in history, the lack of a field devoted to the Midwest has proven hardly sufficient cause to rescue the region from scholarly obscurity. Rather, overemphasis on the white male pioneer mythos in standard nonacademic narratives of the region—one of the original motivations for revising western history—ought to draw interest in similar revisions of the Midwest. Although the project of rewriting the West remains unfinished, midwestern history lags far behind and is still plagued by many of the same problems that western history faced thirty years ago. Moreover, the Midwest provides fertile ground for grappling with several important questions in the study of American history.

To what extent are regions historiographical inventions? The answer to this question will explain why midwestern history disappeared as a scholarly field while western history continued to thrive. In what ways has the

process of frontier closure included the erasure of not only Indigenous histories, but also the very existence of frontier contestation—that is, wiping away memory of settler colonial usurpation? Additionally, how can scholars recover these previously erased colonial histories? The answer to these questions will explain the disjunction between the tranquil imagery of Old World Wisconsin and the aggressive “civilization succeeds barbarism” motto on the 1830s territorial seal. And how can historians bring the local into dialogue with the global, while simultaneously resisting metanarratives? It is to these questions that we now turn.

I: How the Frontier Made and Unmade the Region

The Midwest began to lose traction as a historical field when the Mississippi Valley Historical Association became the Organization of American Historians in 1965. The subsequent decline of the frontier concept in the eighties and nineties then marked the rise of a regional American West and pushed the Midwest to the margins of western history. Midwestern history, on the other hand, continuously needed the frontier because it structures and helps define the region. In fact, the frontier structures the Midwest so completely as to enable its people to falsely envision the history of the place they inhabit as placid, wholesomely unremarkable, and initiated by the arrival of Euro American pioneers. It is no accident that the region is still understood according to a “mild frontier” narrative in which the label “Midwest” stands as a marker of a tamed place, free of Indians and wilderness. Today’s Midwest is a product of the frontier having erased its own tracks.

Buried Indians: Digging Up the Past in a Midwestern Town by Laurie Hovell McMillin, a professor of rhetoric and composition at Oberlin College, uncovers an example of this sort of erasure. As the author notes, in the 1990s, archaeologists identified Indian earthworks in the small town of Trempealeau, Wisconsin, and brought them to the attention of local residents. Some locals outright denied that the mounds were of authentic Indian origin—“I don’t believe in the platform mounds . . . If there was anything up there, we would’ve known about it,” remarked McMillin’s father, a non-Indian farmer.¹² Conversely, a Ho-Chunk tribal member envisioned the mounds as remnant symbols of a violent history of settler colonialism that rendered the entire state of Wisconsin “a huge burial grounds.”¹³ These perceptions reveal a midwestern hesitancy to acknowledge the region’s colonial past. Indeed, the phrase “the colonial Midwest” (or Middle West or

Old Northwest) also has little resonance in historical scholarship. Whereas the American West is a region that often romanticizes stories of its wild frontier, midwesterners, as McMillin notes, “suppress what they perceive as negative emotions and memories” in an effort to position themselves as “rightful occupants.”¹⁴ The American Midwest is a zone of exclusionary erasure and closure, and historians cannot tell the story of this region without the concept of the frontier.

To employ the frontier concept should not constitute a throwback to Frederick Jackson Turner’s outdated model. While Turner used the frontier as a tool to define American exceptionalism, comparative study emphasizes frontiers as a common global phenomenon with divergent outcomes. Despite the sense of placelessness that often emerges from urbanization, globalization, and mass culture, place and regional identity are still significant to the study of American history. The Midwest can be studied as a distinctive region with a particular set of resources for which diverse groups of people have competed. In turn, recognizing the Midwest as a distinctive region opens the way for comparative analyses between the Midwest and other former frontiers.¹⁵ As Turner suggested with his concept of a common historical process linking much of the continent, and as numerous scholars of the Midwest and the West alike have affirmed, frontiers join places rather than isolate them. Reconnecting the American Midwest to a broader, process-driven frontier history—and bringing the Midwest’s own legacies of conquest to the fore—may be the key to energizing a field that remains on the fringes of American historiography.

Over the past thirty years, a tug of war has persisted in the field of western history between place-based study and process, as well as between emphasis on the regional and the global. An intellectual shift away from the frontier concept helped create the scholarly terrain of the regional American West; then yet another shift toward borderlands histories began to dismantle the New West. Thus, the West, like the Midwest, is facing a scholarly identity crisis that binds together the futures of both regional histories. Many readers of this journal may be familiar with the place vs. process debate of the 1980s and 1990s: a historiographical revolt against Frederick Jackson Turner’s notion of the frontier outlined in his influential essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) and the rise of a new western history that reimagined the American West less as a frontier *process*—as played out in a triumphalist Manifest Destiny narrative—

and more as a geographically and historically identifiable *place*, fundamentally different from the East. Turner's argument that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" had deeply influenced decades of scholarship, and historians rightly criticized his vision of the frontier as racist, teleological, unsubtle, outdated, ambiguous, inconsistent, imbued with exaggerated notions of American progress, and worse yet, conspicuously devoid of empowered women and non-Anglos.¹⁶

Criticisms of the frontier thesis prompted a shift toward an increasingly place-based understanding of the region west of the Missouri River, one which called upon scholars to identify the trans-Missouri West's distinguishing geographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The articulation of such characteristics helped to recast the West not simply as a stage of Euro American advancement, but as a place inherently different from other North American regions.¹⁷ Since the 1990s, many scholars in the field have grown tired of reading about Turner and the place vs. process debate, which is now generally understood to have relied upon a false dichotomy.¹⁸ Scholars have moved on from this flawed debate, but they continue to be influenced by its results—namely that the frontier process endures as a present but subordinate construct within the field.

Absent from analysis of the place vs. process debate is the suggestion that the birth of new western history came at the expense of the American Midwest. Since losing their foothold in the field of western history, historians of the Midwest have failed to establish a scholarly community of their own. The decline of the frontier as an organizing principle in American historiography poses a challenge to future research on the Midwest, a region whose past cannot be adequately understood without reference to various frontier processes. Moreover, interest in regionalism has waned, leaving any hope for midwestern history in a double bind. Over the past two decades, the borderlands concept—originally formulated by Herbert Eugene Bolton, a student of Turner's—has heightened in popularity as an alternative to frontiers and the regional study of western history as a whole. The growing influence of the borderlands model represents another major shift in western history, this time away from the regional and toward the global, thus siphoning away some of the American West's significance. This shift underscores what Stephen Aron notes is a growing "sense that western history no longer offers a vision behind which to unify."¹⁹

How might historians solve these related problems of the American

West's lack of a cohesive vision and the Midwest's lack of a regional identity? The answer is simple: the frontier. Although Turner was wrong about many things, he never fully disappears from scholarly debate because his model of overlapping frontiers still holds up. Having been recast as a contingent rather than teleological set of processes and divorced from its Turnerian associations with Social Darwinism, the frontier concept can enrich studies of the Midwest and place the field in conversation with western history. Though the borderlands model offers a less nationalistic alternative for understanding cultural and political borders, the frontier—with its emphasis on an overlapping structural pattern—remains the concept most suited to interpreting the American Midwest.²⁰

The frontier's diminished significance is partly the result of the fragmentation of the "Great West." In the nineteenth century, Americans referred to the territory stretching from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Ocean as the Great West, a concept that connects much of the continent—including the Northeast, Midwest, and Upland South—through a sequential frontier process of US westward expansion. The phrase Great West no longer holds meaning for most Americans, however, because the emergence of new western history spurred a long-term shift in scholarship away from northeastern and midwestern regional locations, originally studied under the rubric of the Great West and the frontier. As a scholarly concept, the frontier had been most closely associated with western history, but that field's revised geographic bounds no longer included so much of the Great West. In the words of William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, the New West "has appropriated to itself—rather illegitimately—the entire frontier history of the continent."²¹ As the regional approach to studying western history gained popularity, new western historians' attempts to purge the frontier from the scholarly lexicon diminished the concept's influence in the study of the United States at large.

It is not only the trans-Missouri West that has a stake in the concept of the frontier; the frontier thesis itself has a midwestern pedigree. John Mack Faragher argues that Turner's concept of the frontier was essentially a product of his late nineteenth century midwestern upbringing in Portage, Wisconsin, and that Turner used it primarily to explain the early Midwest, not the region we now label the West—which Turner himself would have called the "Far West." In distancing themselves from Turner's thesis, the new western regionalists largely left the Midwest—the birthplace of west-

ern historiography—without a chapter in western US history.²² Whether or not scholars of the Midwest realize that Turner’s thesis initially applied to historical processes in that region, they inevitably discover that midwestern frontier histories overlap with the frontier histories of the East and West.²³ Such continuity, though not preordained, reveals an important distinction between the narrative of the frontier and the chaotic emergence of borderlands. Moreover, while the West does not need the Midwest (or the East) to define itself, the Midwest needs the connection to its frontier past—that is, its “Great Western” past—to do so.²⁴

Invoking the frontier need not necessarily be cause to invoke Turner, its greatest popularizer. The scholarly construct of the frontier has a long and ever-changing intellectual history, and to reject it outright is to lose a valuable analytical tool. The central concept of multiple regions undergoing parallel change still retains its explanatory power. The Northeast, South, Midwest, and West all underwent similar and sequential processes, whereby diverse groups of Natives and newcomers met at fluid zones of encounter on the peripheries of their territories. These groups came into conflict over competing visions for the abundant (but certainly not “free”) land and resources, and out of the processes of conquest emerged regions with much more defined—though still often flexible—boundaries. Frontier encounters, often between Indians and competing European empires, shaped those regions, as did the ensuing struggles over resources that had once seemed inexhaustible.²⁵

Reimagining the Midwest in light of the frontier connects the Midwest with the larger story of American settler colonialism and to comparable histories on the continental and global stages. Similar to other American frontiers, the Midwest represents a regional variant of a European imperial process that unfolded from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, with parallels to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, South Africa, and elsewhere. Bolton, a historian of Spanish colonialism in the Americas, highlighted this extended imperial process when he called for an “Epic of Greater America,” a comparative colonial history of the Western Hemisphere.²⁶

Although numerous historical processes—including settler colonialism, the creation of intercultural frontiers, the conquest of Indigenous nations, the elimination of competing European empires, and US expansion—cannot be understood from a solely regional perspective, many his-

torians still hesitate to invoke the frontier, leading to the creation of an alternative model: borderlands. Thus a new generation of historians has taken Bolton's alternative to the frontier, the borderlands concept, and widely extended its usage to the point that it is now ubiquitous in contemporary scholarship. For Bolton and his followers, Spanish northward expansion characterizes the colonial history of the American Southwest (and Mexican North) much better than an Anglocentric westward frontier. Over the past two decades, borderlands historians have dressed numerous frontiers in new clothes and liberally applied the construct across many regions and time periods. Unlike Turner's frontier, which progressed east to west, borderlands fluctuate in multiple directions. They are often transnational in nature, they emphasize multicultural encounters rather than the westward expansion of Euro American hegemony, and perhaps most importantly borderlands do not "open" and "close" like Turner's frontier, but rather endure and remain relevant to understandings of the present.²⁷

It would behoove scholars to recast midwestern frontiers as more like borderlands, and they often have. To completely abandon frontiers for borderlands, though, would be to lose one of the defining elements of western American history: an unfolding sequential push marked by newcomer settlement, Native diplomacy and resistance (not submissive victimization), and the incorporation of diverse peoples into the United States. Though the reality of the frontier process was irregular and full of contingencies and shifting zones of contact, it did generally advance from east to west and from coast to coast, creating the illusion that westward expansion was America's Manifest Destiny. Moreover, the fact remains that within both popular and academic circles the frontier concept has more resonance than the borderlands concept in the Midwest, and this is not likely to change anytime soon. That said, to argue that historians of the Midwest could get more mileage out of the frontier concept is not to implore scholars to entirely reject the borderlands model. Indeed, there is sufficient room for frontiers, Wests, and borderlands to coexist as scholarly constructs.²⁸

Despite the prejudices embedded in Turner's original formulation of the frontier concept, it remains part of the popular and scholarly vernacular and demands that historians confront rather than avoid it. Now that the place vs. process debate is long over, most western historians recognize that the frontier still has some relevance to the field, and scholars can salvage the elements of truth it contains.²⁹ What sort of frontier does the Midwest need if the region is to have a scholarly identity? Over the past twenty-

five years, numerous scholars have already firmly established the following model: frontiers are not simply advancing lines of Euro American settlement. Instead they are a particular outcome of settler colonialism: zones of intercultural penetration where geographic and cultural borders lack clear definition. Frontiers are sites of creolization where new worlds are created, and those new worlds are often dependent upon cross-cultural economic exchange. However, as Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson contend, those new worlds are also sites of power struggle: “the frontier ‘opens’ in a given zone when the first representatives of the intrusive society arrive; it ‘closes’ when a single political authority has established hegemony over the zone.” The historical narrative of the American Midwest can largely be sketched according to these stages of the frontier process: encounter and the creation of fluid new worlds, diplomacy and exchange between Natives and newcomers, increased newcomer settlement, Native military resistance, and the establishment of a new Euro American hegemony.³⁰

II: Conceptualizing the American Midwest

Charting a course for something that can be called midwestern history requires carefully defining the region, but such a task is not easy. Considering that no delineation of the American Midwest’s geographic boundaries—or the boundaries of any other region for that matter—would be universally agreeable, it is more productive to cast aside the notion that it is a fully stable geographic region and instead discern the attributes of those places that label themselves “the Midwest.” The Midwest is an especially slippery region, a non-place in which its inhabitants principally define themselves in opposition to other places. It is at once the anti-East, not primarily urban or industrial or powerful; the anti-South, not chiefly typified by black-white racial discord and its legacies; and the anti-West, neither wild nor rugged nor tainted by a history of protracted Indian wars. What is the Midwest then?³¹ It is a floating signifier of progress, closure, whiteness, and the absence of violence—an idea that closes space for a wide range of multiethnic experiences, not just American Indian histories.

It is possible to use these imagined characteristics to define the region and revise them in the project of creating new narratives of the midwestern past. For many Americans, according to Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Cayton, “the Midwest is the Heartland, the nation writ small, the great middle, lacking extremes, lacking diversity.”³² Of course, the real-

ity of the American Midwest is much more complex than popular representations of the region often suggest. In the American popular imagination, the Midwest is often simplistically and incorrectly mythologized as homogeneous and entirely rural. In light of the region's nuance and complexity, it is important to bear in mind that the Midwest is not now, nor has it ever been, geographically, culturally, or historically uniform. Indeed, no area of such scale is *entirely* consistent. As Aron observes, "if homogeneity is the standard, then all regions are fictions," and so are their histories. The American Midwest is not categorically unlike other parts of the United States; neither are the West, the Northeast, or the South, yet we recognize them as distinct regions.³³

The Colonial Midwest

Like everywhere in the United States, the American Midwest has a colonial past, but its story of conquest subtly distinguishes it from other American regions. From 1650 to 1815, neither Algonquian Indians nor European empires succeeded at imposing their will upon the other and instead compromised, operating in a realm beyond both cultures that Richard White calls the "middle ground," a network of fluid relationships held together by its own language and rituals. Through a series of "creative misunderstandings," Indians and Europeans interpreted and misinterpreted one another's cultures in attempts to coexist. Through accommodation, gift giving, and peaceful exchange, this Algonquian-French symbiosis kept the region from erupting into violent conflict until its dissolution in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. As Eric Hinderaker argues, the complicated nature of these locally negotiated systems also impeded French and English designs for empires based on trade and territorial control. The British ultimately took control of the Midwest in 1763, but an intertribal anti-British uprising led by Ottawa chief Pontiac forced the British to maintain a reconceived middle ground, which lasted until the conclusion of the War of 1812, when Americans took control and ushered in an era of aggressive conquest. For two centuries, then, the Midwest existed as a world in between.³⁴

Following the American Revolution, the US government prepared for the annexation and administration of the Midwest by issuing the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, the region's "charter document," which established the model for American westward expansion: landowning independence reinforced by nationalistic zeal, government policy, and military

aggression. Indeed, according to Edward Watts, the Northwest Ordinance set the foundation for the Midwest as a perpetual “cultural and economic colony” of the east coast. The ordinance’s ban on slavery determined that the region—which later became the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin—would remain aligned with the Northeast as the spread of slavery into new territories became a consuming issue in nineteenth century US politics. Undoubtedly, the presence of free labor north of the Ohio River is one of the Old Northwest’s most important distinguishing characteristics during the antebellum period, to say nothing of the region’s role in helping preserve the Union.³⁵

The effects of the Northwest Ordinance are still visible today. In fact, flying over parts of the Midwest one can observe a gridded pattern of corn, oat, and wheat fields hewn by the Land Ordinance of 1785 and cultivated by the descendants of homesteaders drawn to the Midwest by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The Land Ordinance mandated the square townships that still gives shape to this part of America’s landscape. From an automobile on the Midwest’s rural roads, one can see that the grid, which formulated American ideas of how land is divided and sold, is as important to the region now as it was in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³⁶

After the War of 1812—what François Furstenberg has called “the last battle of the Long War for the West”—the US government carved territories, and later, modern states, out of the dismantled middle ground.³⁷ The contemporary location of midwestern American Indian reservations, in some instances in places other than their traditional homelands, is another consequence of the frontier past, as is the condition of some tribes’ relative dependence upon the federal government on reservations checkered with zones of Indian and non-Indian landownership. Once the US cemented its claims to the region in 1815, Native peoples faced the government’s blatant disregard of their land title, removal from their homelands, reservation confinement, and military confrontations such as the Black Hawk War of 1832. Decades later, the harsh conditions and resentment of reservation confinement were partly responsible for the Dakota War of 1862. The loss of Native power meant a consolidation of American influence. “Thus, as colonial borderlands gave way to national borders,” Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron argue, “fluid and ‘inclusive’ intercultural frontiers yielded to hardened and more ‘exclusive’ hierarchies.” What had been an amorphous borderland became a rigidly bordered land.³⁸

The War of 1812’s conclusion marked the beginning of the end for the

midwestern frontier. Like many other regions of the United States, the history of the Midwest too often begins when Americans arrived. As Daniel K. Richter insists, “Nowhere were Native people passive victims of the colonizers, and nowhere did the colonizers . . . impose themselves on a blank landscape of their own making,” yet narratives of midwestern history have often presumed such a blank landscape.³⁹ Half a century after the War of 1812, the mass hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men at Mankato, Minnesota, in the aftermath of the Dakota War of 1862 serves as a symbol of the violent consolidation of American power in the Midwest.⁴⁰ Following such consolidation, Americans introduced institutions such as boarding schools for Indigenous children, and as Margaret D. Jacobs reveals, “caregivers and other authorities sought to sever the intimacy and sensory connections the children had developed with their homelands, a crucial task in consolidating settler claims to the land.”⁴¹

Corn Belt and Rust Belt

Just as military history plays a critical role in defining the Midwest, so too does agriculture and resource extraction. With Native people subjugated and their military threat minimized, more American farmers moved into the region to take advantage of the availability of abundant and fertile land. In 1834 Cyrus McCormick patented the mechanical reaper and in 1837 John Deere introduced a commercially viable steel plow that could work the sticky clay soils of the midwestern prairie. These new implements, which proved more efficient than previous methods and tools, saved labor, replaced human energy with more powerful substitutes, and transformed landscapes previously considered unsuitable for agriculture. “‘Westward the course of empire takes its way’ with McCormick reapers in the van,” boasted one advertisement linking agriculture with empire.⁴²

During the nineteenth century, American agriculture became the most mechanized in the world—and the Midwest was at the center of that activity.⁴³ At the outset of the twentieth century, the western Great Lakes region was home to an expansive timber “cutover district,” having been cleared by commercial loggers in the late nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, optimistic settlers cleared stumps from the North Woods, hoping to create prosperous farms in a challenging environment. Many of those farms ultimately failed. To the south, however, the midwestern “Corn Belt” was becoming what it is today, a place where hogs and cornfields often

outnumber people, and where agriculture and agricultural subsidies have become the economic bedrock. Not only are vast expanses of midwestern land devoted to industrial farming, but many of its residents are also tied, directly or indirectly, to the agricultural economy.⁴⁴

Of course, the Midwest is not entirely rural and agricultural. In fact, the region is home to five of the twenty-five largest cities in the United States, and the Midwest's industrial characteristics are important to take into consideration when defining the region.⁴⁵ The Midwest became the seat of an urban-industrial empire, exemplified by Henry Ford's assembly line style of heavy manufacturing. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, floods of immigrants took up work in the manufacturing belt's burgeoning factories. "Perhaps for the first time in world history," notes historian James H. Madison, "an interior rather than coastal region became the industrial core of a powerful nation-state." Positioned at the center of the US agricultural and manufacturing economies, the Midwest had become America's heartland by the early twentieth century. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, many midwestern cities whose wealth depended so heavily upon the auto and steel industries experienced an economic bust. As once booming factories closed their doors, the region earned a new name, the "Rust Belt." Detroit's long post-World War II descent into bankruptcy is an important story in the economic history of the American Midwest—as Thomas J. Sugrue highlights in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*—one characterized by white flight as well as labor and housing discrimination against African Americans.⁴⁶

Myths of Homogeneity

Regions exist in our imaginations as much as in geographic or cultural spaces, and how we imagine regions is a meaningful part of their identity. David S. Brown has remarked that "the Midwest is a state of mind," and Cayton, Sisson, and Zacher note that "while we can argue about whether the Midwest has unique characteristics, we cannot deny that many of its daughters and sons think that the region is unique." Indeed, the Midwest is defined not only by geographic, historical, and socioeconomic characteristics, but also by a set of popularly imagined traits. Iowa artist Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, perhaps the most widely recognized painting by an American artist, is enshrined in popular memory as an icon of Euro American midwesterners' rural heritage: hardworking men and domestic women.⁴⁷

One idealized narrative through which midwesterners understand themselves, and link their region to the West, is the pioneer myth. Many of the Midwest's inhabitants envision the region as a place where the frontier fully closed: where Native peoples vanished; where the land was ordered and divided into neatly rational units; and where a white Christian, mostly Catholic and Lutheran, American society took firm hold. Thus, midwesterners imagine themselves inhabiting a place where the frontier has fully yielded to a great American zone of homogeneity. They frequently resist distinguishing their region as anything but the middle. As "average America," midwesterners often consider their region a microcosm for the rest of the nation, and the desire to be unexceptional partly explains why historians of the Midwest have been less successful at carving out a distinct identity for their region than have historians of the West, South, and Northeast. The Midwest's ineffability is part and parcel of what makes it the Midwest. If this imagined homogeneity were actually true, though, the Midwest would not be so difficult to define.⁴⁸

Although the myth of homogeneity is important to consider in defining the Midwest, even more important is the diversity of the region and the at times fraught relationships between its ethnic, racial, and religious groups. There is a danger in mistaking the Midwest's modest contemporary persona for the region's historical character. Such a self-identity conceals how, as both a frontier zone and a modern US region, the Midwest's multiplicity of groups have struggled to carry out their own visions and maintain degrees of cultural integrity while coexisting with each other. A cultural mosaic rather than a melting pot, the Midwest has served as a meeting ground between European immigrants, New Englanders, mid-Atlantic migrants, Upland Southerners, American Indians, and later African American, Latino, Asian, and Middle Eastern immigrants. It is far from a homogenous society.

The Midwest attracted numerous waves of immigrants that created a variety of tense relations. As Jon Gjerde explains, Germans, Irish, and Scandinavians settling the Midwest between 1830 and 1917 took advantage not only of economic opportunities, but also the space in which to establish tightknit ethnic enclaves centered on their churches and schools. In some cases, immigrants practiced a greater degree of ethnic attachment than they had in Europe. In other cases, immigrants chose to assimilate, embracing an American identity and, by doing so, creating divisions within their communities. Additional discord existed between European immi-

grants and Yankee migrants because the latter were generally more interested in bolstering an American national identity than in supporting foreign language, culture, and religion. Moreover, cultural borders did not just exist between Yankees and European immigrants. Nicole Etcheson explains that Upland Southerners who had migrated to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois also often found themselves at odds with their Yankee neighbors in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in regard to the question of granting African Americans full citizenship.⁴⁹

As in other parts of the country, racial hostility has characterized the modern Midwest. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, thousands of African Americans looked to the Midwest and its cities, such as Chicago, as a source of social, political, and economic opportunity. After migrating to this “land of hope,” however, racial conflict ensued. It so consumed Milwaukee during the 1960s that the city was dubbed “the Selma of the North,” and Michael Fedo’s powerful account of a lynching at Duluth, Minnesota, in 1920—as well as James H. Madison’s examination of a lynching at Marion, Indiana, in 1930—further reminds us that violent racial injustice was not confined to the South. Unfortunately, as James R. Grossman notes, “the dreams embodied in the Great Migration eventually collapsed under the weight of continued racial oppression and the failure of industrial capitalism to distribute its prosperity as broadly as the migrants had expected.” Likewise, in recent decades the same social and economic realities have dashed the hopes of many Latino immigrants to rural midwestern communities.⁵⁰

Simply put, midwestern homogeneity is far more imagined than real. The wider region is fragmented by numerous racial and ethnic borders and plays host to no small amount of social tension. Douglas E. Foley’s ethnography of Meskwakis and whites living in Tama, Iowa, reveals that such borders endure due to persistent cultural misunderstanding.⁵¹ The realities of the Midwest are far more complex than the region’s popular portrayals. There is no single Midwest. Rather, there are many Midwests and places like the Ohio River Valley, the Great Lakes region, and the Missouri River Valley have each developed very differently from one another.

III: Toward New Midwestern Histories

Acknowledged or not, the Midwest is an identifiable region, although its geographic boundaries and its relationship to the West remain open to debate. To suggest that the Midwest and the West have something in

common—the legacies of a frontier history that continues to define their contemporary experience—is not to argue that the Midwest is like the West. It was the West. That these two regions share a past, nevertheless, does not mean they are alike in the present. What links these seemingly disparate regions in a larger view of North American and even global history is their common transition from frontier to modern industrial region. Aron describes this transition as “the overlapping processes of conquest, colonization, and capitalist consolidation.”⁵² Their shared past causes the fields of western and midwestern history to overlap.⁵³

Adelman and Aron argue that “over the long run, European and indigenous fortunes in one area shaped—if not dictated—outcomes in the other North American borderlands.” Continuing along the lines of new western history need not necessarily obscure the Midwest, nor other frontiers for that matter. Rather, explaining how these distinct American regions emerged from a common frontier process could and should be a central task of western American frontier history, which is precisely what Turner urged in his later work, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (1932).⁵⁴

Despite new western history’s favoring of place over process, it is possible to study the Midwest and the West as contemporary US regions without losing sight of their earlier nature as frontier zones. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In general, the histories of the American West written in the 1990s and 2000s reconceived the boundaries originally inscribed by new western history. For instance, Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher’s *The American West: A New Interpretive History* and its more recent abridgement, *Frontiers*, have moved toward the reinclusion of eastern frontiers. Though eastern frontiers do not figure prominently in the field of western history, since the dust has settled from the place vs. process debate few historians now reject a process-oriented western history entirely. One need only look to an annual meeting program of the Western History Association to see how the field has also recently begun to adopt Atlantic, Pacific, and global perspectives.⁵⁵

Should western historians fold the Midwest back into their field, or should midwestern historians work toward the development of their own field? The answer is not one or the other, but both. Scholars have exhaustively debated the positive and negative attributes of new western history over the past twenty-five years, but few have asked what that shift meant for regions outside the trans-Missouri West—America’s “last West,” which has held firmly to its designation as *the American West*, or as Donald

Worster puts it, the “true” West.⁵⁶ That turn in historical scholarship hardly affected the Northeast (which tends to play a starring role in the study of early American history) or the South (whose core interests largely remain slavery, secession, and their aftermath), but it created an intellectual identity crisis for the Midwest. The new western historians sought to expel the frontier from the study of US history as if it were theirs alone to dispose of. But the legacy of Turner’s thesis casts as long a shadow across the Midwest as it does across the West, and it retains significant value as an analytical tool in midwestern history.

Moreover, considering that the field of western history has largely shifted its focus away from eastern frontiers, this essay asks how historians of the Midwest might take this opportunity to reimagine their own field. One option is to pursue a regional emphasis by creating a “new midwestern history” patterned on the work of those who have convincingly articulated a set of uniquely western characteristics. And since like the West, as James H. Madison argues, the Midwest “struggle[s] to find a way to tell its story in something other than themes of pioneer success,” scholars can also recast midwestern settlers more as usurpers than as benign prairie farmers and lumberjacks, clearing and improving the land.⁵⁷

Mary Lethert Wingerd’s new history of Minnesota provides an excellent model for writing midwestern histories that deeply engage frontiers and their legacies. *North Country: The Making of Minnesota* explores the process by which Ojibwe and Dakota territory became the State of Minnesota. What was once a hybridized “middle ground” society devolved into a violent contest for power by the mid-nineteenth century. The eventual consolidation of American capitalist control ultimately thrust Indians and non-Indians into a civil war that both secured the future of the State of Minnesota and resulted in the Dakota hangings at Mankato, the largest mass execution in US history. Wingerd’s book exemplifies a new treatment of midwestern frontiers that historians would do well to emulate and build upon.⁵⁸ If more midwestern histories followed Wingerd’s model of deemphasizing “pioneer success” in favor of highlighting competing visions for the land—just as Elliott West’s *The Contested Plains* did with Cheyennes and Americans in gold rush Colorado—we would gain a fuller understanding of how the legacies of settler colonialism have forged the contemporary Midwest.⁵⁹ Stories like these are not hidden or entirely unknown, but as Old World Wisconsin demonstrates, the erasure of Native histories in the region arises

out of a sense that the Midwest truly *belongs* to Euro Americans. Highlighting frontier encounters as a means of breaking this historiographical habit could usher in new multiracial histories of the American Midwest, works that critically engage the construction of Euro American hegemony in the region, its perpetuation into the present, and the experiences of communities that radically challenge white midwestern normativity.

To be clear, this essay does not posit that midwestern history is no longer being written, that the Midwest and the frontier have entirely disappeared from the field of western history, or that all histories of midwestern places have failed to take into serious consideration the region's contested colonial past—not at all. Although there is a critical need for more scholars to join the daunting project of rewriting the Midwest—because narrative, of course, has the power to reframe how we experience places—this work has already been initiated by many of the authors referenced in this essay. The “old midwestern history” faded in influence because it ceased to capture the scholarly and popular imagination. New midwestern historians can acknowledge their intellectual debts and learn from the field's scholarly traditions, but should not focus energy on simply dusting off outdated models without significant revision. The future of a viable midwestern history depends upon retooling the field for the twenty-first century.

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Melissa Nelson, Gregory Nobles, Walter Nugent, Peter Onuf, Robert Ostergren, Megan Raby, Dan Richter, Susan Sessions Rugh, Kenneth Sharp, Michael Steiner, Libby Tronnes, Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Watts, Elliott West, and David Wrobel.

NOTES

1. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 402.

2. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.

3. Friends of Old World Wisconsin, *America's Heartland: A Guide to Our Past* (Eagle: Friends of Old World Wisconsin, 2003), i.

4. Ibid.

5. Site visit, August 27, 2012. According to Daniel Freas, site director of Old World Wisconsin, the museum has ambitions to develop a Native American component but has not made progress toward realizing that goal due to funding shortages. Interview with author, May 21, 2014. For a history of Old World Wisconsin, see John D. Krugler, *Creating Old World Wisconsin: The Struggle to Build an Outdoor History Museum of Ethnic Architecture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

6. For assessments of the influence of Laura Ingalls Wilder and Grant Wood, see Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder's Impact on American Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008); Steven Biel, *American Gothic: A Life of America's Most Famous Painting* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005).

7. Among the most important recent contributions to midwestern frontier history are Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); John W. Hall, *Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies in the Black Hawk War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Ann Durkin Keating, *Rising Up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Catherine Cangany, *Frontier Seaport: Detroit's Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepôt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

8. Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 7.

9. I do not believe that the Midwest has hard geographic boundaries, but I do recognize the following states (or portions of them) as being very frequently considered part of the region: Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

10. Elliott West, "A Longer, Grimmer, but More Interesting Story," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 103–11.

11. Carl Ubbelohde, "History and the Midwest as a Region," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 78, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 44–46; William D. Aeschbacher, "The Mississippi Valley Historical Association, 1907–1965," *Journal of American History* 54, no. 2 (Sept. 1967): 339–53; Jon K. Lauck, "The Prairie Historians and the Foundations of Midwestern History," *Annals of Iowa* 71, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 137–73.

Indiana University Press currently publishes two series: “Midwestern History and Culture” and “A History of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier.” Ohio University Press currently publishes the “Series on Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest,” and from 2009–12 also had a book series entitled “War and Society in the Midwest.” The University of Iowa Press publishes a series entitled “Iowa and the Midwest Experience.” Prior to the *Middle West Review* providing a space for the study of midwestern history, a range of regional publications have existed, though many of them have focused on state histories in particular. These publications include *Great Plains Quarterly*, *Annals of Iowa*, *Illinois State Historical Society Journal*, *Indiana Magazine of History*, *Michigan Historical Review*, *Minnesota History*, *Ohio History*, *South Dakota History*, and *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. Miami University of Ohio also published *The Old Northwest* from 1975–92. Though the Midwest lacks a professional organization comparable to the Western History Association or the Southern Historical Association, it is worth noting the following organizations and research centers: Midwestern History Working Group, Women and Gender Historians of the Midwest, Great Lakes American Studies Association, Mid-America American Studies Association, Ohio University’s Central Region Humanities Center, North Central College’s Center for French Colonial Studies, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures.

12. Laurie Hovell McMillin, *Buried Indians: Digging Up the Past in a Midwestern Town* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), quoted on p. xvii. In the late nineteenth century even archaeologists were skeptical that earthworks were of Indian origin. See Libby Tronnes, “Texts of Authority: Moundbuilders, Indians of Unusual Size, and Other Tall Tales about Place,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, Uncasville, Conn., June 3–6, 2012.

13. McMillin, *Buried Indians*, quoted on p. xvii.

14. *Ibid.*, xx, xix.

15. For reflections on the creation of placelessness in American culture, see William Leach, *Country of Exiles: The Destruction of Place in American Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999). For defenses of regionalism in contemporary scholarship, see the following volumes: Timothy R. Mahoney and Wendy J. Katz, *Regionalism and the Humanities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Peter S. Onuf, *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

16. Quotation from Frederick J. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893*, 199. The literature of the new western history is far too voluminous to cite in a single footnote, but Stephen Aron has provided a thorough overview of the shifting trends in the study of western history as well as a substantive bibliography. See Stephen Aron, “Frontiers, Borderlands, Wests,” in *American History Now*, ed. Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 261–84. For an especially salient examination of the intersecting lives of Native and settler women in Wisconsin, see Joan M. Jensen, *Calling This Place Home: Women on the Wisconsin Frontier, 1850–1925* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2006).

17. Among the most frequently cited western characteristics are aridity and conflicts

over water rights; a “place of extremes” with plains, mountains, and deserts; boom and bust business cycles; inconsistent enforcement of laws; economies based on resource extraction; a perennial dependence on, yet resentment of, the federal government; and a substantively different demographic makeup than the rest of the United States, with a greater proportion of American Indians, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans. In their respective syntheses, Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White advance these qualities as distinguishing the American West from other regions. See Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987); Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). On the environment of the American West, see in particular Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); idem, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Susan Rhoades Neel, “A Place of Extremes: Nature, History, and the American West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 489–505. The best overview of the Native history of the early American West is Colin G. Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003). On Mexican American historiography, see David G. Gutiérrez, “Significant to Whom? Mexican Americans and the History of the American West,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Nov. 1993): 519–39. On early Asian American immigration, see Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, rev. ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998).

18. Perhaps most ironically, Turner himself recognized a century ago that place and process are best understood in tandem, and he devoted the second half of his career not to the frontier but to sections. For Turner's body of work on sections, see Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1932); Michael C. Steiner, “The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (Oct. 1979): 437–66; Michael Steiner, “From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (Nov. 1995): 479–501.

19. Stephen Aron, “All Quiet on the Turner Front,” *WHA Newsletter: Special Sesquicentennial Issue* (Fall 2011): 4. For an analysis of the relationship between Frederick Jackson Turner and Herbert Eugene Bolton, see Albert L. Hurtado, “Bolton and Turner: The Borderlands and American Exceptionalism,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 4–20.

20. For an examination of the past, present, and potential future of borderlands history, see Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, “On Borderlands,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (Sept. 2011): 338–61.

21. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 25.

22. John Mack Faragher explores the genesis of Turner's thesis in the introduction to *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 1–10. In 1991, while Rich-

ard White defined the West as the trans-Missouri region in *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*, he also offered a new frontier model for the Great Lakes in *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

23. Among the most interesting illustrations of such overlapping histories is John P. Bowes, *Exiles and Pioneers: Eastern Indians in the Trans-Mississippi West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

24. It is indeed anachronistic to refer to a region called the “Midwest” prior to the early twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, much of what we now refer to as the Midwest was still frequently called the “West,” “Great West,” or “Old Northwest.” As a result of a rapidly growing trans-Mississippi region in the early twentieth century, the term “Middle West” gained popularity, also partly as a result of Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1901 essay, reprinted in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1920), 126–56. See also James R. Shortridge, “The Emergence of ‘Middle West’ as an American Regional Label,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74, no. 2 (June 1984): 209–20. For an examination of the regionalist impulse during the period between the two World Wars, see Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Many would-be “midwestern historians” identify themselves as historians of the “Upper Mississippi Valley,” “the Ohio Valley,” or the “Western Great Lakes.” To avoid shifting among these terms, all references to the early Midwest in this essay should be understood as denoting the region we now call the Midwest. Like all regions in the United States, the Midwest lacks a set of universally agreed upon boundaries.

25. For a reflection on the transformation from abundance to relative scarcity, see William Cronon, “Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity,” in Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 603–37.

26. For broader accounts of westward expansion and US colonialism, see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995); Gregory H. Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). For Bolton’s presidential address to the American Historical Association, see “The Epic of Greater America,” *American Historical Review* 38, no. 3 (April 1933): 448–74.

27. On Bolton and the Borderlands school, see the following: Herbert E. Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1921); John Francis Bannon, ed., *Bolton and the Spanish Borderlands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964); John Francis Bannon, *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513–1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974); David J. Weber, “Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 1 (Feb. 1986): 66–81; David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994); Albert L. Hurtado, *Herbert Eugene Bolton: Historian of the American Borderlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

28. For one application of the borderlands model in midwestern history, see Kristin Hoganson, "Meat in the Middle: Converging Borderlands in the US Midwest, 1865–1900," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (Jan. 2012): 1025–51.

29. For example, Patricia Nelson Limerick acknowledges the relevance of the frontier concept in "Going West and Ending up Global," *Western Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 4–23. See also Jon K. Lauck, "How South Dakota Sparked the New Western History Wars: A Commentary on Patricia Nelson Limerick," *South Dakota History* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 353–65. For an argument about the inescapability of Turner's frontier, see William Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Apr. 1987): 157–76.

30. Quotation from Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), 7. For another frontier model see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (June 1999): 814–41. On the creation of "new worlds" see James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal*, second ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). On the centrality of economic exchange, see Daniel H. Usner Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

31. Several important works have already tackled the question of what the Midwest is. See James H. Madison, *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989); Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of An American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Richard Sisson, Christian Zacher, and Andrew Cayton, eds., *The American Midwest: An Interpretive Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

32. Sisson, Zacher, and Cayton, eds., *The American Midwest*, xxii.

33. Aron, "Lessons in Conquest," 131. For reflections on subregional diversity in the West, see David M. Wrobel and Michael C. Steiner, *Many Wests: Place, Culture & Regional Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); David M. Emmons, "Constructed Province: History and the Making of the Last American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 437–59.

34. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For an examination of how Indian women incorporated French husbands into their communities, see Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001). For Eric Hinderaker's examination of empire building, see *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For more on power struggles

in the Midwest, see R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); idem, *War under Heaven: Pontiac, Indian Nations, and the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). For a wider examination of the British backcountry, see Eric Hinderaker and Peter C. Mancall, *At the Edge of Empire: The Backcountry in British North America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

35. The Northwest Territory, established in 1787, consisted of the present day states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and part of Minnesota. Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf describe the Northwest Ordinance as a midwestern “charter document” in their introduction to *The Midwest and the Nation*. For Edward Watts’s perspective on the Midwest as colony, see *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002). See also Ginette Aley and J. L. Anderson, eds., *Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front during the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013).

36. For more on the Northwest Ordinance and the grid system, see Bill Hubbard Jr., *American Boundaries: The Nation, the States, the Rectangular Survey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Peter S. Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Hildegard Binder Johnson, *Order upon the Land: The U.S. Rectangular Survey and the Upper Mississippi Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

37. François Furstenberg, “The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 3 (June 2008): 674.

38. Adelman and Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders,” 816. For an examination of mining communities as sites of competition and exchange prior to the Black Hawk War, see Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers: Indians, Métis, and Mining in the Western Great Lakes, 1737–1832* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000). For an account of the events leading to the Black Hawk War of 1832, see John W. Hall, *Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies in the Black Hawk War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009). See also Doug Kiel, “The Erosion of the Middle Ground: Native Peoples of the Great Lakes Region after 1815,” in Eastern National Park and Monument Association, *The War of 1812: Official National Park Service Handbook* (Virginia Beach: Donning Company Publishers, 2013), 134–45.

39. Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America’s Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 419.

40. For Dakota perspectives on the 1862 uprising, see Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988).

41. Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), xxxii.

42. Wisconsin Historical Society Image Collections, WHI-2496; Lee Grady, “McCormick’s Reaper at 100: Marketing the Machines That Revolutionized World Agriculture,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 84, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 10–21.

43. R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2002).

44. On midwestern farming, see Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century*, reprint ed. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994); John C. Hudson, *Making the Corn Belt: A Geographical History of Middle-Western Agriculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Robert Gough, *Farming the Cutover: A Social History of Northern Wisconsin, 1900–1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997); Susan Sessions Rugh, *Our Common Country: Family Farming, Culture, and Community in the Nineteenth Century Midwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

45. The five largest cities of the Midwest include Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Columbus, and Milwaukee, in addition to the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, which was home to a population of 3.4 million as of the 2010 census.

46. James H. Madison, “Diverging Trails: Why the Midwest is Not the West,” *Frontier and Region: Essays in Honor of Martin Ridge*, ed. Robert C. Ritchie and Paul Andrew Hutton (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 47. For more on the midwestern industrial economy, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jon C. Teaford, *Cities of the Heartland: The Rise and Fall of the Industrial Midwest* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939*, second ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945–1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Andrew Cayton and Peter Onuf examine the dominance of the middle class in *The Midwest and the Nation*.

47. David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xiii; Sisson, Zacher, and Cayton, eds., *The American Midwest*, xv.

48. One of the largest museums of western Americana in the United States, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, is located in Indianapolis, Indiana. In explaining its origins, the Eiteljorg Museum describes Indianapolis as a “community just east of the West” and reminds visitors “the Midwest, after all, was once the West.” See Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, “History,” www.eiteljorg.org/ejm_TheMuseum/History.asp, accessed Aug. 2009. In their bestselling 1929 study of the “average” American town—later revealed to be Muncie, Indiana—Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd helped popularize the notion that small midwestern towns are representative of the entire United States. See *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1929).

49. Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787–1861* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Kim M. Gruenwald, *River of Enterprise: The Commercial Origins of Regional Identity in the Ohio Valley, 1790–1850* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Midwest, 1835–1915* (Madison: Uni-

iversity of Wisconsin Press, 1988). Jay Gitlin provides a reminder of the enduring importance of Francophone culture throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. During Minnesota's territorial period and early statehood, according to Gitlin, French was a language of commerce equally important as English. Even Anglos in St. Paul were expected to speak French, and French language newspapers were published in the Twin Cities and Duluth until the turn of the twentieth century. See Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

50. James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Michael Fedo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001); Anne V. Millard and Jorge Chapa, *Apple Pie and Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004).

51. Douglas E. Foley, *The Heartland Chronicles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

52. Aron, "Lessons in Conquest," 135–36. Aron's concept is fully explicated in *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). Aron examines the diverse array of peoples and cultures—American, British, Delaware, French, Osage, Pawnee, Shawnee, and Spanish—that met at the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Ohio rivers and flowed in and out of the region. Here, both the power structure and the frontier boundaries were constantly in flux until Americans consolidated their hegemony, and the need and space for intercultural accommodations began to disappear. Regarding the numerous and obvious differences between the Midwest and West, see James H. Madison, "Diverging Trails," 45.

53. Earl Pomeroy, John Mack Faragher, and William Cronon have identified important connections between the Midwest and the West. For assessments of eastern continuities in the West, see Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41, no. 4 (Mar. 1955): 579–600; John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, second ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000). For an examination of Chicago's role as an engine driving the development of the West, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991).

54. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1932). Quotation from Adelman and Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders," 817. For a re-envisioning of the frontier, see Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, eds. *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), 3–27. The wealth of noteworthy scholarship in new western history—much of which has engaged in dialogues about race, class, gender, and sexuality—is evidenced by the fact that books in the field have frequently won top awards in the historical profession. Indeed, since the late 1980s, numerous works of western American frontier history have earned the Bancroft Prize (best US history book) and the Frederick Jackson Turner Award (best first US history book).

55. Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); idem, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

56. Donald Worster, "New West, True West: Interpreting the Region's History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Apr. 1987): 141–56.

57. James H. Madison, "Diverging Trails," 50.

58. Mary Lethert Wingerd, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008). For an examination of the birth of Chicago that is similar to Wingerd's approach to Minnesota history, see Ann Durkin Keating, *Rising Up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

59. Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998). For an interesting account of the multiple visions for the development of the Chequamegon Bay and Apostle Islands region of Wisconsin, see Eric D. Olmanson, *Future City on the Inland Sea: A History of Imaginative Geographies of Lake Superior* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007).