

Introduction

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.

—Toni Morrison, celebrated Midwestern author

What is a region? Region is one of those spatial concepts, like place or community, that seems to have self-evident meaning, yet comes apart as soon as one looks at it too closely. This is very clear when it comes to the Midwestern United States, which for over a century has had a strange relationship to actual space and actual people. Who or what qualifies as “really Midwestern” is an open question. People may not debate this with the same intensity as they might about whether someone is a “real New Yorker” or a “real Southerner,” but this is partly because it seems almost banal by comparison. It is almost as if people are not *from* the Midwest as much as they are *merely from* there. Consider talk show host Dick Cavett’s televised interview with director Orson Welles on May 14, 1970:

Cavett: If you were to ask, I think, the average person “where is Orson Welles’ hometown?” I have a feeling that you would get a guess that would go all over the globe, probably starting with Budapest or something, and the fact that it’s Kenosha, Wisconsin . . .

[light applause]

Welles: [laughter]

Cavett: . . . is one of the most startling. . . That’s the truth, isn’t it?

Welles: That’s right, I was born in Kenosha.

Cavett was incredulous that such a global and cosmopolitan figure, a celebrity and man-of-the-world like Welles, was from such an underwhelming

place. From their exchange it's clear that Kenosha is not a bad place to be born, just a painfully ordinary one.

In this book, we take issue with this underwhelming quality, this banality, and ask a series of questions that emerge from it: What are the conditions that make regions appear average, plain, and homogenous, and what are the social, political, and cultural consequences of this? Our central argument is that if one can understand the ways in which a region and its people do not seem to matter, then national and imperial projects of race and inequality can be understood and challenged in a new way. In the chapters that follow, we argue that the Midwest—as an imagined national middle, or average—is less a real place or collection of places and more a screen onto which various conceptions of middle-ness and average-ness are projected. Put differently, the Midwest serves as a standard and has for many years, one that allows for normative claims about the state of the nation and fosters projects of structural violence from white supremacy to imperialism and nativism.¹ And, most important of all, it has swept everyone up in its narrative, creating us as we create it, to paraphrase Toni Morrison, whether or not we identify as Midwestern.

This book started as a conversation between the two of us, both anthropologists, while we were on a Minneapolis/St. Paul light rail train in November 2016, two weeks after the election of Donald Trump. We were traveling to the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, from Maine and New York, respectively, and discussing the role “the Midwest” played in the election outcome. But we already had a shared language for thinking through this problem. Our conversation really began nearly twenty years prior when we were both graduate students at the University of Michigan. We were recruited for a special, newly formed research center called The Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life; it aimed to place the Midwest in a critical global and historical context and use immersive, long-term cultural research—the hallmark of anthropology—to better understand issues of work and family in the region. There, we found a wonderful group of fellow students (all now scholar-teachers around the country), with whom we read, debated, and developed ways to think critically together about our research endeavors.

We each went on to pursue our own research projects in Midwestern communities, even as these experiences also built on earlier formative years in the Midwest. Britt was raised in Muskegon, Michigan, by parents who

grew up in Madagascar and Sweden and, as a result, had from a young age a sense of the globalizing Midwest rarely portrayed in national media. In the metropolitan area of one hundred thousand where she was raised along Michigan's western edge, she and her brother were not alone among their young school friends in the 1980s in having family members in other parts of the world. Yet, because of her white middle-class upbringing, no one questioned whether she was a "real American" or "where she was from" and, though her parents' accents were sometimes remarked on in public spaces, her parents' ties elsewhere seemed alternately hidden and unknown or a source of occasional cultural capital. After living in the Midwest for over twenty years, she went on to conduct two years of research in Minneapolis/St. Paul and in Madagascar with white American Christians and ethnically Merina Malagasy Christians who participate in a medical aid program. Though he grew up in upper New York State, Josh lived with his family for five years in Michigan, and did research in a southeast Michigan landfill on the periphery of Detroit. His later work involved an examination of military waste, including the bizarre impact of falling space debris on a small town in Wisconsin. Even though he was not from the Midwest originally, Josh is white and could live in and move about the overwhelmingly white communities within which he did research without anyone wondering if he really belonged for the most part (that is, until he opened his mouth).

These widely varying, long and complex experiences gave us a set of critical perspectives that we reactivated on that Minneapolis train and have been grappling with ever since. While the 2016 election of Donald Trump sparked scholars and journalists to ask important questions about whiteness, this moment of American cultural reflection led to some other problems. Notably, it produced considerable research about white people *over there*, magnifying the perceived gulf between liberal, middle-class, anti-racist whites and working-class, conservative (it is often assumed, more racist) whites.² Focusing on white working-class people in this way partly served the political and economic interests and cultural sensibilities of middle- and upper-class whites, creating social distance between themselves and the pernicious effects of structural racism. Post-2016 cultural reflection largely sidestepped the fact that white supremacy is not simply a matter of individual prejudice but an old, yet continuously transforming, global form of structural power that controls disproportionate access to resources. A second problem has therefore involved white people characterizing the Trump era as somehow new and

totally unprecedented. One way to challenge this tendency is to draw attention to the histories of white supremacy that inform the current era, illuminating historical connections that have been erased or ignored. We seek to do precisely that, not only historically but spatially, by tracing how the Midwest has operated as a screen or stage on which to articulate whiteness and virtue, or white virtue through non-virtuous whites, across different time periods in US history. For this reason, while we touch on it briefly in what follows, it is not until chapter 5 that we return to the 2016 election, and the relationship of whiteness and the Midwest during this contest, after we have covered this widespread historical and cultural terrain that came before it.³

As we argue, distinguishing virtuous from non-virtuous whiteness is an old, long-standing component of white supremacy. It unwittingly recycles a system in which good (often class-privileged) whites distance themselves from the harms of racism by identifying a group of bad (often less class-privileged) whites—what some scholars have called a group of “repugnant others,” offensive due to their retrograde political sensibilities.⁴ Calling out racism on the part of whites and developing anti-racist forms of whiteness are critically important. But simplified ideas of white goodness and badness are part of the same system and do not address the systemic problem of racism, with its long and ongoing history of violence and disproportionate distribution of resources and life itself. We need fresh, new ways of thinking about and seeing what racism is and does in order to begin the multigenerational, hard, and unglamorous work of dismantling white supremacy.

Though we focus extensively on familiar ideas about the Midwest, the book uses this material in order to investigate something else: the often taken-for-granted connection between this seemingly most ordinary of American regions and whiteness, a connection that lends support to other projects related to nation and empire, both historically and today. In fact, that seeming ordinariness is at the crux of our argument. The fact that the Midwest is often imagined as ordinary—and in so many different ways—helps to conceal its relationship to whiteness and vice versa. Uncovering this connection between ideas about the Midwest and whiteness does not rely on unraveling a secret conspiracy or unearthing lost or forgotten materials. Rather, regional narratives have both fully apparent and hidden dimensions that work in tandem to fulfill a variety of cultural imperatives. Our object of analysis is a bit like a well-tied knot—you may not know how to tie or untie it and you may not be able to see every part of the knot, but that does

not stop it from holding firm. The Midwest is just such a knot, made up of a tangle of various threads. Looking into *and* looking through the widely circulated narratives of the Midwest shows what this knot holds in place, fleshing out what remains less openly articulated and what cultural values and interests are reinforced through the more visible elements. The looking-glass quality of these Midwestern common tropes—think of flat, verdant cornfields—does not make the trope itself irrelevant, but in fact reveals a more complex knot of threads, as the apparent elements make possible and relate to the more concealed cultural processes. Because they hold so many ideologies firmly in place, regionalizing knots are power relations that can serve intersecting projects of race, nation, and empire.⁵

One of our claims is that Midwest regional tropes are heavily invested in the imagination of whiteness, though they do not name it as such, and that whiteness actually does require a lot of creative imagery to exist and spread. As we will show, the work of signaling and consolidating whiteness often happens in the absence of white people and instead emerges through racialized white spaces, land, and labor. We are especially interested in how dynamic notions of white virtue and industry are smuggled into Midwest representations, in ways that help connect race, nation, and empire. We explore not only text, but also art and films, and their complex interrelations, which we suggest are central to publicizing whiteness and its many contradictions and inconsistencies. Altogether, this suggests that whiteness does not fly under the radar, *per se*, but hides in plain sight. Publicly circulating media, whether film, fiction, art, or the news, are a key channel for establishing these dominant visions of the world and we explore this extensively in the chapters to come.

What is true of public culture is also true of academic writing. Oftentimes people write academic texts in a third-person point of view with an objective authorial perspective, as if they are standing above it all, nowhere and everywhere. This is a problematic position that can reproduce forms of dominance, such as masculinity and whiteness. To counter this tendency, we have written a number of personal reflections on our experiences with and in Midwest communities that the reader will find between the chapters. The purpose of these reflections, in general and in our book, is to complicate the idea of a single and authoritative self by revealing the complexities of becoming a person in an unequal world.⁶ Here we follow feminist writers about whiteness, who have suggested that “personal narratives provide a

space in which theorists might expose our struggles with racial formation and racism.”⁷ We partook in and have been shaped by the projects of whiteness, nation, and empire that we describe, and are not separate from or outside of them; we consider our distinct life experiences a source of insight into the mundane work of regional tropes as complex signifiers of race, nation, and empire.

It is our hope that this book will not only challenge the Midwest as a racial trope but help readers to see themselves in what we write about. This brings us back to another meaning of Morrison’s quotation with which we began this introduction: the radical power of narrative to enlist us all in the creation of more just worlds. Many approaches to race in the United States create distance between readers and the racist people *over there* who cause problems, but we want readers to see race and racism at work even in the most ordinary of things, like landscapes, paintings, poems, and films. Morrison’s lesson is simple and powerful: when you hear or tell stories about “other” places and people, you’re making them and yourself in the process.