LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Adam R. Ochonicky (2020) *The American Midwest in Film and Literature: Nostalgia, Violence, and Regionalism*, Indiana University Press, $32.00 (paperback), 256 pp., ISBN 9780253045973

I recently attended a literary event in Melbourne at which Jonathan Franzen claimed that the Midwest does not exist. This is something he has said and written about a few times, indicating a certain suspicion about regional generalisations. In a brief video about 'Midwestern values,' for example, Franzen observes: 'I think the Midwest is a myth. And, like all myths, it serves its purpose. People like to think there's something distinctive about the Midwest' (bigthink.com). Franzen problematises the 'midwesterness' of the Midwest yet he acknowledges that it fulfils a certain role as the 'molten core' of the country. For Franzen, the Midwest is a fabrication - but a useful one - particularly for novelists like himself.

Adam R. Ochonicky is a Lecturer of English at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and the Media Review editor of *Middle West Review*. Ochonicky's book provides a critical overview of the evolution, contestation, and fragmentation of the Midwest's symbolic (and often contradictory) meanings in American culture. The central focus in on Midwestern texts – cinematic and literary - stretching from the late nineteenth century through to the first decades of the twentieth century, but this review will only consider the literary aspects of his monograph.

Like the state of Victoria where I am located, regions within colonised nations have routinely functioned as receptacles for settler nostalgia. Ochonicky offers new conceptualisations of nostalgia and tries to show how literature and film have been 'vital forums for illuminating the complex interplay of regionalism and nostalgia' (3) He investigates the ways in which selected literary texts imagine, reify and reproduce midwestern identity and considers the repercussions of such reductive narratives.

The first task for a writer when they are discussing a particular region is usually to define its boundaries, which can be a complex undertaking. As Wendy Griswold has argued in *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (2008) 'sometimes regions are congruent with political boundaries but more often regional boundaries are fuzzy, with one region fading off into another, and depending on the viewer's perspective' (Griswold 12). Just because a literary work is set in the Midwest, it doesn't mean it's necessarily a Midwestern text. Ochonicky acknowledges that defining what is Midwestern is not as straightforward as it may seem – confirming that a text is set there is only the beginning of assessing a text's regional engagement (4).

As with the definition of Midwest, the term 'region' resists singular, cartographic definition. In common with most literary geographers, Ochonicky sees regions as shaped by storytelling: 'a region's physical borders and geological surface function as something of a canvas or stage on which the contentious negotiations of regional culture unfold.' (5). For Ochonicky, Frederick Jackson Turner's

The Frontier in American History (1920) was a foundational text for the invention of the Midwest. In Turner's view, 'the middle region houses the lost culture and values of frontier spaces' – in other words, it is a microcosm of the settler nation at large. These frontier spaces 'did indeed furnish…a gate of escape from the bondage of the past' (31). Ochonicky argues that Turner saw the Midwest as an empty zone of escape and an 'Americanization factory' that took in 'misshaped individuals' and churned out 'idealized, uniform citizens' (31). Ochonicky is sensitive to Turner's shortcomings and lists the subsequent critiques of his seminal work, especially his problematic definition of 'civilization' which did not include Native Americans who are configured as simultaneously present and absent, leaving their land conveniently vacant.

The highpoint of favourable assessments of the region came in 1920s and its nadir was around 1950 according to Ochonicky (57). He identifies three key literary figures, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather, whose novels have contributed to imaginative constructions of the Midwest in the same era. Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell's text *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* participated in a mythologising discourse about the Midwest that takes its cue from Turner's view of the region (59). Ochonicky reads *Middletown* for how it affirms certain elements of the Midwest's reductive popular image, especially in terms of race (59). Lynd, Merrell and the Turner tended to ignore the non-white elements of the population and, by doing so, were able to 'elide the problem of conquest' (Eric Hinderaker cited by Ochonicky 61). Ochonicky suggests that the erasure of Native Americans in *Middletown* allowed troubling racial absences in the history of the Midwest to be perpetuated (62).

The discussion of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) shows how this text 'belies essentialized images of the Midwest during the first half of the twentieth century' because its African American protagonist lives in urban Chicago – usually classic Midwest narratives are set in rural or small town places with all-white characters (70). This association with pastoralism has been sticky and pervasive, condemning the Midwest to being regarded as both 'regressive' and 'authentic'. In 'How "Bigger" was born' Wright himself described Chicago as a 'city which has become the pivot of the Eastern, Western, Northern, and Southern poles of the nation' (71) *Native Son* demonstrates how spatial constriction results from housing discrimination and racial segregation which were thoroughly intertwined (76). To date, Wright's work has not been seen as representative of the Midwest, drawing attention to the homogeneity and whiteness of its composition.

The 21st century has deepened economic decline in parts of the Midwest, Ochonicky notes, contributing to narratives of despair which have been readily appropriated, to produce a 'politics of resentment' (224) that have been exploited by Donald Trump and others. Regardless, it's still seen as the most 'American' of regions. The author's stated aim of bringing regional studies – in the form of the scholarly study of the Midwest – into extended contact with literary and film studies – is hugely ambitious in its scope. For those who have not read or viewed these works, he offers a clear introduction and reads them through the lens of nostalgia, enabling connections between an eclectic range of texts. Arguably this broad format does not allow for in-depth discussion of literary works but gestures towards the ways in which their influence has bled into other media forms.

Describing the Midwest as a 'nostalgia museum, Ochonicky approaches it as a container or showcase for aspects of the nation's self-fashioning (88). As this book thoughtfully shows, certain

foundational texts have clearly enabled the forgetting of inconvenient facts and the imposition of more romantic myths. Ochonicky's book reminds us how powerful – and seductive – such regional place stories can be.

Works Cited

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