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These Little Towns: Land, Family, and Individuality in the Midwest

*"You take Glen Ellyn, for instance, this is a bedroom town. A guy gets transferred to Chicago, they say, 'Where can we live?' They say, 'You can live north, northwest, south, you can go out west, they got a train going out there. Wheaton, Glen Ellyn, Lombard.' They're there six years and transfer to Baton Rouge, Atlanta, Los Angeles, someplace. And they don't expect to be there long. They have no ties with it. No one has ever lived there with their families. No one." – Dave Etter*

I have lived in Wheaton, Illinois for twenty years. At twenty-two years old, it is the only city I have ever truly known. It happened the same way: A guy, my father in this case, was transferred to Chicago and my parents said, 'where can we live?' and they chose Wheaton. My dad took the train into the city for a long time. On 'Take Your Daughter to Work Day' I would go with him on the train. After six years, he was never transferred. Even though I dreamed of moving to New York, California, Arizona, any place other than the one to which I was bound, my parents stayed right where we were. Within the first four years of our move to Wheaton, my family had grown to include two younger brothers. By the time I turned six, I was one in a family of six people. We lived in Wheaton as a family. For now, it is still the place I call home and I believe it is a good home.

Just like Marilynne Robinson's fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, abolitionists founded Wheaton, acting in secrecy to help escaped slaves. DuPage County served as part of the Underground Railroad providing a safe place for hundreds of escaped slaves (Adamson). Every Fourth of July, my parents took us to a community waffle breakfast, which always

included a tour of the basement of a house that hid fugitive slaves. My little brothers and I always took shelter in the coolness of the basement; our feet solid on the dirt floor while my parents and my older brother braved the chaos of the waffle line. The adult guiding the tour showed us hiding places and the coded quilts that meant *safe* or *stay away*. Soon enough my father would pull us out of the basement, drag us through the crowds, and hand each of us a waffle with a whipped cream, strawberry, and blueberry tower. The damp darkness of the basement and the overwhelming July sun each instructing: this is where we come from and this is where we are now.

As a product of the Midwest, I am interested in what it means to settle in a place, especially in a region that I am familiar with, and how contemporary authors and artists are representing and interacting with these ideas across different mediums. In his book *The Midwestern Pastoral*, Bill Barillas writes, "To claim the Midwest is a reality, as a distinct place with a usable past, requires defiance of a long tradition of intellectual attenuation, disparagement, and dismissal of the region's identity" (23). I want to look at the way writers with strong Midwestern roots are exposing the reality of the Midwest, and how it is a distinct region worthy of merit. Kent Ryden writes in *Writing the Midwest: History, Literature, and Regional Identity*, "The Midwest however, is different not because of too much evident history but because of too little, because of the lack of an agreed-upon defining moment or period that people can look back and say, "The Midwest as we know it began here" (4). I am interested not in the beginning, though, but how current Midwestern writers are continuing to develop the Midwest's literary history, and how they relate to Midwestern artists working in different mediums, but with similar goals. These works stand on their own, but by focusing on how they represent land and the influences of that

land, we can see the way the region influences literature. I use regionalism as a lens so I can look at the commonalities among the Midwest region.

I examine contemporary Midwestern literature in terms of land, family, and individuality. I also look at the ways these themes exist in contemporary poetry, art, and music. The land in Midwestern literature is based in rootedness, how the characters preserve but also break their ties with the land. Jane Smiley begins her novel with description of the physical land, while Marilynne Robinson begins with the idea of home. The way the physical land interacts with the idea of home is at the heart of the novels discussed here, but it is also characteristic of many other Midwestern novels. Bill Barillas acknowledges that the land of the Midwest is not understood to be the most remarkable: “No one who has seen other parts of this country will claim that the Midwest compares in natural beauty with, say, the Pacific northwest or New England[...]This notion [...]is an inheritance of the Romantic era: the privileging of mountain and maritime landscapes as fit scenes of contemplation and spiritual transport” (20). Despite this, characters in Midwest literature show a strong connection to the land, which they either struggle with or embrace.

I also found individuality to be a prominent theme throughout Midwestern art across mediums. I use individuality to explain the main characters, narrators, and artists, but also the way that individuality clashes with the close-knit communities of the Midwest. As the included work is all contemporary, the characters are not pioneers or entrepreneurs, rather their roots are already formed, and they are expected to continue growing. There is a consistent tension between existing as an individual and being part of the group, which Barillas describes on a larger scale: “The very name ‘Middle West’

imply[s] the dual sense of centrality and isolation characterizing the region” (19). Ginny Cook leaves the family farm because she cannot sacrifice her individuality anymore, Jonathan Ames stays because he cannot sacrifice the community he supports. Dave Etter, a Midwestern poet, acknowledges the same struggle: “Had I liked Ernest Hemingway more and Sherwood Anderson less when I was starting out to become a writer, I might be living in Paris right now instead of Elburn, Illinois. But I’m sure I have found my right spot on the planet, if it is my fate to stay here for the rest of my life, I will have no complaints whatsoever. In the end, the true art of living is to belong to one place, a place that is always ‘home’” (Pichaske 40). Individuality in Midwest literature is tied to the question of what it means to settle in a place. The individuals in *Gilead* and *A Thousand Acres* collide with their surrounding community. In the example of Ginny, it is what makes her not settle in the Midwest, whereas it was what makes Ames stay.

Family is also a common theme through Midwestern art. I specifically look at the role the family plays in preservation. Barillas also touches on this theme in his book as he writes about the virtue of hard work: “I have seen it embodied in not only the lives of grandparents but of parents and neighbors [...] that by working we express our gratitude and celebrate our powers. To honor that gift, we should live simply, honestly, conservingly, saving money and patching clothes and fixing what breaks, sharing what we love” (37). Preservation is unique to the Midwest because it is a land of farms, an occupation that is traditionally inherited and passed along. Many Midwest authors and artists, all the ones mentioned in this thesis, acknowledge that at one point in their lives they wish they had left the Midwest. It becomes the family’s job to preserve the Midwest way of life, even if all that

means is to stay in the Midwest. Families become a tool for Midwestern authors to preserve the simplicity and work ethic of Midwestern life.

For the most part, I look at each of these themes through a regionalist lens, tying them specifically to the Midwest. I do this because the Midwest lacks a decided-upon definition and I am interested in the way Midwestern authors continue to try to represent that identity. Though I think examining any kind of literature and art with regionalism in mind is helpful, I think analyzing Midwestern literature and art that way is particularly helpful because of the way these themes are particularly representative of the American search for identity as a whole. Not only is the Midwest searching for an identity, the characters of Midwestern authors are also searching their identity: Who are we beyond the land we are born into? America is a country of immigrants, some older than others, who are trying to reconcile our individual identity with the larger ones we inevitably come into contact with, acknowledging the commonalities as well as the differences. I use regionalism in this paper not to conclude why the Midwest is particularly different, but instead identify the universal themes that are handled in specific ways by Midwestern authors.

The two main novels I use to compare with other contemporary Midwestern work are Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* (2004) and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991). I first chose *A Thousand Acres* because it is one of the most well known contemporary Midwestern novels, and Smiley herself grew up in a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. *A Thousand Acres* is a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *King Lear* set on a thousand acre farm in Iowa, owned by the Cook family. The father, Larry Cook, decides to divide ownership of the farm between his three daughters, Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. Caroline

refuses the farm and is consequently shut out of the family. Ginny and Rose run the farm until their father begins to become mentally unstable and tries to take the farm back from his daughters and their husbands. By the end of the novel, the family is torn apart and the farm is left to Ginny's ex-husband as the Cook family all move away. Since *A Thousand Acres* is set in Iowa, I chose *Gilead* to compare it to, as *Gilead* also takes place in a rural Iowa town. Though Robinson is not from the Midwest herself, her novels *Gilead* and *Home* both take place in Iowa with characters that are deeply involved in the land. *Gilead* takes place in Gilead, Iowa. It is written as a novel written in diary form by the narrator, Jonathan Ames. Ames is a pastor that has lived in Gilead for his entire life. The novel takes place after his recent diagnosis of cancer, with numbered months left to his life. Ames uses the diary to pass down whatever he can about himself to his son, which ranges from accounts of daily life to larger life lessons.

The land plays an important role in *Gilead*. Throughout the novel, Jack Boughton struggles with the purpose of a quiet, peaceful town like Gilead, not understanding what keeps people there. Smiley's opening sentence in *A Thousand Acres* implies a similar question when Ginny's first description of her family's farm is that "At sixty miles per hour, you could pass our farm in one minute" (3). The events that are to take place on the farm change the Cook family forever, but the first thing the reader is aware of is how passable it is. For outsiders, like Jack Boughton in Gilead, the land is easily overlooked. Both *Gilead* and *A Thousand Acres* take place in Iowa. Iowa- like many other Midwestern states- is often considered unremarkable, yet both authors question and qualify the towns throughout their respective novels. *Gilead's* Jonathan Ames speaks to this idea directly, "A stranger might ask why there is a town here at all. Our own children might ask. And who could

answer them? It was just a dogged little outpost in the sand hills, within striking distance of Kansas[...]I truly suspect I never left because I was afraid I would not come back” (234).

This is a rare moment of doubt for Ames. It affirms the way Smiley and Robinson have characterized the Midwest as a place that is easily overlooked by the outsiders, though it also questions why insiders stay on the land, apart from sentimental attachment. Both authors force their characters, like Ames and Ginny, to question if they would stay on the land had they not been taught to see the beauty in it.

Ames explains this type of beauty throughout *Gilead*, “I love the prairie! So often I have seen the dawn come and the light flood over the land and everything turn radiant at once- that word ‘good’ so profoundly affirmed in my soul that I am amazed I should be allowed to witness such a thing...To me it seems rather Christ-like to be as this place is, as little regarded” (246). Ames calls the land “little regarded” but also includes that he has seen it often, showing how much he does regard it as a result of seeing it multiple times. Ames’ explanation expresses privilege in being able to appreciate the beauty of the Midwest, which is more often than not missed by others. In the case of Jonathan Ames and Ginny Cook, it seems one must be locked to the land through ancestry in order to understand exactly what Ames is talking about. The beauty of the prairie has to be taught to you by ancestors, just as Ames’ relationship to the land stems from the relationship his ancestors had with the land, though it evolves into his own relationship with time.

The land in Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* is tied to the relationships within the Cook family. A reader cannot understand the land or the Cook family without understanding the other, as the land is the manifestation of the Cook family. This relationship can be seen in the way the land mirrors the toxic relationships of the Cook family when the water from

the well is discovered to be poisonous. In Sinead McDermott's article "The Gender of Nostalgia: Memory, Gender, and Nostalgia in *A Thousand Acres*," she explains this idea: "The novel suggests that Larry's abuse of his land and his abuse of his daughters are connected: both are justified by a patriarchal discourse of property and implicitly condoned by his community" (McDermott). The toxic water from the abuse of the land is the reason Rose Cook has cancer and the reason that Ginny has experienced over six miscarriages. The land impacts not only the Cooks' livelihood, but their entire lives through the way the toxicity of the water has determined so many of their expectations for life.

The land defines the relationship between Ginny and her sister Rose, simultaneously keeping them as close as possible and tearing them apart. Ginny consistently examines her relationship with her sister throughout the novel: "My deepest-held habit was assuming that differences between Rose and me were just on the surface, that beneath, beyond all that, we were more than twinlike, that somehow we were each other's real selves, together forever on this thousand acres" (307). The Cook farm is what keeps the two sisters together, as they share the responsibility of farming the land and taking care of their father together in adulthood. Even in describing the deep bond she thought she shared with her sister, Ginny cannot help but mention the farm. By the end of the novel, though, Ginny realizes the land is the only thing that was keeping them so close. When Ginny gives up the farm, she gives up her sister, as a result. Ginny finally decides she wants to kill Rose, in which she also turns to the land: "It was clear that the fields abounded with plenty of poisons, too[...]the most poisonous, mentioned in passing but not pictured, was water hemlock[...]I especially relished the secrecy of it. In that way, I saw, I had been practicing for just such an event as this all my life" (312). Smiley shows how powerful the

land is by allowing Ginny to find the way to kill her sister in the land that has bound them together for their entire lives. By the end of the novel, the toxicity of the land has caused multiple actual and attempted deaths: the possibility of Ginny's children, Rose's cancer, Rose's attempted homicide, Larry's death, and Larry's wife's death.

The land also provides the framework through which the Cook daughters and the readers see Larry Cook, as Larry's purpose in life is completely tied to the land: it is the thing he cares about most and the thing he does best. Ginny Cook uses the land as a way to see her father in the beginning of the novel: "Perhaps there is a distance that is the optimum distance for seeing one's father, farther than across the supper table or across the room, somewhere in the middle distance: he is dwarfed by trees or the sweep of a hill[...]well, that is a distance I never found[...]the white pine windbreak were as much my father as if he had grown them" (20). This shows how there was no separation between the land the daughters farmed and their father, but it also foreshadows the conflict that takes place in the rest of the novel. Ginny cannot imagine her father as lesser than the land that is unquestionably bigger and more powerful than him. Larry's inability to accept the things that are larger than him is his fatal flaw: he is at war with the land and is unable to win yet he keeps persisting.

The relationship between Ames and his son in *Gilead* is far less toxic than the familial relationships in *A Thousand Acres*, yet in both novels there is an emphasis on the passing down of knowledge. Larry Cook, in stark contrast to Ames, fails at passing down his way of life. This eventually contributes to his madness and depression, knowing his legacy will be lost. Larry Cook fails at being a proper vessel of the past; instead he mistreats

his daughters and drives them away. In *Gilead*, Jonathan Ames fosters the past in his son, whereas Larry Cook denies them of love and expects his daughters to remain.

In *A Thousand Acres*, the entire conflict begins with Larry Cook's idea of passing down his farm onto his daughters, in the hope that the farm will remain in the family after he dies. Furthermore, Larry Cook exiles Caroline once she does not accept the farm, because when Caroline rejects the farm, she is rejecting Larry's entire life. Ginny explains this rejection, "My father's pride, always touchy, had been injured to the quick. It would be no use telling him that she had only said that she didn't know[...]Perhaps she hadn't mistaken anything at all, and had simply spoken as a woman rather than as a daughter. That was something, I realized in a flash, that Rose and I were pretty careful never to do" (21). Larry was trying to pass down his farm, and by extension his way of life, though neither were worthy of maintaining anymore for many reasons, including the sexual abuse of Ginny and Rose. Caroline was able to speak this way to her father because she was able to escape Larry's abuse, and therefore able to escape the submission that her sisters were brought up in. Her worth to her father was not tied to the farmland the way Ginny and Rose's were, giving her an advantage in getting off the farm, though it was a dream all the women shared. Larry Cook spent much of his life trying to reach a thousand acres on his farm, and when he finally did, he wanted to pass it down to his daughters. What he did not realize though, was that his farm would never last because he would drive Rose and Ginny away and give Caroline a worth to her life apart from the land, so she would never come back.

Ames is also trying to pass on his knowledge and way of life to his son. In Ames' case, though, the knowledge he passes down in the journal is especially important, as

his time with his son is very limited. His final influence is what he writes in the journal that he is leaving to his son. Ames does not have specific goals for his son's life, only a hope for what kind of man his son will be: "I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love- I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence. I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country" (247). To Ames, the type of man his son will be depends on what his son gives back to the land, as Ames is aware that Gilead has made him into the man he is at the present and he wants his son to understand that relationship. Ames conveys this idea throughout his journal with moments that extol the town he calls home.

The word 'brave' in the way Ames calls the Midwest a "brave country" could mean many things, but I believe that it has to do with the way Ames refers to Gilead earlier in the novel, "To play catch of an evening, to smell the river, to hear the train pass. These little towns were once bold ramparts meant to shelter such peace" (246). Brave and bold both include risk-taking. Gilead is a bold rampart because it was a town that served to protect runaway slaves even when it was extremely dangerous. Ames' grandfather worked to protect those slaves, even going so far as to kill a man who was chasing them. Gilead continues to be brave because it remains as a town even after its greater initial purpose has passed, Gilead's inhabitants are loyal to the town despite their awareness of better places to exist and the relative irrelevance of the town. Ames journal is trying to pass down the history of Gilead and the way it has impacted him, so that his son can foster the same relationship with Gilead even when Ames is not there to show him.

In *Gilead* and *A Thousand Acres*, there is tension between the individual and the surrounding society. Isolation is a common theme of the fictional rural Midwest, which can

be seen in the small Iowa farming towns in *Gilead* and *A Thousand Acres*. Smiley and Robinson approach this tension differently, though. In *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny is treated with disdain by the rest of the town as the Cook family feud becomes more and more public. Ginny describes this way of judging the farmer through their farm, “Most issues on a farm return to the issue of keeping up appearances. Farmers extrapolate quickly from the farm to the farmer. A farmer looks like himself, when he goes to the café, but he also looks like his farm, which everyone has passed on the way into town” (199). The farm is a means through which the public judges the farmer, yet as the reader understands through Smiley’s novel, there is much more to the destruction of the Cook family than poor farming or farm management, such as the hidden sexual abuse of Rose and Ginny.

Robinson also comments on public influence on the individual. Jonathan Ames writes about it specifically to pass on to his son, “They make you doubt yourself, which depending on cases, can be a severe distraction and a waste of time. This is a thing I wish I had understood much earlier than I did” (7). As a pastor, Ames is also an individual judged by his very public trade, preaching, just as the Cooks are judged by their farm. This opposition between the individual and the public creates a consistent tension between the individual and the public, but it also causes the immediate family of the individuals to be much more important. Ginny’s only confidant is her sister Rose. Rose is just as toxic to Ginny as the public she is retreating from, but Ginny does not have anyone else to turn to. In *Gilead*, Ames’ wife and son consume most of his thoughts, and the only people that he actively and honestly communicates with outside of his family are the Boughtons.

Despite the knowledge and life that Ames and Larry Cook are trying to pass down to their children, both fathers acknowledge the mysteriousness of children. Both fathers are

aware of their inability to completely understand what will outlast them. Ames explains this idea in his journal: "A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension" (7). Ames experienced this feeling with his own father, as he did not fully understand his father's complicated relationship with his grandfather, and his father would not tell him much. Both Ames and Larry Cook understand the phenomenon of being very physically close to someone for your entire life without actually knowing or understanding them. They hope for loyalty in their descendents-- loyalty as children, and loyalty to the land they have spent years investing in. Both fathers struggle with not being able to control that loyalty, rather they are left with the responsibility of trying to show the reason for that loyalty.

Larry Cook tries to pass down his loyalty to the land through his daughters by giving them the farm he has spent his whole life cultivating. Larry does not realize that this is bound to fail, though, because he does not know his daughters. Instead, he believes that their loyalty to him will be enough. The Cook family operates in secrecy and dishonesty, which can be seen in the way Ginny spends all of her time taking care of other family members in her life because she will not be honest about how dissatisfying it is. Ames is also aware of this inevitable lack of communication in families, "In every important way we are such secrets from each other, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us" (197). Ames uses his journal to combat against this separation, hoping it will be easier for his son to understand and learn from him through his most intimate thoughts put down on paper. Both fathers struggle to completely connect with their children. This shows that while plays a large roll in these two Midwestern novels, it is not to say that family is always a positive roll. In the case of the Cook family and Ames, family serves as a

reflective device, showing the character what they believe and why. Family is necessarily instructive, but not always a positive force.

The Midwest dominates Dave Etter's poetry, as he is known for his allegiance to small Midwestern towns like Alliance, Illinois. In Etter's poem "Black Sunflowers" (1983), he finds meaning in a field of weather-beaten sunflowers. Etter's description of bravery in nature is similar to the way Ames describes Midwestern towns in *Gilead*: "These little towns were once bold ramparts meant to shelter such peace" (242). Etter compares the sunflowers to an army, leaving the sunflowers as "sunshine soldiers" by the end of the poem. The metaphor comparing the field of sunflowers allows Etter to attribute a weariness to the sunflowers, "In a wreck of cold rain, / a bent and battered / army of sunflowers / blinks into harsher weather, / their time come and gone." Not only are the flowers physically tired and worn like soldiers, their time has "come and gone," as though they have served their purpose already and are now a thing of the past. Comparing the sunflowers to soldiers is attributing them with bravery and courage, yet Etter continues to characterize them as past the time when that bravery mattered, just like the town of Gilead. According to Jonathan Ames, during the Civil War, Gilead was a town that served as a refuge for runaway slaves. During that time Gilead was in its heyday, serving as a town with a specific, brave purpose, but that time has passed. Both Gilead and the sunflowers continue to exist, though, as they both continue to blink "into harsher weather."

Etter also uses the field that the sunflowers are in as a metaphor. Etter writes, "I stop my mud-stained car / by the field of golden dreams, / call out, 'Attention!' / But there's no head-snap response, / no strong chins meeting mine." The field that the narrator is calling out to is beyond Etter's control because when he yells out 'attention,' as a general

would do to his soldiers, there is no response. The way that the field disregards the narrator shows that not only does the narrator have no power over the field; the field also does not listen. The field has no regard for the narrator, yet the narrator calls out to the field, so they do put worth in the response that they do not get. The field of golden dreams is representative of the worth people put into the land, forgetting that the land only gives what it wants, that there is no way to control what you receive in return.

The ruthlessness of the land is similar to how both Robinson and Smiley characterize the relationship between their main characters and the land in their novels. In *A Thousand Acres*, the land tears apart the family emotionally and physically. When Larry Cook tries to divide ownership of the land between his three daughters, the family is disbanded through the conflict. Due to poor farming, the well water from the land also causes Rose's breast cancer, Ginny's infertility, and their father's mental illness. Though the Cook family has spent their entire lives with the land they own, the land shows it does not owe them anything, nor does it consider them, only the Cooks consider it constantly.

In addition, Etter's poem 'Living in the Middle' (1979) uses repetition of the word "middle" to convey the setting of the land but also the narrator's life. Many works of Midwestern art characterize the idea of the middle, which makes 'Living in the Middle' especially interesting because it does this in a concentrated way. Etter writes, "Here in Alliance, Illinois / I'm living in the middle, / standing on the courthouse lawn / in the middle of town, / in the middle of my life." Etter immediately places the reader in the physical Midwest by calling out a specific town. He then takes the reader to 'middles' of increasing abstractness. Etter makes a point throughout the poem to not apply positive or negative adjectives to the middle, which he continually repeats; rather he just states its

existence. In the beginning of the poem, the narrator states he lives in the middle, he is a middlebrow, he is of the middle class, and he is middle western, all of which are relative objective facts. "Living in the Middle" is a seventeen-line poem, and all of those facts come in the first eight lines. The ninth line, or the very middle of the poem is aware of being the middle, "the middle, you see, the middle." It stands out from the other lines in the poem, as it is the only line to repeat the word 'middle' twice in one line. After the middle line, the narrator writes he is "believing in the middle way...in the true-blue middle of middle America, / in the middle of my dreams." The reader does not know what the middle way is, nor what it means to be in the middle of dreams.

The middle is ambiguous in this poem, as the middle does not have the hope of a beginning or the accomplishment of an end. Just as the east coast was modern America's beginning and the west coast a product of Manifest Destiny, the middle was a means to fulfill an end. Smiley, Robinson, and other poets that will be discussed later treat the middle in a similar way that Etter does in 'Living in the Middle.' The authors find familiarity in the beauty of the land, and while they may express appreciation at points, their characters are also aware of what they might be missing. If they are not actively seeking it, like Klink's narrator and the Cook sisters, they are at least aware of it, like Ames. Perhaps the most important line is when Etter writes that he believes in the middle way. Though there is no description of what the middle way is, knowing that it is something to believe in is important. Robinson's Ames has a similar spiritual relationship with the land. Smiley's characters do not exhibit this relationship, but perhaps that is one of the reasons they cannot sustain on the land. In Robinson's, Smiley's, and Lerner's work, there is a juxtaposition of the positive and negative aspects of living in the Midwest, as it is never

always a positive or negative place, though that tension is part of the reason they stay. This could be true of any place, but I believe that the way the tension between rootedness and displacement is unique to the Midwest in the way it binds some inhabitants to the land while simultaneously sending others away, searching for a new identity.

I have not lived anywhere but the Midwest, but as an outsider, I see the way the coast of California gives people an identity, or the way Texas gives Texans an identity. I have never felt this way about Illinois, rather I have found traces of it in city sports teams and such, but I do not believe the rural Midwest provides an identity in the same way that other regions do. How can the Midwest provide an identity that binds its inhabitants to the land when the region itself has been without one itself for so long? This question created a desire in me to experience a place that informs one's sense of self so intensely, yet just as the Ginny and Ames are bound to the land, my roots are strong.

In contrast to Dave Etter, Ben Lerner is a more experimental contemporary poet born & raised in Topeka, Kansas who deals with universal Midwestern themes in his poetry. Lerner's poem "[The predictability of these rooms]" (2006) is a prose poem that deals with domesticity to convey deeper themes: "The predictability of these rooms is, in a word, exquisite. These rooms in a word. The moon is predictably exquisite, as is the view of the moon through the word. Nevertheless, we were hoping for less." Predictability can be found anywhere, but I think that it is particularly unique to the Midwest in relation to tradition. For example, as seen in *Gilead* and *A Thousand Acres*, in both the Ames and Cook family, the Midwest is described as a place one stays because one was born there and therefore learns to understand it. Both patriarchs also stress the importance of tradition in the ways they attempt to pass down the knowledge that they learned from their ancestors.

There are also not any characters in either novel that come to the Midwest willingly from a different region of America. Tradition is vital to the Midwest in the way it preserves the roots of its inhabitants.

Lerner characterizes the predictability in his poem as exquisite, and I think in this way Lerner's characterization of predictability is the same as Robinson's and Smiley's description of tradition. Lerner characterizes predictability as a positive thing, but he goes on to write that "nevertheless, we were hoping for less." There is the same tension in Lerner's characterization of predictability that there is in Robinson's and Smiley's characterization of tradition in the Midwest. Tradition keeps the families in the Midwest and through that forced residency, the next generation learns through a slow process how to appreciate and understand the Midwest. They spend enough time in the Midwest to realize its unique beauty. Predictability is what finally drives Ginny away, though it is what keeps Ames in Gilead. Ginny can no longer stand the way her life consists of the same routine and responsibilities every single day of her life, always taking care of the burdens she was born into. Robinson, like Lerner, describes the predictability and tradition of the Midwest as something noble, though her characters are not always content. Even so, Ames, like Lerner's description of the moon, finds beauty in the land that keeps him coming back, if not stuck.

"[The bird's-eye view]" (2006) is another prose poem by Ben Lerner. This poem deals with perspectives and the power of those perspectives, as it features a bird's eye view, the perspective of the public, and the perspective of the president as a representative of a country. Lerner also plays with the power in those perspectives, removing the bird's eye view from the bird, the video gamer controlling the on screen soldier, the individual's

view of the public, and the president's ability to speak for people he has never met.

Lerner's characterization of the public is particularly interesting: "The public is a hypothetical hole, a realm of pure disappearance, from which celestial matter explodes."

Lerner writes that the public is a destructive void, capable of "disappearance" and exploding celestial matter. Lerner describes the relationship between the individual and the public similarly to Robinson and Smiley through the use of destruction, though he goes even farther than the other authors and describes the public as capable of eradication. The next line in Lerner's poem satirizes an extremely public figure, the president: "I believe I can speak for everyone, begins the president, when I say famous last words." Lerner does not believe that the president's famous last words speak for everyone; instead it is just the opposite. Using different perspectives throughout the poem, Lerner uses the president to make fun of the way public figures are supposed to represent individuals, as using a common figure to represent many takes away individuality. Through Lerner's use of perspectives and characterization in the poem, he shows how the public cannot speak for, nor empathize effectively with, the individual.

Joanna Klink is a poet from Iowa who also deals with themes of land and rootedness. Her poem "Toward what island-home am I moving" (2012) expresses her relationship with nature. Klink repeats imagery of a field in her poem. In her repetition of the field she intertwines nature and her body, the way nature has a physical effect on her: "And it was again the evening that drew me / back to the field where I could sense no boundary- / the smell of dry earth, cool arch of my neck, the darkness entirely within myself." While writers like Robinson, Smiley, and Lerner express the struggle to exist as an individual in the public, Klink writes about the opposite feeling found in nature. The narrator of the

poem feels the effect of nature on her with the same ease she feels her body-- there is no opposition between the two. This relationship with the land is similar to other characters' relationship to the land, in which almost all the main characters and narrators in the included works value the land over society, as the authors express finding more community and comfort in the land than in people. Klink also expresses a search for a home, "Toward what island-home am I moving, / not wanting to marry, not wanting / too much of that emptiness at evening." Though Klink's narrator repeats "Toward what island-home am I moving," she also repeats the imagery of the field and the way it continually draws her back instead of allowing her to find a new home. In this way Klink juxtaposes the land with the idea of home, where the land is preventing her from moving on as it is always drawing her back.

The way Klink juxtaposes these ideas prompts the reader to consider when land becomes more than just land and becomes a home and also when the opposite happens, and a home becomes only land. Like the other Midwestern writers discussed, Klink finds the relationship between Midwesterner and land fascinating, as well as extremely important. The poem ends with a shorter, five line stanza: "Come, black anchor, let us not be harmed. / The deer leafing in the dark. / The old man at the table, unable to remember. / The children whose hunger is just hunger, / and never desire." Although it is not explicitly clear what the black anchor is, I think it can be argued that the black anchor is a metaphor for the draw of the land Klink's narrator is inhabiting. The narrator is continually drawn back the field that she describes, though she wants to move towards an "island-home." Through the way the land keeps drawing her in, the land or field becomes an anchor that keeps the narrator in one place though she desires to move on. The hunger of the children

that Klink mentions is also reminiscent of the hunger described by many of the other Midwestern writers in their main characters and narrators. The characters are hungry in that they yearn for something more, but they do not desire a specific place because they have not known that place, so their yearning is simply hunger for something they only think exists.

Jenny Holzer is a visual artist from Ohio that also deals with the land, the importance of the past, and the juxtaposition of the individual and the public in her work. Holzer's project called *Truisms* (1978-1983) is a series of one lines listed in bold type in alphabetical order. She printed the lines in black italics on white posters and wheat-pasted them anonymously around Manhattan. The phrase, "The land belongs to no one" is included, which speaks directly to the way many other Midwestern artists deal with the land. Whereas Smiley and Etter struggled with not being able to control the land, Holzer is concerned with the ownership of the land. Both ideas show how the land owes nothing to the people who inhabit it. Despite the way it affects us, the land does not take note of us. "Much was decided before you were born" is another statement in Holzer's *First Impressions*. This is a similar statement to what other Midwestern writers, like Smiley and Robinson, have conveyed about the impact of the past. For Robinson's Jonathan Ames, it decides his occupation, where he grows up, but also the way he finds his spirituality in the land. What came before Ginny and Rose impacted them in many ways throughout *A Thousand Acres*, and it is not until they completely remove themselves from that setting that they can become their own person.

Holzer also deals with individuality, placing the individual in opposition with the surrounding society in her *Projections* (1996-2011) series. In *Projections*, Holzer projected

large bodies of text onto buildings in major cities, Chicago being the only Midwestern city to feature her work. The project in itself, apart from the text, forces private, personal thoughts onto the public. Holzer breaks down the division between public and private, and she does it forcefully by covering a large, well-known building like the Civic Opera House in Chicago in bold, bright white text. Holzer projected “Whatever you say reverberates, whatever you don’t say speaks for itself. So either way you’re talking politics” onto the Civic Opera House. Holzer’s words urge the viewers to consider what they say, as what we do not say holds just as much worth in her point of view. Holzer’s words are projected in a city where millions of conversations are taking place at any given moment, though her individual words become physically larger and accessible to the entire city. This projection also becomes self-reflective through the way Holzer had to choose her individual words to display in such a public place, yet it asks the reader to evaluate what they choose to say. Smiley’s Cook family also struggles with what to say and what not to say, especially regarding their father’s sexual abuse. Had the rest of the town known about their family situation, they would have been much less likely to sympathize with Larry Cook. Even Rose and Ginny struggle with sharing their feelings about the abuse between themselves, much less the rest of society. The Cook family decays because none of them are sure what to say to each other and what to keep to themselves.

On the opposite hand, contemporary Midwestern musicians publicly deal with themes of family, land, and individualism through performing music. Mermaid Avenue is an album of songs written by Woodie Guthrie and performed by the Midwestern band Wilco and British folk-rock musician Billy Bragg. In 1992, Nora Guthrie, Woodie Guthrie’s daughter, reached out to Billy Bragg with lyrics for songs that Guthrie left unfinished after

his death. Bragg then shared those lyrics with Jay Bennet and Jeff Tweedy of Wilco. Nora Guthrie encouraged the musicians to “write as if they were collaborating with Woody, creating new, vital music for the lyrics” (Erlewine allmusic.com). Though Bragg does not have Midwestern roots, Guthrie himself grew up in Oklahoma, and Wilco is arguably one of the most well-known Midwestern bands, consistently paying homage to Chicago, where they are based. Regardless of the content, the project itself is an act of preservation, specifically through family. Nora Guthrie took lyrics that could have easily been looked over and gave them to musicians to be recorded for contemporary listeners, specifically including Midwestern musicians.

Jeff Tweedy was also a member of the band Uncle Tupelo, and these same themes can be seen in Uncle Tupelo’s lyrics. In their song “New Madrid,” place is the subject: “So come on back from New York City, roll your trucks in at dawn, walk with me to the fountain.” Tweedy is lamenting a lost love that has left their town, while he cannot leave for unsaid reasons. Tweedy does not go into detail why he cannot leave, but that does not mean he wants to leave, a feeling many of the other characters and narrators of Midwestern work. The song goes on to say “Caroms over the landfill, buries us all in its broken back.” Again, Tweedy characterizes the land to be inescapable, as they will all be buried in it. By characterizing the land as having a “broken back,” he does describe the land that he seems to be bound to as a place that is desirable. “Screen Door” by Uncle Tupelo conveys the same feeling of being bound to the land, but in a more care-free manner: “Down here, where we’re at, The weather changes, that’s the way it goes, sometimes it snows, when everything’s wrong, sometimes it snows, but when it does, it doesn’t last long.” The lyrics convey the same lack of control over nature that Smiley uses, yet it is not a

burden in this case. Instead, it is just a part of the place that they have to deal with. There is also a strong sense of community in the song: “Down here, where we’re at, everyone is equally poor, down here, we don’t care, we don’t care what happens outside the screen door.” There is a strong sense of community, emphasized by the “equally.” This shows how important community is to small Midwestern towns, just like Robinson’s description of Gilead, even though there are many examples of the individual clashing with the community.

My father was a first generation American, growing up in a poor community on the Southside of Chicago, though he did not stay there. As a businessman, he has been all over the world and still continues to visit new places. My father has been to places that I dream of seeing one day: Germany, Brazil, Japan, yet he always returned to the place he knew best, less than an hour from the hospital where he was born over fifty years ago. This could be because this is where my father feels most comfortable, though I think my father, like Robinson’s Jonathan Ames or Smiley’s Ginny Cook, struggles with rootedness and displacement. As a teenager sitting at the dinner table, I promised my father I would not go to college in a place that had cornfields. I did not keep that promise: the six-hour drive home from college is a six-hour drive through cornfields. Throughout my childhood, my father took me across the country and back, but rarely to other parts of the Midwest. My mother took me to Western Europe, and I eventually sent myself to study abroad in the Mediterranean. Had I not been born in the Midwest, I do not think it would interest me in any way, yet I was born here, and I keep coming back.

In writing this thesis, I was interested in examining how Midwestern authors and artists are currently representing their own relationships with this complicated region.

I began with Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* to establish a jumping off point. From there, I looked at other Midwestern works, some I was already familiar with and others were completely new to me. I saw themes throughout each different medium and individual work that I found in my analysis of Robinson and Smiley. I found the differences and similarities between the way mediums interacted with those themes to be especially intriguing. I am interested now to see how the themes of land, family, and individuality play out in other literary regions, or if those themes are prominent at all. Our country is full of diverse regions that influence all type of creators of art, and I hope to continue to learn about the ways those artists let the land influence their work.

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