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by

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“You are a trained observer and there is nothing to observe.”

D a v i d F o s t e r W a l l a c e ’ s M i d w e s t

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D a v i d F o s t e r W a l l a c e ’ s M i d w e s t

by

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Report

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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a b s t r a c t

This essay examines David Foster Wallace’s literary representations of the Midwest region. Reading *The Broom of the System* (1989), “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley” (1992), and “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” (2001) in the light of the patently regionalist treatment of landscape in his posthumous work, *The Pale King* (2011), I trace a consistent and continuous regionalist trajectory through his oeuvre. His work, which is frequently conceived of as a metafictional commentary on postmodern systems of technology and media culture, maintains an urgent preoccupation with mapping and depicting regional landscape. By reading his texts through the lens of regional criticism and within the frameworks of space/place theory and géocritique, I demonstrate the centrality of the Midwestern environment to his texts’ endeavors to restructure the literary cartography of the U.S. In recreating the Midwest on the page, Wallace offers an alternative role for regionalism in postmodern literature and an ethical imperative to locate oneself—both in one’s immediate surroundings and within regional, national, and global networks—via awareness of place. Literary representations of region, this report contends, can serve to ground and to implace the contemporary reader.

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“You are a trained observer and there is nothing to observe.”

D a v i d F o s t e r W a l l a c e ’ s M i d w e s t

It is flat. The geometry of the fields suggests a map as large as the thing it represents.
Michael Martone “The Flatness”

This Midwestern sky is the nakedest loneliest sky in America.
Walker Percy *The Moviegoer*

—

When we think of the Midwest, we think of nothing. We think of a lot of things that amount to nothing—of plainness, flatness, the endless same. Of monocultural farmland, rigidly gridded townships, highways so long and straight you can see the earth’s curve in the distance. We think of land that you drive through or fly over. Fast food chain restaurants in endless repetition that look just like the fast food chain restaurants nationwide. We think, perhaps, of blandness not just in the food but in the people. We think these things as a nation whose media generally chooses not to depict the Midwest unless as an other, a cultural vacuity, an absent center.

I say "we" here, but I speak from personal experience. I grew up in northern Illinois and for most of my life have felt that I grew up exactly nowhere. To leave the Midwest, as nearly everyone does, put me in touch with people no older than I who had a sense of place, a sense of history, an explicit cultural heritage in their East or West coast existence. If they were from the South, they knew it and always had. As a place of origin,

the Midwest had no literary narrative, no set of source texts that addressed a place I recognized.

To write about region is to generalize and to specify all at once. To assert the personal perspective, the lived experience, is perhaps the only way to temper the essentializing narrative regionalism engenders. I am a native of no-place and I have come to realize that no-place is still place. That the placelessness a Midwestern upbringing confers, a placelessness that echoes and reflects the flat globalization and deterritorialization of the late twentieth-century moment, is, too, an implacement that grounds identity, both in local specificity and in global awareness. I borrow “implacement” from Edward Casey’s *Getting Back Into Place* (1993), wherein he notes that place has the power “to direct and stabilize us, to memorialize and identify us, to tell us who and what we are in terms of *where we are*.”¹ I also intend it to refer to the potential for adequate “cognitive mapping” Frederic Jameson reaches toward at the end of “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”; he defines it as “the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world,” capacities distinctly threatened by what he terms “postmodern hyperspace.”² I think the word “grounding” could be employed to encompass both these ideas: a relation to place that offers a personal bond to a particular landscape and a sense of one’s social

¹ Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), xv.

² Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 83.

position in larger regional, national, and global networks.³ This essay posits that literary representations of a region can serve to ground or to implace the contemporary reader.

David Foster Wallace is the first writer I encountered who writes empathetically and persistently of the Midwest. His work, which offers a complex portrayal of this bewildering, alienating regional landscape and its people, demonstrates that place can have a grounding effect no matter how blandly developed or branded or repetitive it seems; that all landscapes contain unique mythologies; that people and landscape exist in a reciprocity based in immediate experience and adamantly relevant to world systems. Reading his Midwest demands a reconsideration of the region's imagined cartography.

Somewhere near the exact center of the continental US, Wallace locates a region that serves as an environmental paradigm for his view of America's predicament: it is a landscape that alienates its inhabitants—constantly changed and developed, it grows less and less distinct; it's a place that maintains its defining specificity for individuals despite its manipulability and increasing sameness; and it is a region that creates communality among its inhabitants in their worldview. Worldview, or *Weltanschauung*, is used here to imply awareness of one's position in a global system, or what Wallace will refer to as “any felt sense of a larger world” in “The View from Mrs. Thompson's.”⁴ His fictional

³ In “After Strange Gods,” Roberto Maria Dainotto also uses the term “grounding,” but in the Heideggerian sense (*bergründen*). The “ethical imperative” to reconnect to place that Dainotto sees in Heidegger and in the ancient Greek loyalty to *polis* offers a bridge between recent critical discussions of regionalism (like Dainotto's “All the Regions Do Smilingly Revolt”) and theoretical considerations of space and place in humanist geography (Edward Casey, Yi-Fu Tuan, Michel de Certeau, Michel Augé). My approach integrates these two dialogues by considering a specific region in the context of space/place theory; I also use the cognitive mappign Jameson describes to incorporate the geocritical discourse of Bertrand Westphal and Robert Tally. Roberto Maria Dainotto, *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 166-167.

⁴ David Foster Wallace, “The View from Mrs. Thompson's” *Rolling Stone* (25 October, 2001), 95.

representations of the American Midwest may not at first appear to be at the heart of his literary enterprise, which is generally conceived of as a metafictional commentary on postmodern systems of technology and media culture; his works have been associated most frequently with the post-post-modern, the posthuman, the technomorphic, and the post-ironic/New Sincerity; his style tends to be called maximalist.⁵ But his final, posthumous work, *The Pale King* (2011), has led some reviewers to start calling him a regional writer. A close look at Wallace's first novel and his essays shows that this preoccupation with mapping and depicting region is a consistent thread throughout his body of work. If we are to call him a regional writer, what function does the Midwest serve in his texts?

In this essay, I will read his early works and *The Pale King* through a regional lens to demonstrate that part of his project in restructuring America in his writing is to unpack and challenge the assumptions that push the Midwest to the margin, and in so doing bring his central home region to the forefront of his readers' awareness. His emphasis on a particular and recognizable place suggests that the self-conscious artifice of metafiction does not adequately reflect the scope of his works' impact in the realm of contemporary writing. At the same time, the choice of the Midwest region does not situate him comfortably in the established regionalist categories of literary history. Looking at his work through a regional lens requires both a reevaluation of the role of the postmodern discourse in his work and a reconsideration of what it means to be a regional writer in the context of late twentieth-century U.S. fiction.

⁵ See N. Katherine Hayles, Paul Giles, Adam Kelly, and Tom LeClair.

Wallace's investment in the Midwest dates back to his first novel. The highly manipulable landscape of Ohio in *The Broom of the System* (1989), demonstrated best by the installation of The Great Ohio Desert, serves as a playground for Wallace's more conjectural ruminations on the lingering power and hold of place even at a moment when place seems utterly destructible, disposable. The Midwest in *Broom* exists as a theoretical construct: the text asks us, what happens to a regional community when the land it inhabits is defined by volatility? An early personal essay on Wallace's childhood in Philo, Illinois, "Tennis, Tornadoes, Trigonometry: A Midwestern Boyhood" (1992), shows the affective and nearly metaphysical bond the author felt with his own home region and its particular geometry, geography, and vector-shifting winds.⁶ Here, he begins to mythologize the Midwest; much of this essay turns out not to be true to his biography (e.g., he never once lived in Philo, IL), and so it offers an author at pains to create from his past a legacy fitting for a true regional writer.⁷ Here, too, an important concept of his comes to light: the perceived and enduring reciprocity between body and landscape, and an artistic link between body, landscape, and text. The essay presents a link between a map of the region and Wallace's physical, mental, and aesthetic orientation toward the world around him. Imagined Midwestern cartography is the lens through which he claims to see, feel, and comprehend his immediate experience. Ten years later, he writes an essay in response to the attacks of September 11th, 2001, called "The View from Mrs. Thompson's." In this essay, by placing the people who inhabit his

⁶ Later retitled "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" when published in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*.

⁷ Note that Sherwood Anderson—probably the most canonical Midwest regionalist—wrote a novel with a similar title, *Tar: A Midwestern Childhood* (1926). Wallace's title for the first of his three pieces for *Harper's* reaches for an established Midwestern coming of age story to situate his own.

home region, in this case the women of Bloomington, IL, at the center of his take on a global crisis, his earlier works' theories and personal investments in the Midwest turn political. He demands that readers take seriously an alternate, distinctly Midwestern point of view on what it means to be American in the wake of 9/11. Fictional, mythological, and actual Midwests that appear in his earliest work merge and gain a new imperative in his final, unfinished book. The changeability of inhabited space, the felt physical and mental connection to native landscape, and the community engendered by shared placement in global systems combine and are fully realized in the regional landscape of *The Pale King*.

The Regional Examination Center Wallace installs in *The Pale King*'s fictional Peoria, IL, draws its sprawling, indeterminate, incongruously structured landscape from the theoretical map in *The Broom of the System*. Explorations of the IRS workers' various upbringings make the connection between each individual character and the Midwestern landscape palpable and personal, and, like his tornado essay, show how it defines their perspective and even mood. The Center introduces a community bound by a place that both alienates them from the land and other people and connects them to it and to one another, much like the community he observes at Mrs. Thompson's. *The Pale King* is perhaps Wallace's most grounded exploration of region and regionality. He spent years researching this book, not just by taking courses on tax code, but also by observing his surroundings and the region's inhabitants. Notes in his personal library housed at the Harry Ransom Center show his vigilant attention to the habits and particularities of his home region, obsessively listing local turns of phrase, mannerisms, and diction; he is like

a field reporter on a prolonged jag, living deep amongst a foreign people but yet not of them. By detaching himself enough from the region to record faithfully the Midwestern dialect, he unearths an enduring and binding form of local specificity that resists the flattening, homogenizing discourse of postmodernity.

Wallace's writing returns again and again to this (imagined) part of the country—his native Illinois, Ohio, Indiana—to examine different aspects of place, regional imagination, and local identity. Much of his work can be read as a sustained and compassionate portrait of a region he suggests is often presumed to be ignored or marginalized. By rethinking that assumption and by taking the Midwest and Midwesterners seriously and at their word, these works suggest, it is possible for readers of these imagined cartographies to understand better how to remain human in a monocultural, postmodern US. A conscientious focus on the place and people who seem most homogenized by late capitalism shows how individuals can use landscape and space in singular, particular ways and maintain consciousness of their positionality in larger systems.⁸ Even as place becomes more and more placeless, even as people seem less grounded and more mobile, place retains its centrality and hold over identity. Awareness of the legacy of a place, even when its topography seems unspecific or recursive, offers a means to assert humanity in the face of actual and textual postmodern hyperspace.

⁸ I take Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) as a model for this argument. "If it is true that the grid of 'discipline' is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them, and finally, what 'ways of operating' form the counterpart, on the consumer's (or 'dominee's') side, of the mute processes that organize the establishment of socioeconomic order" (xiv).

In other words, deep awareness of environment, Wallace's writing suggests, is a redemptive method for fiction and its readers. His much-beloved commencement address, given at Ohio's Kenyon College in 2005, offers a similar argument about the awareness and discipline required to endure the boredom and frustration of postmodern adult life: "if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down."⁹ Or, as a temporary IRS worker learns from *The Pale King's* wise elders, the true way to deal with being alive in this place and at this moment is "[t]o function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air."¹⁰

⁹ David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (New York: Little Brown, 2009), 93.

¹⁰ ———, *The Pale King* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 438. Subsequent citations refer to this edition, abbreviated *PK*.

I. "A desert respects no man."¹¹

What geography can give all Middle Westerners, along with the fresh water and topsoil, if they let it, is awe for an Edenic continent stretching forever in all directions.

Makes you religious. Takes your breath away.

Kurt Vonnegut "To be a native middle-westerner"

The Broom of the System, Wallace's first novel and one of his two undergraduate theses at Amherst, follows Lenore Beadsman, a young woman searching for her missing grandmother, who is language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's former student. Her search forces her to confront the possibility that she may be nothing more than a linguistic construct. The novel takes place in Ohio, in and around Cleveland. The reader's view of the landscape is aerial: repeated images of intersecting highways, lists of suburbs and small cities, ominous, maw-like characterizations of the Cleveland skyline, and the fictitious hundred-square mile Great Ohio Desert, geo-engineered from what was once Caldwell and the Wayne National Forest. The novel abounds with reflections on the Midwest's fractured landscape, on the longing for wilderness, and on the experience of living on land that has undergone drastic changes, from prairie to farmland to industrial center to desolate sprawl. In these reflections and ruminations, which compose a kind of unencumbered linguistic sprawl throughout the text, Wallace's characters voice various interpretations of the region and its relation to the rest of the country. In this way, it toys with and reconfigures a reader's assumptions about the region while testing out possible theories for the Midwesterner's positionality relative to the nation. By presenting the theoretical ramifications of a volatile and marginalized landscape, *Broom* offers an

¹¹ —, *The Broom of the System* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 54. Hereafter abbreviated *Broom*.

extreme and abstract framework for an evolving, as yet hypothetical, representation of the Midwest.

The relationship between aerial view and grounded perspective in the novel mirrors how the (fictional) region's inhabitants conceive of themselves/are conceived as part of the national whole. Wallace describes at length Lenore's hometown, East Corinth, which her grandfather designed and built. The city takes the shape of actress Jayne Mansfield, according to the cinematic fantasies of its architect. He projected the filmic image of an objectified human body onto the land by building and swelling its highways and industrial parks in all the right places. This manipulation of landscape comes to light early in the text and demonstrates how the most frivolous individual fantasy can be brought to bear on a vast territory. The worship of image and celebrity takes extreme, absurd form, shaping the land as a repeated instance of a familiar two-dimensional figure and thereby conforming landscape to object—specifically sex object. Wallace provides the point of view of the people of East Corinth as he maps it, explaining that while pilots always sought to arc their flight paths over the town for the scenic view of Jayne Mansfield's outline, "The people of East Corinth, many of them unaware of the shape their town really lay in, a knowledge not exactly public, crawled and drove and walked over the form of Jayne Mansfield, shaking their fists at the bellies of planes" (*Broom* 46). This description suggests that the good people of East Corinth are at once ignorant of the larger shape of their hometown and ineffectively indignant at the misunderstood attention it draws from overhead. Their relation to their landscape, over which they "crawled and drove and walked," indicates a certain detachment and lack of positioning awareness.

They do not settle, farm, or mine this land, but merely traverse its surface. Their engagement with it is superficial at best. And there is no more purpose to the arrangement of the space they inhabit than to form a movie star's image to which they have no access. Already the reader gets the sense of a people out of touch with the highly manipulable landscape that surrounds them and likewise disconnected from the population who passes over them while flying from coast to coast. At the same time, the coastal dwellers flying over the region are interested and aware of it only for the two-dimensional representation it offers of a familiar celebrity figure; they show no recognition of the people who might inhabit this land. They participate in the objectification of the region from above. In this way, different forms of detachment from the landscape serve to unite the East Corinthians with the fliers over. The land's manipulability in *Broom* renders it a spectacle, mere surface, rather than an environment with which to interact.

The book's most conspicuous example of the high manipulability of land, the G.O.D. or Great Ohio Desert, arises from the Ohio governor's dissatisfaction with his state. Informing his advisors that the state has "gone soft" due to "too much development," the governor demands yet more development (*Broom* 54). The only solution to his state's problems, namely the people's detachment from their land and ignorance of its history, is "hewing":

GOVERNOR: Guys, the state is getting soft. I can feel softness out there. It's getting to be one big suburb and industrial park and mall. Too much development. People are getting complacent. They're forgetting the way this state was historically hewn out of the wilderness. There's no more hewing... We need a wasteland... Gentlemen, we need a desert... Gentlemen, a desert. A point of savage reference for the good people of Ohio. A place to fear and love. A blasted region. Something to remind us of what we hewed out of. A place without malls. An Other for Ohio's Self. Cacti and scorpions and the sun beating down.

Desolation. A place for people to wander alone. To reflect. Away from everything. Gentlemen, a desert. (*Broom* 54)

Governor Zusatz's impulse to create a desert corresponds with an older, Biblical understanding of wilderness that William Cronon outlines in "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Unpacking the Biblical usage of the term, Cronon writes, "To be a wilderness then was to be 'deserted,' 'savage,' 'desolate,' 'barren'—in short, a 'waste.'"¹² In his demand for a wasteland, the governor suggests a similar function of nature for contemporary Ohioans. The Great Ohio Desert is meant to fulfill Ohio's need for empty, uninhabited space, for wandering, and for hewing; the idea that hard work on the land will help reengage "soft" Ohioans is at the core of the plan. "Hewing" is a means of putting individuals directly and physically in touch with their soil; it suggests both violence to the land and hard work on the individual's part. Yet, as Lenore will mention later to Mr. Bloemker, to go to the desert is "easy." All you need to do is buy a Wander-Pass and hop on the bus. The landscape's reconfiguration is immediate and technological, requiring no "hewing" on citizens' parts. This makes an example for Cronon's larger project, which is to show that wilderness is always a created environment—that the concept of wilderness is man-made, and likewise its execution. In the G.O.D., contemplative wilderness experience converts to a visit to an amusement park.

The desert is also hypothetically a zone of reflection away from society. As Cronon puts it, wilderness's oldest usage indicates "places on the margins of civilization

¹² William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" in *Uncommon Ground* (New York: Norton, 1995), 70.

where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair” (Cronon 70). Wilderness, then, is a space collectively imagined for this purpose. In *Broom of the System*, it is not the community but the civilizing body itself that seeks to create—to impose—wilderness. In an effort to remember the state’s frontier history, the governor couches his project in the language of a new frontier. The Ohio landscape has proved most manipulable throughout the civilizing process—it withstands destruction and rebuilding, use and reuse—and so the governor’s ambition in creating the G.O.D. is the ultimate refiguration of tamed landscape into wild. The purpose of the space inverts the settling process that hewing ordinarily suggests. The new space is intended for reflection and contemplation and is hastily built out of desperation and perceived necessity. That the space’s name abbreviates to “GOD” implies an attempt to locate the divine, the religious, or the sublime in the landscape, to construct a site for worship and perhaps an entity to worship. Governor Zusatz’s project has about it the air of a last ditch spiritual endeavor, if a woefully misguided one. Here, he seeks to preserve nothing of the original landscape, but to fashion a new, alien landscape that he has imagined: the black desert. Cronon addresses the constructed nature of any empty wilderness: “The removal of Indians to create an ‘uninhabited wilderness’—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is. To return to my opening argument: there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny” (Cronon 79). While this suggests that, historically, built wilderness has had about it the pretense of nature, the G.O.D. embraces its

artificiality. So enamored is he with his plan, the governor feels no responsibility to pretend that his wilderness is in some way natural. In order to build the desert, he has zero qualms about relocating the people of Caldwell and destroying another constructed wilderness, the Wayne National Forest. His wilderness is aware of its constructed quality and of the violence that its “hewing” will entail. He makes no apologies for the destruction or for the commercialization.

The notion that the G.O.D. would allow Ohioans to venture “away from everything” is clearly an unfulfillable wish. As Wallace’s title for his Illinois State Fair essay, “Getting Away from Already Being Pretty Much Away from It All,” suggests, his Midwest is always already *away*. And, at the same time, both instances point to the fact that there is no *away* for people to occupy; the state fair and the G.O.D. are swarming with crowds of people. The G.O.D. allows Wallace space to play with several American literary myths at once. Not only does it represent a wilderness for wandering in the Biblical sense, but it also engages with the journey motif and American frontierism. In each instance, however, it proves the failure of these myths and demonstrates their emptiness in his projected version of 1990 Ohio. The journey Lenore takes to find her grandmother proves unsuccessful; the “hewing” of the frontier in visiting the G.O.D., a process that should lead Lenore to a physical engagement with the land and offer her a chance to “hew,” as in adhere or be loyal, to Ohio, never occurs. Rick Vigorous, Lenore’s erstwhile lover, always ready to latch onto a literary trope rather than acknowledge his immediate reality, is thrilled at the prospect of a quest for self-discovery in the desert with Lenore. ““Here’s the end of the trail. Shall we strike off into the interior? I sense that

whatever it is we're looking for is best looked for in the interior. In the heart of the Desert, Lenore. What do you say?' 'Let's just go back the way we came. My nose hurts. This is clearly a waste of time. At least this way I get to look at the lake'" (*Broom* 433). Both Rick and Lenore objectify their experience with the landscape, trying to get something from its interior or from its vista; neither approaches the contemplative self-confrontation that the governor had in mind. Not only do they fail to find Lenore's grandmother, but they leave with no greater attachment or responsibility to the land than that with which they arrived.

What, then, does this man-made wilderness and its exploration and commercialization say about the function of the Midwest in *Broom*? In one sense, the G.O.D. could have happened anywhere. It was designed by the same designers who "did Kuwait," which reaffirms that landscapes lack (perceived) local specificity in this moment (*Broom* 54). It also imports an alien landscape into Ohio and destroys what already exists, suggesting that the Ohio landscape itself is endlessly replaceable and unimportant in its own right. Vigorous responds to the crowded desert with a demand for even further destruction or development. "If you want my opinion, Lenore, they should either obliterate this place or enlarge it. The touristiness of the whole thing is negating whatever marginal attractions this place had to offer" (*Broom* 423).¹³ The only options available in Vigorous's mind require reconstructing the land. No version of the desert as it stands will suffice, only to "obliterate" or "enlarge" it. This response speaks volumes about his indifference to his environment. Even the threat to relocate Ohioans without a

¹³ Note the multiple valences of the word "marginal" in this context—at once spatial and cultural.

thought says something about the state government's indifference to its people. But the governor wants this desert specifically for the people of Ohio, an attempt to create a memorable, impactful landscape out of overdeveloped suburban sprawl and shopping malls. In appreciating the desert's name, he says, "It spells size, desolation, grandeur, and it says it's in Ohio" (*Broom* 56). Location is important and here, the desert represents an attempt (though a failed one) to reunite a regional people with their overwrought land. Something about the Ohio landscape and the status of place in 1990 negates the efficacy of former myths and literary narratives that should ground inhabitants in their shared landscape. Wallace establishes this problem in *Broom*, and in his later works shows ways to overcome it.

The failure of traditional American literary myths to properly implace the residents of the novel's late twentieth-century Cleveland offers itself up as the place's distinguishing characteristic. Detachment from myth as a unique regional quality comes through in the comments of Mr. Bloemker, who has considerable space in the text to question his history and regional identity after living through the changes of the twentieth century in the Midwest. He is the manager of the nursing home from which Lenore's grandmother has escaped, prompting the quest in the desert. For him, the region's situation provides grounds to test some bigger ideas about American culture, memory, and life inside of uncontrollable, dehumanizing systems. He tells Lenore:

'The Midwest: a place that both is and isn't. A volatile mixture... These people, think of the worlds they've been part of. The *worlds*. They've literally gone from horse and buggy to moonshot. The technological changes alone that they have stood witness to are staggering. How might one even begin to orient oneself with respect to such a series of changes in the fundamental features of the world? How to begin to come to some understanding of one's place in a system, when one is a

part of an area that exists in such a troubling relation to the rest of the world, a world that is itself stripped of any static, understandable character by the fact that it changes, radically, all the time?’ (*Broom* 142-143).

The constant reinventing of Ohio’s landscape, of which the G.O.D. represents an exaggerated but recognizable example, highlights for Bloemker the experience of inhabiting this region. Its mutability in the face of technological change renders it difficult to characterize, unspecific in some way. Of course, Bloemker’s insistence on this as a Midwestern quality points to a central paradox in Wallace’s elaboration of the Midwest throughout his career: its unspecificity is what makes it specific. Its combination of suburban sprawl, industrial blight, and agribusiness denies a sense of landscape while at the same time comprising an utterly unique late twentieth-century vista. This paradox, the recognition of place in placelessness and historical positioning in what Marc Augé calls the “perpetual present,” returns throughout Wallace’s work.¹⁴ Bloemker and Lenore voice a challenge to the broader cultural presumption that their region, by way of its replicability and replaceability, is defined by “non-places” (Augé 78). Both seek a way to interpret their region through the possibility for what Augé terms “‘anthropological place’ ...formed by individual identities, through the complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how” (Augé 101). In offering the inhabitants a voice with which to question their relationship to the landscape, *Broom of the System* opens a space from which to pose a challenge to the theory of non-places, but doesn’t offer a clear answer or means to overcome it.

¹⁴ “Assailed by the images flooding from commercial, transport or retail institutions, the passenger in non-places has the simultaneous experiences of a perpetual present and an encounter with the self.” Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 1992 trans. 1995), 105.

Bloemker is invested in the paradoxical nature of the regional Midwest. He seems at pains to rehearse the contradiction between a traditional, mainstream view of the Midwest as “heartland” and the lived experience of growing old in this part of the country. He expounds on the Midwestern experience to Lenore: “Both in the middle and on the fringe. The physical heart, and the cultural extremity. Corn, a steadily waning complex of heavy industry, and sports. What are we to say? We feed and stoke and supply a nation much of which doesn’t know we exist. A nation we tend to be decades behind, culturally and intellectually. What are we to say about it?” (*Broom* 142). Here, he emphasizes that the Midwest is central to the US, both geographically and in terms of the necessary resources it provides. In his view, the nation’s general apathy and ignorance regarding the Midwest is a sign of their local blindness to the source of their food, energy, and material goods; the Midwest becomes a symbol for places worldwide from which the US draws its resources without consideration. Bloemker also reinforces a stereotype about the Midwest’s cultural and intellectual backwardness with respect to the country, a quality that Edward Watts aligns with postcolonial discourse; I address the concept in more detail in section three. Here, Bloemker performs the center’s peripheralizing act on the Midwest from the position of the marginalized. That he is aware enough to pose this question already suggests a positional consciousness that such marginalization would deny. He situates himself in a postcolonial dialogue that views mainstream US culture as a dominating and imperializing force, engaging with a regional postcolonialism that resurfaces throughout Wallace’s work.

Though Bloemker recognizes his place within cultural power structures to some extent, his insistent question regards the voice of the region's inhabitants: "What are we to say about it?" Part of the project that Wallace begins in his first novel is to pose that question by giving the Midwestern perspective a nuanced and complex voice in the pages of literary fiction. The book explores a number of theoretical questions about the region and its inhabitants. It assesses the impacts of the land's manipulability, which result in the inhabitants' disconnect from their landscape and their desire for connection with landscape via wilderness. It suggests that large-scale land development is the only means inhabitants have of interacting with this landscape, which denies them personal agency or connection to the soil and thereby alienates them from the place. And yet, in this alienating and unspecific terrain, the text finds ways to bind Midwesterners to one another by the very position of occlusion typically ascribed to them. Lenore's sense of implacement grows out of her conversations about the Midwest with Mr. Bloemker. In a way, the regional view offered in *Broom* is an extreme version of a more generalized American detachment from land and environment and immersion in homogenized, tourism-based experience. The regional perspective in *Broom* provides a hypothetical rendering of place, showcasing the disorientation that accompanies each character's life and relationship to a place defined by continuously replicable postmodern terrain. This version of Wallace's Midwest functions as a symbol of American alienation from environment and as a warning against such detachment, and it is a representation that his future attention to the region will complicate.

II. “Not object but medium.”

Why the writing of to-day has to do with the way any land can lay when it is there particularly flat land. That is what makes land connected with the human mind only flat land a great deal of flat land is connected with the human mind and so America is connected with the human mind, I can say so but what I do is write it so.

Gertrude Stein *The Geographical History of America*

Close examination of the imagined Midwestern landscape in *The Broom of the System* reveals Wallace’s investment in this region from the beginning of his writing career. It illustrates how he uses depictions of the Midwest to allude metonymically to cultural analyses of the US as a whole. Even in the often theoretical, metafictional, aerially-viewed terms of *Broom*, something about Wallace’s specific understanding of the Midwest speaks for and to larger, defining national and historical qualities. The novel offers a Midwest viewed as an object for speculation at a distance, and as a place that unites its inhabitants in shared alienation from the land. As Wallace’s writing evolves over time, his vision of the Midwest sharpens and becomes more grounded and more multidimensional in its representation of particular localities and people within the region.

A regional approach to his writing begs the question: where does interest in the Midwest and in its symbolic valence originate for Wallace? Is it a question of personal connection or of literary inheritance? Many considerations of regional writers tend to take a region’s literature collectively, as the work of several figures. Think of the Southern Agrarians, or the New England Transcendentalists. It is harder to find a set of collective figures who represent the Midwest in literary history. There are the nineteenth-century “local colorists,” the Chicago Renaissance writers of the early twentieth, but no

comprehensive Midwestern vision readily emerges from these; the region tends to be left out entirely from critical works on literary regionalism.¹⁵ To call Wallace a Midwestern regionalist without referring to an established Midwestern tradition requires an assessment of his specific literary influences.

Examining an author's reading practices is perhaps the most direct way to analyze the question of influence. I spent several months reading through Wallace's archived personal library, a set of 300 annotated books, housed at the Harry Ransom Center. His marginalia shows a vested interest in the regional writing of Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Cormac McCarthy. Yet only one categorically Midwestern writer emerges from the library as a local influence: Michael Martone, a native Indianan and Wallace's somewhat older contemporary. In 1990, Wallace wrote a review of one of Martone's books, *Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List* (1990), for the *Harvard Book Review*. In it, he praises the book as an effective "study of the Midwest in all its self-conscious averageness, a place that understands itself as always origin and never end" and as achieving a "full and accurate evocation of Indiana as place."¹⁶ Wallace heralds Martone as a regional writer of the highest order, revealing for us some of his prejudices and preferences in the genre:

But the uncanniness of the landscapes' capture seems in this book to be more a spiritual than a technical achievement. Michael Martone (unlike the transplanted William Gass, who 'immortalized' Indiana while awaiting tenure at Purdue) is first and last a native, and he has made Indiana his own in a manner reminiscent

¹⁵ For example, see Edward L. Ayers *All Over the Map* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996); the book divides the US into "the North, South, and West" (3). Because the Midwest does not figure largely in many studies of literary regionalism, my source for regional criticism is Timothy Mahoney and Wendy Katz's *Regionalism and the Humanities* (2008), a collection that focuses on the Midwest and the Southwest.

¹⁶ David Foster Wallace "Fort Wayne is Seventh on Hitler's List." *Harvard Book Review* (no. 15/16, Winter-Spring 1990: 12-13), 13.

of Breece Pancake with West Virginia and Walker Percy with New Orleans. Here is an Indiana limned in offhand detail as environment and not setting. (*Fort Wayne* 13)

Environment and not setting. This key distinction situates place not as backdrop but as player, something with which characters engage and interact. If we are to take his response to *Fort Wayne* as a sign that Martone's writing was at least a constituent part of Wallace's literary consciousness, and at most a major influence in his writing about the Midwest, a reader can see the reviewer's own possible literary aims take shape. Perhaps he wants to be the Pancake or the Percy of his own semi-native central Illinois. He responds to the evocation of Indiana as a "spiritual" achievement, suggesting that writing about place connects to a deeper, possibly metaphysical function of literature. Another work of Martone's that had an impact on Wallace's writing is an essay called "The Flatness," which appears in a Midwestern anthology he edited, *A Place of Sense: Essays in Search of the Midwest* (1988). It's clear from Wallace's worn paperback copy that he read this essay many times over; the spine breaks on the essay's last page. The rest of the anthology shows only a few markings and underlinings, but Martone's essay has been gone over in three different colors of ink. Based on evidence of his reading practices throughout the library, this essay shows itself to be a likely huge influence on Wallace.¹⁷

The obvious other major Midwest connection at the base of Wallace's writing is personal connection. He grew up in Urbana, IL, but he claims that he came from a village called Philo.¹⁸ He moved with his parents to central Illinois as an infant and spent his

¹⁷ Martone and Wallace knew each other and eventually collaborated on a second Midwestern anthology called *Townships* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press), 1992.

¹⁸ Charles B. Harris, "David Foster Wallace's Hometown: A Correction" in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (51.3 185-186). Harris claims that Wallace's parents were bewildered by this

childhood there until heading to Amherst for college. Eventually, he returned to the region to teach writing and literature at Illinois State University in Normal. However much or little one chooses to make of biography, in discussions of regionalism the author's life and location are major contextualizing factors. Wallace wrote exactly one autobiographical piece on his childhood, first published in *Harper's* in 1991, and subsequently printed in *A Supposedly Fun Thing* as "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley." In this early essay, elements of the personal and the pastoral combine in ways that might seem unfamiliar in the context of his better-known writing. This is one of the few places in Wallace's body of work where he limits his focus not to some group or concept or institution, but to his own life experience—or to some creative version of that experience.

Ostensibly discussing his evolution as a tennis player and his coming of age, much of this essay describes his relationship with the landscape in which he grew up. Pausing on a detail reminiscent of the large-scale geoengineering projects that define *Broom's* Ohio, Wallace explains that the tennis courts where he practiced had been "carved from farmland that had been nitrogenized too often to farm anymore."¹⁹ He goes on to show how the tennis court forces him to recognize the interaction between natural and man-made systems in his immediate surroundings: "The same soil that's so full of humus farmers have to be bought off to keep markets unflooded keeps clay courts choked with jimson and thistle and volunteer corn, and it splits asphalt courts open with the

persistent lie, unsure why he would change his hometown. Before discovering the falsehood, I had always wondered why, writing of Philo, Wallace never mentioned the fact the town's water tower has the slogan "Center of the Universe" painted on it above the zip code; in terms of his larger mythologizing vision for the Midwest, this detail seems apropos.

¹⁹ David Foster Wallace, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 3. Hereafter referred to as "Derivative Sport" or "the tornado essay."

upward pressure of broadleaf weeds whose pioneer-stock seeds are unthwarted by a half-inch cover of sealant and stone” (“Derivative Sport” 7). The cracks in the asphalt courts, he observes, have “the eerie look of well-rivered sections of Illinois, seen from back aloft.” The particularity with which Wallace describes the weeds—calling each by name—is very similar to the opening of *The Pale King*, which I go into below. In the essay, the toggling back and forth between attention to the soil and the imagined view from on high show an individual trying to come to terms with the vast and highly systematized, manipulated land that surrounds him. The process of representing this region required that he get extremely close to its minutiae and alienate himself from it enough to see it from above, and also from alternate regional perspectives (especially the East Coast perspective).

His meticulous attention to the local soil, manifest in his ability to name the weeds that grow through the tennis court’s cracks, portrays an individual in tune with the particularities of his surroundings. A similar capacity to perceive the particularity of the mundane comes through here and throughout his work in a heightened awareness of weather. In the tornado essay, he focuses on the incredible wind that defines central Illinois. Through weather, as through local flora, place becomes a factor not just in his natural and spatial awareness, but in his diction. There are “more downstate sobriquets for kinds of wind than there are in Malamut for snow” (“Derivative Sport” 4). As *Broom’s* Lenore demonstrates in Wittgensteinian terms, language and vocabulary are the constitutive elements of a person’s worldview. While Lenore fears that she may well exist only in the language, permanently abstracted and ungrounded, the ties this essay

establishes between local external phenomena, inhabitant, and regional language offer a resolution to Lenore's solipsistic problem: describing external surroundings, learning the names of native plants and the words for wind, puts language in touch with geography, grounding it in a place and in its usage in that place.²⁰ Wallace's depiction of the relationship between wind and Midwestern citizen implies that the place requires of its citizens a steadfastness—the land leaves the individual exposed and unsheltered. Wind is a huge boon for Wallace's tennis game early on. He harnesses its powers rather than fighting against it, accepting its logic-defying presence on the court and attuning himself to it to improve his game. Here the awareness of landscape he describes is a form of discipline, a oneness with environment.

The ultimate wind phenomena, tornadoes, become central in the essay's second half. Wallace cites tornadoes as transfiguration. They are an extreme instance of the changeability or volatility of landscape. He attributes human emotion and mood to the weather, reciprocally uniting body and landscape. "Wind did massive damage to many Central Illinois junior players, particularly in the period from April to July when it needed lithium badly, tending to gust without pattern" ("Derivative Sport" 9). The weather is personified and given a mood disorder for which it needs medication; he goes on to refer to its "schizophrenic gales" ("Derivative Sport" 10). Tornadoes are for

²⁰ If and only if you are a nerd for language philosophy, you might find this corresponding Wittgenstein passage from *Philosophical Investigations* §122 pretty neat:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we don't have *an overview* of the use of our words,—Our grammar is deficient in surveyability. A surveyable representation produces precisely that kind of understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing *intermediate links*.

The concept of a surveyable representation is of fundamental significance for us. It characterizes the way we represent things, how we look at matters. (Is this a 'Weltanschauang'?)

Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009) 54^e-55^e.

Wallace the ultimate uncontrollable force: “They made no sense... Tornadoes are omnipotent and obey no law” (“Derivative Sport” 17). In this, tornadoes inspire in Wallace a kind of religious awe. As he says in response to *Fort Wayne*, “wind and soybeans, flat black land, schizoid temperatures, elms blighted by Dutch rot, tornadoes as religion” (*Fort Wayne* 13). Living in a state of constant vigilance, prepared at any time for the unfathomable, unpredictable force that a tornado represents, Wallace shows that individual awareness of and bond to landscape is itself an evolving, dynamic process; landscape is unfixed and unfixable. Tornadoes assert a vector-like force on the two-dimensional landscape, existing as an incalculable but real force in the mathematically conceived cartographical plane.²¹ By personifying and psychologizing the wind’s power, Wallace suggests the introduction of an affective, human element into the otherwise flat, Cartesian terrain.

The arbitrary, rigid grid that delineates the Midwest landscape infiltrates his mental map of the place and his physical awareness of his body within it, merging body, mind, and place. He describes the fields and gridded townships of his home as a board game, something akin to Monopoly or Life when viewed from above. He emphasizes the sense of a planned landscape, a place measured and plotted at right angles like coordinates on a graph: “My part of the Midwest always looked laid down special, as if planned” (“Tornado 6”). Much of his own mathematic interests he claims originated in this sense of his region’s geography. His description resonates with Martone’s assertion in the introduction to *Townships*, “We know the Midwest by this arbitrary and artificial

²¹ In his notes for *The Pale King*, Wallace cites the tornado as his structural inspiration for the text’s organization.

pattern that has been imposed on it" (*Townships* 13). Wallace not only recognizes his landscape by the superimposed pattern of gridded lines, but absorbs that grid into his own spatial awareness. "I found I felt best physically enwebbed in sharp angles, acute bisections, shaved corners. This was environmental. Philo, Illinois, is a cockeyed grid" ("Derivative Sport" 8). A key correlation comes through in the essay in the overlap of his physical relationship to landscape, his spatial orientation, and his intellectual pursuits. Wallace insists, in this essay and elsewhere, that this perceptual symbiosis is likewise physical, grounded in the body's immediate experience. The ingrained mathematical perspective will have a huge impact on the way Wallace structures his fiction, using fractals, vectors, and other planar geometric figures to conceive of his writing process. Claiming that the map of his home region infects and structures his consciousness, Wallace demonstrates that local features are a part of even his most abstract or theoretical ideas about the world. He reiterates and employs his own version of Frederic Jameson's "cognitive mapping"; deep awareness of and immersion in his immediate surroundings offer a solution to what Jameson terms "the alarming disjunction between the body and its built environment" (Jameson 83).²² Wallace's hyperawareness of his environment, both built and unbuilt, on the tennis court, enables him to function as a better tennis player. His ability to recognize the winds' effects help his game and it also shows a sense of identity formed in relation to the land and its features. While for Wallace the effect of this spatial awareness is isolating, improving his tennis game but alienating him from

²² This concept also connects to Wallace's use of the word "map" in his writing, which readers of *Infinite Jest* will recall refers to a person's face; as the face is a person's most singular and identifying physical feature, so the map is his or her particular spatial orientation. In *IJ*, to die is to be "de-mapped"—to have personal geography or specificity removed.

other players, Martone offers a more collective role to this imaginary mapping: “We are Midwesterners because we think ourselves into the map of the place without having to fit into the place itself. We relate to each other on that mathematical plane alone”

(*Townships* 14). By the end of this essay, the merging of map and body reaches comical fruition. He and his friend Antitoni are thrown against the back fence of the tennis court by unexpected tornadic gales. As a result, “we both got deep quadrangular lines impressed on our faces, torsos, legs’ fronts, from the fence, my sister said we looked like waffles” (“Derivative Sport” 20). This adolescent encounter with environment left the marks of the grid on his skin. Their bodies also left cartoonish impressions in the fence, indicating that the body/place relationship is reciprocal.

Throughout the essay, Wallace shows an uncanny and often metaphysical awareness of place. He calls himself “a citizen of the concrete physical world” in a way that distinguishes him from other tennis players. What does his particular investment in this landscape imply for his literary vision? The last paragraph of Martone’s “The Flatness” gets the most attention in the margins of Wallace’s copy. He underlines much of the closing section:

It was the Romantics of the last century who gave us mountains as something beautiful to see instead of as impediments to get over. From them too we have inherited ‘the view.’ I grew up in a landscape not often painted or photographed. The place is more like the materials of art itself—the stretched canvas and paper. The Midwestern landscape is abstract, and our response to the geology of the region might be similar to our response to the contemporary walls of paint in the museums. We are forced to live in our eyes, in the outposts of our consciousness, the borders of our being. Forget the heart. In the flatness, everywhere is surface. This landscape can never take us emotionally in the way smokey crags or crawling oceans can. We stare back at it. Beneath our skins, we begin to disassemble the mechanisms of how we feel. We begin to feel. (“Flatness” 33)

As I have shown in Wallace's essay, Martone likewise connects the Midwest landscape to individual consciousness, sensory perception, artistic material, and affective experience. Alongside Martone's characterization of the landscape as canvas, surface, and skin, Wallace has written the note "Not object but medium" ("Flatness" 33). Applying this idea of landscape as surface or canvas, the distinctly flat, blank Midwestern vista offers viewers/readers/imaginers a vessel to be filled and demands of them a confrontation with their own consciousness. Pausing on the word "medium" opens up further productive interpretations: the Latin root *medius* corresponds to both literal "middle" or "midst" and the more metaphorical "means." The landscape as medium could be said to function as a midway between extremes, as an intervening and transmitting substance or a mediator (medium in the spiritual sense) between individual and space, and thereby between individual and self. It can also be read as an enveloping substance, or the substance in which an organism lives or is cultured, which corresponds figuratively to one's environment/social setting. If the terrain is viewed as an artistic medium, the place offers the raw materials for its own exploration.²³ Wallace shares with Martone the idea that his landscape both allows and demands a high level of attention that not many give to it. Midwestern regionalism, both writers suggest, demands attention to a landscape that, in offering so little to look *at*, requires and enables one to see through, to locate the self, to ground in the self, to *feel* in a more present, aware manner. Rather than using the region to establish an other for outsiders to position themselves against, a function the region serves in *Broom of the System*, in this understanding the landscape's

²³ I am paraphrasing from the definitions in *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 6th ed., vol. 1 s.v. "medium", 1741.

desolation is what makes it the most inviting, the most applicable to the postmodern individual. The flatness welcomes.

The move both these essays make—from “actual” landscape to textual representation (via individual perception) back out to casting a new imaginary of the landscape—is at the heart of their regional intervention. Textual representation can position itself between the reader and the place, allowing a new cartography to emerge in the reader’s mind. This intervention is only possible because, as leading voice in *géocritique* Bertrand Westphal puts it, “There is no bright line between the real and the fictional.”²⁴ As his introduction carefully traces through the discourse of postmodernism, the recognition that all perspectives are equally real and that all representations are fictional, (a recognition that implies such an utterly heterogeneous view of the world as to make local or place studies seem irrelevant for place studies), in turn, and by way of a geocritical approach, enables a reconfiguration of place in literature and beyond it. Place, as Wallace’s note suggests, becomes malleable in the hands of the author, a material or canvas on which to create an alternative imagined cartography. In Wallace’s tornado essay, the text situates the reader in a literary topography that is itself part of an intertextual network with historical and political dimensions, and that literary topography comments on and alters the recognizable space of their world.²⁵ Investment in place grants the text literary purchase on the world outside the text.

²⁴ Bertrand Westphal *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* trans. Robert J. Tally, Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 4. This sure seems like a basic assumption Wallace could get behind.

²⁵ “Topography”’s Greek roots are worth considering: *τόπος topos*, “place”, and *γράφω graphō*, “write.”

Because the Midwestern landscape doesn't offer the vistas traditionally associated with natural beauty—as Cronon describes, “Most of us, I suspect, still follow the conventions of the romantic sublime in finding the mountaintop more glorious than the plains, the ancient forest nobler than the grasslands, the mighty canyon more inspiring than the humble marsh” (86)—it demands a rethinking of what nature is and how human beings relate to it. Both essays insist that built environment is every bit as impactful on the individual and worthy of evocation as traditionally natural or wild elements. A basic way to explain the extreme version of this rethinking that Martone and Wallace offer in their evocations of the Midwest is that nature, or wilderness, or the contact with the sublime those two constructs imply, is present and available in one's immediate environment if one can only be aware of it. They expand their definition of nature to include the features evident in their landscapes: farmland, industrial blight, sprawl, federal highways, &c. For both writers, landscape includes manmade elements and evidence of destruction. Awareness of environment cannot be contained in a frame that sees nature as only that untouched by human influence, or human culture as not also continuous with nature. Like Wallace's experience with the tornado that sent him hurtling into a metal fence, forces of nature and manmade components are equally relevant in their impact on mind, body, and textual map.

Put another way: to see Augé's non-places, the highways and strip malls and convenience stores and car dealerships, for the humanity that persists within them, to see the farmland used and reused and to recognize that regardless of change this is “very old land” (*PK 5*) and to see it for all the transformations it's endured, and then to recognize

one's own place within it—this is, perhaps, the way to redemption through landscape in the late twentieth-century US. This is a way of embedding singular identity and human relations into non-places, despite Augé's assertion that they create only "solitude and similitude" (Augé 103). Reading **place** in this way redeems the individual's position in it, making her singularly, specifically grounded, mappable in a global context, and connected to others via the place's shared representation (in text and common language). The text offers a way to specify non-places, to implace them, to grant them unique mythologies.

III. “understood in terms of distance”

The distance at which we see each other, arrange each other, love. That love, he will say, is a federal highway, lines putting communities, that move and exist at great distance, in touch. My husband has stated publicly that America, too, his own America, that he loves enough to conceal deaths for, is to be understood in terms of distance.

David Foster Wallace “Lyndon”

If *Broom of the System* considers the theoretical effects of overdeveloped, changeable landscape on its inhabitants, and if “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley” shows the impact of Wallace’s home regional landscape on his physical person and mental map, “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” his *Rolling Stone* essay immediately following the attacks of September 11th, 2001, attempts to develop the relationship between inhabitants of the Midwest and the rest of the world. He makes a key presumption here (and elsewhere) about his implied audience—they do not have the same perspective as the average Midwesterner. The lens through which he watches the events unfold in Mrs. Thompson’s living room is used as a conscious alternative to the mainstream angle. Wallace confers the collective voice to a group of older women who have gathered at Mrs. Thompson’s to watch televised news footage. Of course, he takes pains to make no claim that this group is representative of the region or even the community. But he invites readers to consider this group’s perspective in a moment of international crisis and shows their allegiance to national concerns despite the implication that their voice is one that doesn’t often get heard or offered in dominant strains of media.

By situating this group of people as a “them” of which he is not a part, Wallace also underscores an important aspect of his regional consciousness: felt alienation from that region. Using Mrs. Thompson’s living room and a semi-rural Illinois setting,

Wallace addresses the global political situation from a grounded local position and demonstrates that all global consciousness is necessarily local. He situates himself on the page as a mediator between the cultural center and periphery, and in the process shows what he will come to call a less cynical, more innocent response to national tragedy. He avoids an essentializing collective narrative by taking all the precautions of a trained ethnographer—by recording the region’s vocabulary, by observing its customs and taking part in them—and he does so at a moment that begs for a sense of union among Americans.

By the time Wallace enters Mrs. Thompson’s living room on 9/11, ten years have passed since his self-and-region-mythologizing essay on tennis and tornadoes came out. In those ten years, Wallace publishes his massive novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996), a collection of short stories, and essays on a wide swath of topics, including “A Ticket to the Fair” (1994) wherein he spends several days exploring the Illinois State Fair on assignment for *Harper’s*. He returns to live in Illinois and teaches at Illinois State University. “Mrs. Thompson’s” opens with the phrase, “In true Midwest fashion,” establishing the narrator’s insider/outsider position immediately—he knows Bloomingtonians well enough to articulate their ways for the reader. He makes a number of general observations about the place, presenting the basics of Midwestern social temperament, lawn-care passion, and the impact of a landscape defined by oceanic fields of corn and soybeans: “You can also hear the wind in the cornfields just south; it sounds the way light surf sounds when you’re two dunes back from it” (“Mrs. T’s” 92). From his land-locked position on the ground, he offers coastal readers an oceanside analogy for immersion in

cornfields. After situating the reader in the place and its habits, he moves indoors to discuss his neighbors' television-watching habits. It is important to note that, in each of these descriptions, while Wallace is careful to situate himself as a bit of an outsider, he isn't mocking the people he describes or belittling them. The fact that they are his neighbors and fellow church members is important to keep in mind. He maintains a sense of regional authority, translating the local idiom and offering East and West coast referents for distinctly Midwestern phenomena, but he also aligns himself with the Midwestern perspective, showing that he is, albeit ambivalently, one of these people.

One particularly Midwestern activity the Bloomingtonians engage in is getting together to watch television. Wallace participates in this pastime. Because he does not have a TV of his own, members of his church welcome him into their homes to watch TV "in the same instinctive way they'd bend to lend a hand if you tripped in the street" ("Mrs. T's" 95). On 9/11 (which he refers to in the essay as "the Horror"), he goes to Mrs. Thompson's house for just that reason and finds a group already gathered around the screen. Wallace notes that television has a major impact on how these individuals understand the world outside their community: "Something that's obvious but still crucial to keep in mind re: Bloomington and the Horror is that reality—any felt sense of a larger world—is televisual. New York's skyline, for instance, is as recognizable here as anyplace else, but what it's recognizable from is TV" ("Mrs. T's" 95). Wallace points out an element of contemporary culture that he returns to throughout his writing: the dominance of the televisual. The world they know, the world he knows, the world we know is image first. Because their imagined map of New York comes from the skyline

they've seen on TV, Wallace has to intervene to explain the location of the World Trade towers within the city. He calls this geographic clarification "pretty much the only good I do all day" ("Mrs. T's" 132). For the women at Mrs. Thompson's, awareness of the global comes through television.

Wallace's writing often explicitly examines television's effects on Americans' perception of the world. His much-cited essay on television and contemporary writing, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," has a relatively privileged position in Wallace criticism; it is used to an (at times reductive) extent as some kind of "key" to his work. Remaining skeptical of the oversimplifications of his project for American fiction that come out of critical readings of this essay, I find his analysis of television's effects on media consumption relevant and applicable. In it, he writes, "Americans seemed no longer united so much by common beliefs as by common images: what binds us became what we stand witness to" (*Unibus* 42). "The View from Mrs. Thompson's" suggests a similar bond between Wallace's readers and the women in Mrs. Thompson's living room. Global consciousness is filtered through national media and television levels access to it. At the same time, Midwesterners offer, in Wallace's depiction, an awareness of and subtle resistance to the televisual culture that immerses them. Their regional dialect, which he describes as not "Southern but simply rural," is audible, whereas he notes that in their view, "corporate transplants," i.e. State Farm workers in Bloomington, "sound like the folks on TV" ("Mrs. T's" 93). This suggests a certain perceived distance between Midwesterners and the dominant culture they absorb through television. In

distinguishing their own mode of speaking from what they hear on TV, they maintain a sense of regional identity.

Wallace's texts consistently record Midwest dialect. Documenting the way language is used in a specific place both serves to preserve that language and to show how one's linguistic constructs and specific idiom shape one's worldview. In Mrs. Thompson's, he mentions that "The native term for a conversation is *visit*" ("Mrs. T's 95). The term "visit" connotes ceremony, suggesting that human-to-human interaction has perhaps a more recognized importance than casual conversation in this local usage. He uses a small distinction on the level of language to say something much bigger about how people interact with one another and understand human interaction in different places. While in this essay he positions himself as a translator of the dialect, in *The Pale King*, the dialect becomes the text's native tongue, forcing the reader to learn it and comprehend it for themselves, much the way regional writers traditionally have. "E Unibus Pluram" suggests that televisual culture homogenizes human connection via access to shared images. "Mrs. Thompson's" acknowledges this flattening effect of broadcast television, while offering regional difference as a site of resistance to the dominant culture.

Television poses a problem to the way regional writing is traditionally understood, especially when it comes to the Midwest. The fact is, televisual culture equalizes access to a certain knowledge of the world. If everyone in the country sees the same things on TV, absorbs the same imaginary, what difference does location make to global understanding? The Midwest is a difficult region to evoke in the postmodern era

because the vague traditional literary image it has is of a place provincialized, marginalized, outside and without access to some mainstream culture. And yet, in a televisual age, as Wallace shows, no one is really provincialized. At the same time, everyone is similarly marginalized, as Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become a silent majority. (de Certeau xvii)

Every person shares in their absorption of news media, images, and vocabulary. And on a day like September 11th, just about everyone is watching the exact same footage, over and over. Viewers can distinguish themselves from one another in how they *use* the images they absorb, a distinction that the essay's conclusion makes central.²⁶ Wallace depicts this alternate use of national media in such a way that he and his reader to engage directly with another perspective.

In their introduction to *Regionalism and the Humanities*, Wendy Katz and Timothy Mahoney explain that regionalism persists because a highly attuned local perspective works the “productive tension between general and specific, cosmopolitan and provincial, global and local, national and regional, the homogenous and the distinctive, and even modernism (or postmodernism) and the ‘backward.’”²⁷ The particularity of regional writing offers a means of what they term “mapping the human

²⁶ What de Certeau calls “the art of using” (xv) or “ways of reappropriating the product-system, ways created by consumers, [that] have as their goal a therapeutics for deteriorating social relations” (xxiv).

²⁷ Wendy J. Katz and Timothy R. Mahoney, eds. *Regionalism and the Humanities* (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press, 2008) xx.

condition.” Relying on his knowledge of and connection to the region as much as on his alienation and perceived distance from it, Wallace finds in Mrs. Thompson’s living room a sense of community and human connection bound up in an alternate and deeply personal form of national identity and loyalty. Katz and Mahoney situate the regional Midwest at the center of a postcolonial argument that dates back to Frederick Jackson Turner, a controversial voice in regional studies:

Because Turner sought to establish an interaction between regional or sectional stories and national ones (a process-oriented approach some construe as antiregional), his impulse was to put place—the land, climate, topography, region—and its diversity back into a history governed by a spaceless national politics. This asymmetric model understands regionalism as a form of dependence on already-existing national norms, in which a place is recognized as a region precisely because of its deviance from standards that are themselves created elsewhere—usually in eastern urban milieus that control the national market for publishing, capital, art—and so can and do equate their own region with the nation. (*Regionalism* xv).

This approach to region emphasizes both the particularity of a given place and its situatedness in larger national systems of media, market, and politics. While Turner’s “sectional” theory seems to employ the kind of nationalizing agenda Dainotto finds most troubling in regionalist criticism, this passage shows how regional and national identities are at once distinct and inextricably intertwined. Katz and Mahoney show the importance of emphasizing a region’s relationships to other regions and to the nation. Wallace’s connection to and felt alienation from the group gathered in Mrs. Thompson’s living room serves a similar function—showing the region from within, and showing how it is perceived from without. In each of his representations of the region, he engages this duality of perspective. The point of view has a literal, spatial echo in his insistence on offering both aerial and grounded views of the Midwest in his early works; “Mrs.

Thompson's" third section is titled, "Aerial & Ground Views." The essay offers what Ginette Aley calls "internal representation" of the Midwest and situates it as simultaneously immersed in and deviant from national norms (*Regionalism* xvi).

The postcolonial lens offers another way to interpret the position of the Midwest in "The View from Mrs. Thompson's." As Edward Watts explains in "The Midwest as a Colony: Transnational Regionalism," a historical understanding of regions as colonies exposes some of the power relationships that contribute to surviving stereotypes of the provincial. He situates the postcolonial argument in the work of a mid-century historian: "In *Planting Cornbelt Culture* (1953), Richard Lyle Power used 'Yankee Cultural Imperialism' to describe the deliberate effort of New England culture to reign over the non-Anglo, non-Protestant, and noncommercial agriculturally oriented folks they found in Indiana" (Watts 170). Wallace subtly and consistently engages with this East Coast imperialist concept in his writing set in the Midwest. He repeatedly contrasts Midwestern behaviors and idioms with their East or West Coast alternatives. Some examples from "Mrs. Thompson's" include: "By New York standards folks keep to themselves"; "TV's more social here than on the East Coast"; each morning, Bloomingtonians who stay at home watch morning shows like *Today* "that broadcast (it goes without saying) from New York"; Mrs. Thompson's is "a home that on the West Coast would be called a bungalow and on the south side of Bloomington is simply called a house" ("Mrs. T's" 95). He made similar comparisons in his other work, insisting in the tornado essay that the New England breeze he felt at Amherst was "pussified" in comparison with the Midwest wind he knew; the attitude there is defensive, a little childish, but also in touch

with a culturally imagined Midwest quality of hardscrabble endurance. In his Illinois State Fair piece, he frequently mentions the “swanky East Coast” magazine that sent him to write the story, emphasizing the disconnect between the magazine’s world of publishers and readers, the author, and the subject. By pitting coastal mentality and motivation against that of his home region, and by consistently asserting a consciousness of—empathy for—the Midwestern view, he suggests an “understanding of the Midwest as a colony—or at least as a region subject to many of the same asymmetries and misrepresentations typical of colonial experience,” and while recognizing it, he attempts to subvert that perspective (Watts 170). Watts explains the legacy of this regional power dynamic:

Postcolonial cultures assume a former (if not perpetual) condition of marginality, of being behind or peripheral, in comparison to the imperial home... The identifications of the Midwest's relation to the nation as colonial in particular draws attention to the asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relation of the region to the nation, since region connotes difference based on geographical space rather than on cultural coercions and imbalances. (Watts 171-172)

In this view, the East Coast vs. Midwest antagonisms and misperceptions, even the subtle ones, can be understood as holdovers from a colonial era.²⁸ Wallace traces this thread in *Broom of the System* and in “Tornadoes,” but in “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” it is his central focus. The point of view Wallace wanted to offer his readers on 9/11 is one that he clearly assumes they understand little about, marginalized as it is said to be. He is at pains throughout the essay to bring this place and its inhabitants to life in full specificity and complexity, and also to retain an awareness of the alterity the essay

²⁸ Michael Martone does something really amazing with this concept without ever naming it in his introduction to *Townships*, where he describes the attitude of one Thomas Jefferson, who had never set foot in the Midwest, imperially blocking the entire region out in the grid that still exists today, and naming each square from afar.

presents. His position in the piece, his voice, beseeches the reader to reassess her understanding of what constitutes the nation that was just attacked in New York. And to recognize that even in a postcolonial moment, place remains definitive, structurally contingent, and even limiting to worldview. To present a regional perspective is a literary effort often/traditionally associated with the provincial, as in the nineteenth century's "local color fiction." While regional writers in the twentieth century had to fight against this misperception of locally grounded writing, Watts' analysis suggests that regional focus on the Midwest is doubly marginalized, doubly provincialized, doubly stigmatized. Again and again, Wallace takes the place that is characterized by lack, by indistinction, flatness, middleness, and makes it unique, building a regional imaginary via deep engagement with the actual place, and asserting it as a locale equally valid as more culturally central, i.e. East and West coast, perspectives.

The difficult part of "Mrs. Thompson's" is the sense, pervasive throughout but most explicit at the essay's end, that Wallace is and isn't one of the people he observes. He spends the first part of the piece trying to locate a flag so that he won't be making a statement by not having one out post-9/11, and suggests that his lawn-care regimen isn't exactly up to par for the neighborhood, drawing some deprecating looks. But when he enters Mrs. Thompson's home, the reader sees him as welcome and a part of this community. He helped Mrs. T's son remove the door from its hinges to bring in the couch. He knows local custom well enough to remove his shoes once inside: "it's basic common courtesy" ("Mrs. T's 132). And yet, after watching the news footage and

listening to the frantic phone calls east all morning, his sense of belonging in the group begins to wane:

This is the beginning of the vague but progressive feeling of alienation from these good people that builds throughout the part of the Horror where people flee rubble and dust. These ladies are not stupid, or ignorant...What the Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a bizarre absence of cynicism in the room...Nobody's edgy or sophisticated enough to lodge the sick and obvious po-mo complaint: We've Seen This Before. Instead what they do is all sit together and feel really bad, and pray. Nobody does anything as nauseous as try to make everybody all pray together or pray aloud or anything, but you can tell what they're doing. ("Mrs. Thompson's" 133)

In this moment, taking his position as an outsider, Wallace offers the response of the "innocent" ladies to the events as an alternative to his own reaction and to the one he presumes of his audience. He suggests that there is something about their response worth paying attention to, and that their response is due at least in part to where they're from and what their community consists in. By finding a way to marginalize themselves, situating themselves outside the world of televisual image and yet still inscribing themselves in a concept of nationality, they are able to do something other than compare the event to images and past events. I don't want to say that Wallace's essay marginalizes them, though, or serves only to reinforce extant stereotypes about the "innocent" (read: naïve) Midwestern perspective. Rather, he shows the ways in which zooming in on a local perspective in this moment of global crisis reveals the interconnectivity of global systems and exposes the persistence of forms of personal connection that globalization doesn't account for. The Bloomingtonians he describes nearly all have personal ties to the military, via loved ones or friends in the service or who have served. When he asks his neighbor why he put out a flag after 9/11, the neighbor says that it's "to show our support

and empathy in terms of what's going on, as Americans" ("Mrs. T's" 93). In the essay, it is narrator-Wallace, and his friend, Mrs. T's son F--, and "poor old loathsome Duane," who are outsiders, who do not participate in the national narrative. The essay suggests a different way to participate in national culture that is grounded by local perspective, that rejects totalizing televisuality, that finds a way for inhabitants to be not just *consumers* of American identity, but citizens of an American nation.²⁹ Each member of the group responds to the tragedy personally, individually, "according to his or her relative abilities" in tears and in prayer. And their responses encourage Wallace to formulate prayers of his own to alter the twisted inhumanity he ascribes to Bush—he prays, "that he's actually far smarter and more substantial than you believe, not just some weird soulless golem or nexus of interests dressed up in a suit, but a statesman of courage and probity" ("Mrs. T's" 133). By offering this alternative response to global events, the essay presents another way to conceive of national identity and the individual's relation to it, a remapping of national connection via empathy. The grounded regional perspective Mrs. Thompson's Bloomington living room affords provides readers access to a community bound by place and invested in national community.

²⁹ He develops this concept—what it means to be a US citizen, a citizen of a democracy—further in his essay following John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign on the "Straight Talk Express."

IV. “What Is Peoria For?”

The greatest single fact about our American writing is our writers' absorption in every last detail of this American world, together with their deep and subtle alienation from it.

Alfred Kazin *On Native Grounds*

Each of the aspects of Midwest regional environment I've addressed so far—the simultaneous alienation from and embeddedness in a highly volatile landscape, the potential for an individual to construct a physical and mental map via awareness of even blank-seeming surroundings through representation, and the way local emphasis forces a reevaluation of the region and readers' placement in national and global systems—come together in Wallace's most sustained treatment of the region, his final book, *The Pale King*. The structural, personal, and political threads of cartography I've traced in the earlier texts show an evolution in thinking about place in literature that arrives at his most regionally-defined style. By looking closely at these early texts, I offer a basis for the so-called shift that takes him in reviewers' eyes from metafictionist stunt pilot to unironic comparisons with Yoknapatawpha county's creator. The regional emphasis is continuous with and constituent of even his most stylistically metafictional work. *The Pale King* foregrounds the regionalist bent for the reader by mimicking and reformulating familiar stylistic and structural tropes from well-known American regional writers.

Posthumously organized and published, *The Pale King* offers a culmination of Wallace's interest and investment in regionalism and in the Midwest. The book's working title was “What Is Peoria For?” He sets the story in Peoria, IL, at what he terms a Regional Examination Center for the IRS. After major restructuring, the IRS has recently entered what is called in the book the “era of Region,” a moment when the

decentralized Service has been “partially re-centralized” (PK 329).³⁰ Each of the book’s main characters works at the Center, and most hail from some small town or city (or in-between version of this, as I’ll explain below), in the Midwest. As Wallace explores each character’s individual background, other parts of the Midwest are developed in detail: Lane Dean, Jr’s lakeside village, Toni Ware’s myriad trailer parks and her daughter’s Anthony, IL, the character David Wallace’s Philo, IL, Chris Fogle’s upper bourgeois Libertyville and commuter relationship with Chicago, and so on. Wallace paints each of these sections of the fictional region in detail, highlighting the class differences between the service workers at the REC. Drawing on the specificity that emerges in each of his earlier portraits of the region, the Midwest in *The Pale King* is more heterogeneously, less monolithically rendered. As Aley describes it, attentive representation allows the region to be present in its full multidimensionality (Aley 97). I see the Midwest regional vision emerge most fully realized in this work; the text revolves around a symbiotic and inextricably bound system of individuals and their landscape, both built and unbuilt. More a set of linked stories than a novel per se, the text draws its characters together to form a community not unlike Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg or Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. And the metaphysical relationship between people and place at the book’s heart resonates with the admired Percy’s New Orleans and Pancake’s Rock Camp.

Part of Wallace’s task in *The Pale King*, and, in its light, throughout his oeuvre, is to mythologize his place of origin. Here, the subliminal tie between landscape and body

³⁰ It’s important to note that the author has invented and named this component of the IRS; there is no “Regional Examination Center” in Peoria, but Wallace’s own regional examination begins in this central Illinois community.

that he explores in “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley,” a deeply fictionalized piece of autobiography, comes through in passages of *The Pale King* that are predominantly pastoral.³¹ The book’s opening section demonstrates the mappable bond between landscape, body, and text that Wallace imagined in that early essay. Rather than using first person pronouns to capture an individual experience, this section uses pronouns that encompass the second person (you) into the first person plural (we), enacting a communal experience, both on the page and off it by obliging the reader to see as the narrator sees:

Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lamb’s quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spine-cabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother’s soft hand on your cheek. An arrow of starlings fired from the windbreak’s thatch. The glitter of dew that stays where it is and steams all day. A sunflower, four more, one bowed, and horses in the distance standing rigid and still as toys. All nodding. Electric sounds of insects at their business. Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers.

Some crows come overhead then, three or four, not a murder, on the wing, silent with intent, corn-bound for the pasture’s wire beyond which one horse smells at the other’s behind, the lead horse’s tail obligingly lifted. Your shoes’ brand incised in the dew. An alfalfa breeze. Socks’ burrs. Dry scratching inside a culvert. Rusted wire and tilted posts more a symbol of restraint than a fence per se. NO HUNTING. The shush of the interstate off past the windbreak. The pasture’s crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get at the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by

³¹ It is worth mentioning that Wallace’s explorations of region and regionality often coincide with crossing the line between fiction and autobiography; in §9, “Author’s Foreword,” character David Wallace insists that the entire text of the *Pale King* is his memoir, including those sections that describe characters other than himself. The “Foreword” is a kind of extension of the tornado essay, in that it tells a detailed story of the character/author’s past that is based in fact, but almost wholly falsified. Focusing on a real place allows him to set the reader up to engage with the content as factual.

the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite touches tail. Read these. (PK 3-4)

The book opens by directly addressing a person immersed in the regional landscape, standing in a field, observing the plant and animal life going on around her. It is unclear which character this describes—the fact is, it could just as easily be one as another. It could be anyone. The non-descriptness of the subject invites the reader to participate in the experience. The style is some of Wallace’s most lyrical and lushly descriptive, giving over fully to the nostalgia that regional writing is prone to, and yet not seeming to inflate or idealize any aspect. In this scene and in other pastoral moments, the stylization verges on the parodic. He is describing a landscape that doesn’t typically get imagined in such detail on the pages of literary fiction or in most mainstream culture.

The passage incorporates the incongruent layers that comprise the place, its plant life and rusted skyline, the electricity of insects and the “shush” of the interstate. The scene captures D. W. Meinig’s claim in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* that, “Life must be lived amidst that which was made before. Every landscape is an accumulation.”³² The national and commercial touch down when the readers’ shoes’ brand imprints itself in the dew, branding the land itself. The fence’s rusted wire is a remnant of Peoria’s industrial heyday as the nation’s largest producer of barbed wire, further integrating systems of industry and commerce into the landscape. The passage addresses these effects of human influence—the barbed wire, the shoe imprint—in what feels like geological time, a perspective reaching back into the past and down into the

³² D. W. Meinig, editor, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: geographical essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 44.

earth. This symbiosis of the present with the past and the local with the global are important elements of literary regionalism. The human and the earthly merge and coexist in this passage in all their incongruity and reciprocal effects. The place's history of violent development, agricultural, industrial, and human, is exposed and recognized, but still accepted as environment. The pastoral mode *includes* visible human impact as constituent of the scene, rather than as a sign of this particular nature's destruction. Gone is the sense in *Broom's* Ohio that contemplation of one's environment requires the installation of a new wilderness; here, the wilderness is the immediate.

The opening chapter literalizes the notion of merging text and landscape from the tornado essay. The worms in the earth form words, which the reader is prompted to read; by embedding the imperative to "read" in the text the reader is reading, the practice of reading turns outward, out from the text. Now, the reader is called upon to read and recognize signs in her own immediate surroundings. Attention to the text and to the body's environment are both implied—the imperative instruction to read that comes at the end of the opening section places emphasis on the physical, present practice of reading. The text implants itself between the reader and her immediate experience, between the reader and her understanding of the represented place, between the reader and her default setting. The pastoral mode recurs throughout the text, especially in sections dealing with Claude Sylvanshine (whose name evokes the pastoral), Lane Dean, Jr., and Toni Ware and her daughter. Many reviewers cite these as the most memorable

passages of the book.³³ At the same time, the interior of a van, interstate sprawl, institutional hallways, windowless offices, the IRS building itself—each of these is described with as much lyricism, as much detail. The human or built environment is treated as every bit as valid a literary subject as the “natural” setting. By evoking the specificity of this region in the opening passage, naming the weeds, outlining the place’s geological history, describing the activity of insects and other very small things, down to the person’s feet and shoes in contact with the earth, *The Pale King* brings the place to literary life. Through attention to the minutiae, the seemingly insignificant details, the text demonstrates how zooming in on the local addresses one’s embeddedness in far-reaching systems of industry, transit, agriculture, weather, even geology. And in so doing, it offers a representation of the Midwest that changes the reader’s mental map of the place and sense of its detail and specificity. This world is alive.

Some of the book’s most evocative treatments of Midwestern landscapes are the sections that delve deeply into a particular character’s background. The text shifts between the present moment at the REC and the individual pasts of each of the employees who work there. §6 of *The Pale King* is one that many reviewers cite when categorizing Wallace as a regional writer. First published as “Good People,” a stand-alone story in the February 5, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, the story is a scene from service member Lane Dean, Jr’s adolescence, in which he and his girlfriend, Sheri Fisher, discuss her unplanned pregnancy. The title of the *New Yorker* version implies an intertextual conversation with Southern regionalist Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country

³³ See Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times*; Tom McCarthy in *The New York Times*; Jonathan Raban in *The New York Review of Books*; and John Jeremiah Sullivan in *GQ*, among quite a few others.

People” (1955), a story that deals with similar themes—coming of age, loss of virginity, crises of faith, and recognition of evil.³⁴ Wallace’s story, set in the rural Midwest but with the provincializing modifier “Country” removed from its title, suggests a more encompassing, inclusive view of its characters. The title doesn’t marginalize them. The scene the story sets is in a small town, on a fragrant, lush springtime afternoon by a lake. A recent storm has felled and uprooted several trees in the vicinity. Lane and Sheri sit on a picnic table while a man in a suit stands at the water’s edge, unmoving. The third-person narration occupies Lane’s consciousness, indicating that he is responsible for the sharply observed scene.

Lane muses on his personal struggles, considering himself a hypocrite at war with himself, feeling utterly detached from Sheri, who sits beside him. His distant reverie comes to an abrupt close when he engages his attention with his surroundings: “When he moved his head, the part of the lake farther out flashed with sun; the water up close wasn’t black now and you could see that all the water was moving but gently, this way and that, and in this same way he besought to return to himself as Sheri moved her leg and started to turn beside him” (*PK* 41). Lane’s state of awareness in this scene is extremely vigilant—he perceives the movement of the sun and its warmth, which registers as the passage of time; he identifies various smells and their implications (honeysuckle and lilac are almost too evocative of the springtime, Sheri’s clean smell that makes him trust her and care deeply for her). He takes in each layer of the scene. He is hyperaware and in tune with his surroundings, and it is via that awareness, the section’s

³⁴ A story that had an impact on Wallace as a reader; his copy is covered in marginal comments and underlining in several colors of felt tip ink.

end suggests, that he is able to coax himself into imagining Sheri's position. Taking her perspective, as he understands it, he readies himself to respond in a deeply empathetic way to her news that she cannot go through with the abortion. Environmental awareness is linked to empathy, as though consciousness of physical surroundings goes hand in hand with consciousness of other humans' unique perspectives. Lane is one of several characters whose background narrative shows how attention to regional landscape carries argumentative weight in *The Pale King*.

Another character whose back-story is especially marked by the stylized, regional voice is Toni Ware. In fact, most of Ware and her daughter's sections take place in the past. Ware's first section begins with the impulse to map: the path to their trailer takes us "under" the "THINK FARM SAFETY" sign, "through" the entrance, "down" the street, "past" the rottweiler, "hairpin right and then hard left," to "where the copse leaves off at a tangent past the end of the undeveloped cul-de-sac" (PK 53-54). It is strange to locate so specifically a place that is defined by its indistinction and ephemerality. The reader soon learns that the dominant perspective in this section is that of Ware's daughter, who obsessively maps the random movements that define her and her mother's lives. Mobility characterizes this Midwest origin myth, wherein the daughter is aware that she was, "Begat in one car and born in another. Creeping up in dreams to see her own conceiving" (PK 59). She describes her life as, "Routes on maps that yield no sensible shape when traced" (PK 54). The daughter wields a battered road atlas against the randomness of her mobile upbringing, wherein over her Peoria, her mother's "place of origin lay a spore of dried mucus spindled through with a red thread of blood" (PK 55). Trying to make sense

of her attachment to place, trying to ground her identity in place, via its representation on a map, Ware's daughter has to confront a grotesque merging of the body with the place in the physical emblem of her mother's disgust for Peoria. The daughter herself was born in a nearby town that "bore her own name"³⁵; "The daughter's daughter drew circles within circles about her own given name on the map and the arteries leading thereto" (*PK* 58).

The mapping impulse here can be read as Jamesonian. Without a clear map of her origins and location, she finds herself desiring but unable to locate herself, to find an emplacement that allows for stable identity. For this reason, she is a reader—of places, of maps, of signs, of books—and it is only via deep, close reading of her constantly shifting surroundings and the resources they present her that she can survive and protect herself and her mother. "The girl made it her business to read signs and know the facts of her own history past and present" (*PK* 58). Her awareness of her environment is what empowers her. While the book's opening passage shows how such an awareness can ground a individual in collective systems, and while Lane's section shows how such an awareness can offer access to interpersonal empathy, young Ware's reading of her environment grants her individual identity and personal history.

A late scene in which her mother, Toni Ware enters the "QUIK 'N' EZ" convenience store, (which coincides with the "hideous" convenience store of the same name in "Mrs. Thompson's"), comments on another feature of regional writing that *The Pale King* engages throughout. Local dialect emerges in conversation and via the infiltration of individual voice in narration, showcasing the spoils of Wallace's many

³⁵ Notes in the *Pale King* archive suggest that her name is Peoria, but the book says she was born in Anthony, IL; her name is likely Peoria or some version of Anthony, like her mother's.

years of dedicated research and recording. He has an entire spiral notebook in his archive at the Ransom Center devoted to capturing “Midwesternisms,” pages upon pages that list overheard turns of phrase. The notebook’s back cover is a list of character names, many of which appear in *The Pale King*, indicating that the dialect-recording went on at the same time as the development of characters for this book. Midwesternisms also appear inside the covers of many books in his personal library. The impulse to document this language seems obsessive. As I discussed in “Mrs. Thompson’s” and in the tornado essay, translating the local idiom is a priority in Wallace’s nonfiction. He serves as a mediating figure, offering East and West coast equivalents of Midwestern phrases for his readers. In *The Pale King*, dialect functions a bit differently. Here, rather than offering translations, he situates both dialogue and exposition in a decidedly Midwestern voice. There are subtle shifts to reflect the variety of linguistic experience across the region, but the text enacts a consistent and continuous linguistic immersion for the reader. In her conversation with the clerk at the QUICK ‘N’ EZ, Toni Ware mimics the local dialect to ingratiate herself to her audience. This inspires her to reflect on speech patterns and local specificity. The clerk comments on the wind (stereotypically Midwestern discussion of weather abounds in this book in a way that is in no way accidental). “‘Like to blow me right off the road comin’ in,’ Toni said. The counter woman seemed unaware that Toni Ware was affecting the exact accent and cadence of her own speech. The assumption that everyone else is like you. That you are the world. The disease of consumer capitalism. The complacent solipsism” (PK 514). The glimpse this offers the reader into Ware’s mindset, irritated by the clerk’s ignorance and self-centeredness, points to a bigger

question about representing this particular local accent on the page. By immersing the reader in this voice, the text demands confrontation with linguistic difference and creates a tension that is productive; it does not mimic conventional usage in order to appeal to the reader, as Ware does with hostile insincerity to the clerk. Instead, it expects you to engage with and learn the dialect as you read (in much the same way reading a Faulkner novel requires the reader to actually learn a language). The use of dialect in this book is one of the most obvious signals of literary regionalism, a signal many early reviewers were quick to notice.

John Jeremiah Sullivan, in his May 2011 *GQ* review of the *The Pale King*, “Too Much Information,” is among the first to call Wallace a regional writer and to align his regional perspective with his linguistic perspective. He writes:

His voice was regional in more than one sense—the fastidiousness about usage, for instance. Only midwesterners will waste time over the grammar of small talk with you; nowhere else, when you ask, “Can I get an iced tea?” does anyone ever say, “I don’t know...*can* you?” And Wallace did think of himself as in some ways a regional writer—else he’d never have let the über-author photographer Marion Ettlinger take the well-known trench-coat-lion shot of him smiling wryly beside a waving cornfield. He knew that he came, as he said in the essay he read that night, from a landscape “whose emptiness is both physical and spiritual.” The very “maximalism” of his style, which his detractors claimed to find self-indulgent, suggests an environment with space to fill. (Sullivan)³⁶

Sullivan brings together several threads of regionalism here, starting with the use of dialect and attention to grammar that he cites as Midwestern, and ending on a point that resonates with the Martonian view of Midwest landscape as blank, empty, and therefore fillable. This also evokes the connection between land and text I found in Wallace’s

³⁶ John Jeremiah Sullivan, Review: “*The Pale King*: Too Much Information.” *GQ* (May 2011).

tornado essay. Sullivan himself, a contemporary of Wallace hailing from Indiana but laying claim to a Southern heritage, offers a unique and ambivalent perspective on Midwest regional identity in his Fall 2010 *Paris Review* essay on Southern agrarian writer Andrew Lytle, “Mr. Lytle”: “I was under the tragic spell of the South, which you’ve either felt or haven’t. In my case it was acute because, having grown up in Indiana with a Yankee father, a child exile from Kentucky roots of which I was overly proud, I’d long been aware of a nowhere-ness to my life. Others wouldn’t have sensed it, wouldn’t have minded. I felt it as a physical ache. Finally I was somewhere, there.”³⁷ In this quote, he participates in a twentieth-century literary habit of proclaiming ambivalence toward and denying connection to one’s Midwest origin.³⁸ Whatever the regional equivalent of expatriation is, many writers from the Midwest have made it a tradition. Sullivan’s complex relationship with his own Midwestern roots makes his identification of Wallace as a regionalist all the more intriguing. Without a clear Midwest regional trajectory in literary history to embed Wallace in, what is Sullivan saying by calling him a regionalist? The embrace of “nowhere-ness,” and of the indistinction and “physical and spiritual” ache of emptiness that accompanies it, is the requisite for writing from the Midwest regional perspective—to embrace the region as a writer is to be ambivalent toward it, both on the page and off.

This regional quality, complex and ambivalent relationship to the Midwestern landscape, is represented in *The Pale King* not just in tragic and ordinary Midwestern

³⁷ John Jeremiah Sullivan, *Pulphed* (New York: FSG, 2010), 59-60.

³⁸ You see the same practice in the modernists we tend to lump together as “expatriates”: Fitzgerald (St. Paul, MA), Hemingway (Oak Park, IL), Eliot (St. Louis, MO), Pound (Hailey, ID), and to an extent in Stein (Allegheny, PA), among many others. In the process of denying Midwest heritage/identity, they had to leave the country.

back-stories or in the highly mobile lifestyle of Toni Ware and her daughter. The experience of the non-midwesterner is an important component in developing the region's alienating effect. Claude Sylvanshine is cast early on as an outsider to the region and arrives in the text and in Peoria via Consolidated Thrust Regional airlines. He immediately experiences the landscape as an overwhelming monotony, and his internal monologue about the place captures some of the meat of this book's argument about how to overcome boredom. By shifting his perspective between aerial and grounded views as he looks at the traffic from above, Sylvanshine enacts the type of empathetic cognitive mapping that Wallace develops in part in his earlier works. Sylvanshine's narration requires the reader to share in his multiple perspectives:

The interstate highway below disappeared and then sometimes reappeared at a spot Sylvanshine had to squash his cheek right up against the plastic inner window to see, then as the rain recommenced and he could tell they were beginning descent it reappeared in the window's center, light traffic crawling with a futile pointless pathos you could never sense on the ground. What if it felt as slow to actually drive as it looked from this perspective? It would be like trying to run under water. The whole ball game was perspective, filtering, the choice of perception's objects. Sylvanshine tried to envision the small plane as seen from the ground, a cruciform shape against the old-bathwater color of the cloud cover, its light blinking complexly in the rain. He imagined rain on his face. It was light, a West Virginia rain; he hadn't heard one unit of thunder. (PK 15)

Here, the ability to map one's position from multiple points of view intersects with *The Pale King's* larger argument about how to endure boredom and monotony. By taking the time to pay close attention and see the plane as from the ground, he accesses a memory and a physical sensation that allows him to view the plane and the traffic with a comprehensive awareness that the people of East Corinth in *Broom* never had. Sylvanshine's ability to see these other perspectives comes through in his narration often

at random; he is a “fact psychic” and is intermittently pelted with discrete pieces of data about the world around him. He finds this data overwhelming and distracting, but to the reader it allows a version of widened attention to one’s immediate surroundings. As the plane lands and the ground view comes into sharper focus, Sylvanshine sees not just a parking lot full of cars, but “Each car not only parked by a different human individual but conceived, designed, assembled from parts each one of which was designed and made, transported, sold, financed, purchased, and insured by human individuals, each with life stories and self-concepts that all fit together into a larger pattern of facts” (*PK* 16).

Whether he wants to or not, he is aware of the deep interconnectedness of each aspect of his experience. What seems like superfluous data to him appears to be a key to locating the self. “Tastes a Hostess cupcake. Knows where it was made; knows who ran the machine that sprayed a light coating of chocolate frosting on top; knows that person’s weight, shoe size, bowling average, American Legion career batting average; knows the dimensions of the room that person is in right now. Overwhelming” (*PK* 121). In an environment that precludes specificity, locality, particularity, when there is nothing to see but traffic, when there is nothing to eat but national brand snack foods, when all you’ve got to go on is a Hostess cupcake, Sylvanshine shows (perhaps not cognizantly) how to use nothingness as a means to be more (rather than less/not at all) attentive to global systems and your own immersion in them.

Just as Sylvanshine finds himself overwhelmed by the data he has to incorporate into his mental understanding of each situation, so the logistics of preparing for his exam, arriving in Peoria, and starting his new job leave him swimming in unprocessable data.

When Lane Dean found himself in a similar situation, overwhelmed by the moral implications of his thoughts, he focused on the lake to bring him back to an awareness of his place in the present moment. Here, Sylvanshine stands on the tarmac, having just disembarked, and seeks a similar grounding through immersion in the landscape:

the whole thing presenting such a cyclone of logistical problems and complexities that Sylvanshine was forced to do some Thought Stopping right there on the wet tarmac surrounded by restive breathers, turning 360° several times and trying to merge his own awareness with the panoramic vista, which except for airport-related items was uniformly featureless and old-coin gray and so remarkably flat that it was as if the earth here had been stamped on with some cosmic boot, visibility in all directions limited only by the horizon, which was the same general color and texture as the sky and created the specular impression of being in the center of some huge and stagnant body of water, an oceanic impression so literally obliterating that Sylvanshine was cast or propelled back in on himself and felt again the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror and Disqualification pass over him, the knowledge of his being surely and direly ill-suited for whatever lay ahead, and of its being only a matter of time before this fact emerged and was made manifest to all those present in the moment that Sylvanshine finally, and forever, lost it. (*PK* 24)

This is Sylvanshine's first interaction with the regional landscape. The sense of obliteration that he feels when he stares out at the "featureless" terrain is akin to the "constant bombardment, the monotonous feel of feeling" Martone identifies in the abstract, blank Midwestern landscape ("The Flatness" 33). While Sylvanshine experiences this confrontation as a negative one, bringing to the surface the most fearful parts of his consciousness, the fact remains that the "oceanic impression" that the sameness of this landscape provides puts an individual in tune with/forces a recognition of his own insignificance. In a way, we can see this as the inversion of the typical response to *horror vacui*, the fear empty spaces inspire.³⁹ Sylvanshine's confrontation

³⁹ Edward Casey has an extended treatment of *horror vacui* in *Getting Back Into Place*.

with the empty-seeming vastness helps him to stay momentarily the onslaught of data that infiltrates his mental space and thereby confront his deep-seated feeling of insecurity. Self-recognition is another function of landscape in the text, in addition to the other forms of grounding I've explored in sections describing reader, Lane Dean, and Toni Ware's daughter. This consciousness, accessible only through confrontation with the blank, the monotonous, the dull, is explicated in other sections of the book. Michiko Kakutani's *New York Times* review effectively combines two of these moments to show how this monotony works in the text: “‘dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there’ [PK 85] namely the existential knowledge ‘that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we've lost one more day that will never come back’ [PK 143].”⁴⁰ In this scene with Sylvanshine, the two concepts Kakutani picks out are brought together via an individual's confrontation with regional landscape—the terrain is both too dull to distract from psychic pain, and vast enough to confirm one's insignificance “at the mercy of large forces.” *The Pale King* uses this particular landscape, one largely associated with the dull, to connect to a more transformative property of boredom, and to offer characters and readers an imagined vista that forces confrontation with the self. The end of the second part of the quote compares this dismal feeling to “the way I feel at dusk on a wintry Sunday,” reiterating the connection between a person's immediate surroundings and this type of powerful self-recognition.

⁴⁰ Michiko Kakutani “Maximized Revenue, Minimized Existence” *The New York Times* March 31, 2011.

The book treats the problem of boredom, so a landscape that would otherwise seem blank is a fitting setting. It seems almost posed as a challenge to writer and reader alike: how can this characteristically dull place be rendered compellingly in all its dullness? The challenge is similar to one we saw Wallace take up in his earlier work, that of making Augé's non-places—interstates, tennis courts—habitable.⁴¹ Despite the inconsequentiality and institutionality of the book's setting, the text focuses extensively on situating this place and detailing its history. Much of the specific geography and history of Peoria appears in tiny font in footnotes throughout sections narrated by "David Wallace." These are the sections that seem to be closest to a caricature of the hypertextual, metafictional style attributed to Wallace; several of the sections begin, "Author here." The subject matter's apparent insignificance is reflected in its demotion to the level of the footnote throughout, requiring that the reader either adjust her gaze and attention level to focus on the fine print, or risk skipping it. Because the notes tend to comprise the bulk of character-Wallace's sections, they indicate that, as the end of the Author's Foreword has it, "There may, though, I opine, be more to it . . . as in vastly more, right before us all, hidden by virtue of its size" (*PK* 85). Size works on two levels here, referring both to the large mass of information and to the tiny insignificance it represents. The terrain comprised by text on the page mirrors the geography it describes.

The Regional Examination Center is located in an incongruously named and situated place called Lake James, "something between a suburb and an independent township of metropolitan Peoria" (*PK* 256). Surrounding communities include, "Peoria

⁴¹ This process reflects de Certeau's idea about reading as an act of intervention; the reader's mutation of a text whilst reading "makes the text habitable" (xxi).

Heights, Bartonville, Sicklied Ore, Eunice, &c”—the third of which emphasizes the diseased state of this landscape—and each of these occupies a place of ambivalence, both official and perceived, between the urban and the rural (*PK* 256). “The whole separate-but-attached-district thing had to do with the city’s inexorable expansion and encroachment into the rich agricultural land around it, which over time brought certain small, formerly isolated farming communities into Peoria’s orbit” (*PK* 256). The history of development merges rural into urban and forces confrontation between the two. The Bloomington that appears in “Mrs. Thompson’s” has a similarly complex overlap between rural community and city, which creates a disconnect between farmers and State Farm workers. The disconnect in Peoria is between farmers and IRS service members. Lake James has an ambiguous location, given that its physical position doesn’t match its postal address, which shows an instability and ambivalence of human situation in landscape that goes back to *Broom*.

Another resonance with Wallace’s first novel is Lake James’ defining feature: “The really relevant, representative thing about Lake James as a township is that it has no lake. There is, in fact, a body of water called Lake James, but as a practical matter it’s more of a large fetid pond, choked with algae from ag-runoff, a good dozen miles northwest of Lake James proper” (*PK* 257). This characterization of Lake James is similar to the descriptions of Lake Erie that Rick Vigorous complained about in *Broom of the System*. But the key component is that the town is distinguished by its lack of a distinguishing feature. Not only do residents of Lake James have an address that does not correspond to their location, but their town is named for a body of water that it doesn’t

even contain. This incongruity and ambivalence of naming and locating their place, in other words its unmappability, is what opens the place to descriptions like Martone's of the Midwest as canvas. It doesn't offer its own coherent narrative or image with which a resident or reader can engage. It doesn't properly position or distinguish itself.

While a lot of textual real estate in *The Pale King* is devoted to describing and explicating the particularities of the region, narrator-Wallace undermines the lengthy descriptions by attesting that the details are irrelevant: "In other words, incongruities like these are complex and puzzling but not really all that important unless you're invested in the geographical minutiae of Peoria (the possibility of which I have decided I can safely presume is remote)" (*PK* 257 n. 2). At the same time, the main text in the sections character-Wallace narrates makes it quite clear that these "minutiae," this fine print is more valuable than you might presume. "I learned, in my time with the Service, something about dullness, information, and irrelevant complexity. About negotiating boredom as one would a terrain, its levels and forests and endless wastes" (*PK* 85). As boredom is a terrain to navigate, so the Midwest replicates the function of boredom in the text; again, mental state/inner experience is made manifest in the external environment, and vice versa. Like Sylvanshine awash in the vast emptiness of his first glimpse of rural Illinois, the reader of *The Pale King* is called on to pay close enough attention to the description of boredom to actually experience and effectively navigate it.

The Pale King shifts back and forth between extensive descriptions of Peoria and the tax center and the individual histories of the characters who inhabit these spaces. The text is invested in the personal dimension of place that Wallace explored in "Derivative

Sport”; it situates itself between individual and landscape to show the way they interact and influence one another. Each character, even those that seem minor, gets a Midwestern back story (a discrete short story, really) replete with such detailed narration that it makes that character a protagonist in his or her own right, embedded in a specific time and place. When the cast comes together in the present, the mass of drone-like service workers is seen for all the separate individuals’ stories it contains. Each character is a main character in the context of his or her place, and thus each of the minor-seeming characters at the REC is elevated to hero status. Each one becomes the “ordinary man,” “common hero,” and “ubiquitous character” to whom Michel de Certeau dedicates *The Practice of Everyday Life* (de Certeau i). The regional perspective allows access to ordinary experience, the average life, the localized quotidian, re-envisioning its centrality and shared qualities. Origin myths dominate the text, and these myths are what make later scenes at the REC come alive, despite the bland, homogenizing, dehumanizing effects of the job and work environment. In the later sections, the text doesn’t even need dialogue tags—the backgrounds make each adult character distinctly recognizable. As Kakutani explains it, “Sometimes it feels like a hallucinatory variation on Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, giving the reader a choral portrait of a Midwestern community — though in this case, that community is not a town, but the I.R.S. Regional Examination Center in Peoria, Ill., in 1985” (Kakutani). “Choral” is a particularly apt term, resonating with de Certeau’s turn “to the chorus of secondary characters”; and like linked story collections (a common regionalist genre), *The Pale King* evokes the collective via dwelling in a variety of individuals’ voices and experiences in a shared place.

For Wallace, individual character is deeply connected to evocation of landscape in regional writing. As he puts it in his praising review of Martone's *Fort Wayne*, "It is its fidelity to character and expression, its integrity as an act of witness, that makes Martone's collection the great book I'm pretty sure it is. Its medium is, finally, less the projected image of an era or the emotional cartography of a region than it is the timeless theme of people in circumstances. Martone's people are unique and 3-D and worthwhile not only because of their studied normalcy or their brushes with fame, but because they're drawn with the animating care which sheer talent can confer. They have life breathed into them; their author has given them and us a good gift" ("*Fort Wayne*" 13). The "act of witness" that is *The Pale King* demands the reader witness the place and its people in their fullest expression; it is at once the "projected image of an era" and "the emotional cartography of a region," and the literary placement of "people in circumstances," and it is the first two that bring the last to life. The acutely observed time and place, the detail and attention paid to even the most banal and repetitive elements of the landscape, render Wallace's characters "unique and 3-D and worthwhile" in a way that showcases the other crucial functions of this text: to convey the interaction between individual and landscape, and to demonstrate how a shared landscape and region serves to bring people together and to facilitate outsiders' understanding of a place and its collective people.

Having read Wallace's literary representations, when we think of the Midwest now, we still think of nothing. But it is a productive nothing, a peopled nothing; reading his texts embeds a generative, creative, resistant human force in the flatness. It's a

flatness that both binds and engenders distance between the reader and the region, between the reader and the text, between the reader and herself, and via that closeness and distance enables confrontation and empathy. The map Wallace sketches in *Broom*, identifies with in “Derivative Sport,” and populates and situates in “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s” is here most fully imagined, figuratively encompassing the full size and complexity of the place it represents. By depicting the Midwestern U.S. in the late twentieth century, the texts create a regional narrative that reaches beyond the page and grant readers a means of situating themselves, grounding themselves in their immediate surroundings, and thereby remaining human in the most obliterating of scenes and systems. Examining Wallace’s oeuvre through the imagined cartography of the Midwest offers an alternate, regionally grounded way of reading his texts that imbues the metafictional with the pastoral; his attention to the concrete particularities of local environment gives readers a means to locate themselves both in their immediate surroundings and within regional, national, and global networks. By reimagining and filling a regional space perceived to be empty, these texts enable the reader to render postmodernity’s flatness habitable.

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