

truly national scope that will stand as a useful model for future studies of higher education. At three hundred pages (not counting the notes and index), the book is perhaps overlong, at least compared to other similar, contemporary monographs, and could have benefited from judicious trimming. Ris at times spends too much time explaining where the book is headed: the phrase “I will describe” appears frequently. Such interventions can be helpful, but this reviewer would’ve appreciated more showing and less telling. One could even see a leaner version of *Other People’s Colleges*, a book that has much to say about our current educational moment, finding an audience outside of the academy. These minor stylistic gripes aside, this is a smart, well-argued book that should interest scholars of higher education, the Progressive Era, and American political development.

The Midwestern Screen and the Anthropological Gaze

Halvorson, Britt E., and Joshua O. Reno. *Imagining the Heartland: White Supremacy and the American Midwest*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. xiii + 218 pp. \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0520387614.

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Imagining the Heartland, a collaboration between anthropologists Britt E. Halvorson and Joshua Reno, seeks to reveal the ways in which whiteness, settler colonialism, and virtue combine to reveal something sinister in the American experience. What this slim volume lacks in heft and depth, Halvorson and Reno attempt to make up for in intellectual sophistication. Employing the tools of post-structuralist humanists, Halvorson and Reno have produced a volume that their friends and family might eagerly display. Most scholars who have studied the Midwest, particularly its history since the 1880s, however, will find *Imagining the Heartland* a polemic hard on argument, thin on evidence, and thick with pretention.

The authors’ main contention is that the Midwest “has operated as a screen or stage on which to articulate whiteness and virtue, or white virtue through non-virtuous whites, across different time periods in US history” (4). Thereafter, in chapters that examine literature, film, and other forms of cultural production, the authors explore themes of belonging and exclusion. They make trenchant points throughout. They also intersperse reflections by each author, regularly taking down the wall that might otherwise separate

expert from audience in a way that might attract some readers. Their points about the ways in which many Americans whitewash the past are instructive and fit squarely within the revisionist trends of academia.

Scholars and residents of the Midwest should look critically at the role the region has played in American mythology. Scholars also need to be attuned to the flipside of those narratives: the stories that Midwesterners use to describe themselves. Upon these assertions Halvorson and Reno would agree. To the extent that *Imagining the Heartland* encourages a public to engage with works such as James Shortridge's classic *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* or Kristin L. Hoganson's *Heartland: An American History*, it will be a success. An ambitious agenda and shrewd intelligence, however, do not paper over a book that is cavalier in scope and methodology.

One of the chief shortcomings of the book is that the means of cultural production it analyzes are all passive: books are written, movies are produced, and media is consumed. Adding agency to these processes, which might come through careful work in archives, newspapers, or oral histories, is not something that interests Halvorson and Reno. In the place of such practices, Halvorson and Reno apply their anthropological methodologies. Such methodologies do not necessarily translate into the type of study historians would willingly embrace, precisely because of that lack of agency. If the success of a book is correlated to the number of certain academic buzzwords, then this will surely win awards. "Trope" appears over 65 times in the 164 pages of text; "banal" appears 14 times (suggesting, at the very least, that lovers of irony will have something to savor).

Halvorson and Reno hope that their book will "help readers to see themselves in what we write about" (6). It is precisely because they set their bar so high that their efforts seem so misplaced. The most revealing disconnect between the authors and the region about which they seek to explain occurs in one of the individual reflections, which finds Reno perplexed that residents of rural parts of Michigan might follow Detroit's professional hockey or basketball teams, even when otherwise distancing themselves from the city. Even worse, he found, are "people who never went to college, let alone the University of Michigan, [who] rooted for the Ann Arbor-based Wolverines, particularly against hated Ohio State" (90). The author may be hinting at nuances of Midwestern life with his observation, but rather than viewing these examples as potential bridges, he treats them as gulfs that separate.

In contemplating the significance of this missed opportunity, one is reminded of the intellectual historian Merle Curti, a Nebraska native most associated with his long tenure at the University of Wisconsin. In "Intellectuals and Other People," his response to Richard Hofstadter's influential essay, "Democracy and Anti-Intellectualism in America," Curti chided his colleagues for deprecating their fellow citizens. Quoting transcendentalist Theodore Parker, Curti admonished his audience to "think with the sage and saint, but talk with the common man."¹ If, as scholars, we hope to understand our subjects with greater insight and empathy, we might be wise to heed Parker's call and deploy more inclusive language in the twenty-first century.

¹Merle Curti, "Intellectuals and Other People," *American Historical Review* 60 (January 1955), 281.