Geographies of (In)Justice: Radical Regionalism in the American Midwest, 1930-1950

A dissertation presented

by

Brent Garrett Griffin

to
The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of
English

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
April, 2015
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In the decades bracketing World War II, a group of Midwestern radical writers promoted a new form of radical literary expression—proletarian regionalism—both to counter burgeoning right-wing extremism in the United States and to renew a spirit of grass-roots democracy, egalitarianism and place-based working class action. For Meridel Le Sueur, Jack Conroy, Nelson Algren, and Mari Sandoz, four of the most regionally conscious and committed writers of the period and the focus of “Geographies of (In)Justice,” proletarian regionalism was a vehicle for interpreting localized social, economic, and environmental injustices and for making connections between these places and larger-scale processes of capitalist accumulation. By tracing regional discourses through a broad range of forms, including social realism, little magazines, conference presentations, fictional autobiography, and political allegory, this recuperative literary history demonstrates that proletarian regionalism appropriated many forms in an attempt to interpret and represent an affective geography of capitalism and capture the socio-spatial experiences of people struggling to live and work in the region. Arguing that Midwestern proletarian regionalism presents a counter-narrative to the still-dominant view of regionalism as inherently conservative and backward looking, this dissertation continues work by scholars such as Michael C. Steiner, who have begun to recover a “woefully neglected tradition” of left-leaning regionalism, and puts this tradition in conversation with recent theories in cultural geography (3).

Ultimately, “Geographies of (In)Justice” is an attempt to revise our understanding of these writers’ contributions to radical literature and reinvigorate a Marxist analysis of regionalism as a form of social critique and cultural analysis. The central claim of this
dissertation is that proletarian regionalism maps and interprets the complex geographies of capitalism and involves readers emotionally in the experiences of being situated within marginalized and often neglected places. By reading this body of literature alongside cultural geography, this research offers a better understanding of how regional writing can be understood as a vital representational strategy for imagining a broad geography of empathy and unity among socially responsible readers, and, as such, can be a force of progressive social action.
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were fast asleep every night when he returned home, to help me, a then twenty-seven-year-old escape the drudgery of factory work—a drudgery that, unfortunately, race, language, immigration status and age precluded him from escaping. In many ways, without Enrique’s insistence that I take advantage of my privilege, I never would have made it out of the factory let alone to Boston to pursue graduate work. Enrique, I owe your more than you could ever truly know.

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INTRODUCTION: Placing Proletarian Regionalism, the Midwest, and the U.S. Literary Left: A Brief Cultural History

In October 1934, at the national conference of the John Reed clubs in Chicago, Phillip Rahv, an influential literary critic and co-founder of the Communist Party’s literary and political journal *Partisan Review*, reproached a group of Midwestern radicals for their insistence that regionalism could be a force of progressive social transformation.¹ Meridel Le Sueur, a target of Rahv’s vitriol, was also in attendance at the time and recalls Rahv’s stinging claim that there was no such thing as radical or progressive regionalism. Rahv was voicing a general disdain that many leftist academic critics in New York had for what they referred to pejoratively as “hinterland literature.” New York intellectuals such argued that “hinterland,” Midwestern literary radicalism, was marred by a “vulgar populism” and it romanticized images of the farmer. Ideologically, it ran counter to the Communist Party’s demands for revolutionary change. Rahv claimed that “the farmer was already a capitalist, [and so]…there’s no use writing about the farmer…he didn’t love the land—that was just romanticism” (qtd. in Wixson 380). To Le Sueur and other Midwestern Radicals in attendance, Rahv’s attack on regionalism was infuriating. Midwestern radical regionalists asserted that they were not merely concerned with producing representations of farmers or rural landscapes, but rather with representing proletarian sentiments and experiences in a broad range of rural and urban places. Moreover, Rahv’s dismissal ignored the regional roots of the old Grangers and Populists and Nonpartisan Leaguers, of the IWW and

¹ Named after the iconic American journalist and co-founder of the Communist Party, USA, the John Reed Clubs were a federation of American literary and intellectual groups created to cultivate left-wing literary and intellectual activity in the United States. Its program was based on the Proletcult in the Soviet Union. See Eric Homberger’s “Proletarian Literature and the John Reed Clubs, 1929-1935.” *Journal of American Studies* 13.2 (1979): 221-44.
a whole history of Midwestern farmers’ revolts against economic injustices, and seemed to run
counter to the New York cultural left’s larger goal of initiating class struggle on a broad scale.
Midwestern radicals argued that literature sensitive to regional difference was not only
compatible with the left’s larger project of social and cultural transformation, but that it crucial
for such change to occur. As Constance Rourke argued, “Even if revolution starts in a tenth-
floor loft in New York or in the textile mills of a Southern village or plant on the River Rouge, a
knowledge of these regional differences would seem essential for the enterprise of initiating the
class struggle on any broad scale” (qtd. in Denning 133). Yet, when Rahv repudiated regionalism
at the John Reed Club conference in 1934, it became clear that a kind of cultural imperialism was
taking place in New York as influential editors and critics like Rahv worked “to shift the basis of
radical literary production to the control of an intelligentsia, through critical selection and
ideological ‘purity’” (Wixson 398). In an effort to maintain cultural hegemony, the New York
cultural left deliberately hindered a burgeoning regional movement and contributed powerfully
to the neglect of a significant intellectual tradition.

At the time Rahv made this statement, left-wing regionalists formed a loosely-knit group
of writers, many geographically located in the Midwestern United States and known to one
another primarily through personal correspondence and publication in small literary magazines,
most notably Jack Conroy’s Anvil and Dale Kramer’s Hinterland.² To these regionalists, the
Midwest was especially primed for revolutionary activity, in part because of the region’s deeply-
rooted traditions of socialism, populism, and radical labor unions. By 1934—the year of the
general strikes—intense labor conflicts across the region pointed toward the increasing militancy

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² The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature identifies the region as being comprised of twelve states: Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota. This definition is based on Frederick Jackson Turner’s, put forth in The Frontier in American History, and is considered the prevailing definition “in many cultural, historical, if not economic and geographical, studies” (1, 11).
and solidarity of the working class. In February, The American Workers Party helped organize the Auto-Lite Strike in Toledo which culminated in a crowd of 10,000 strikers and supporters clashing with police and strikebreakers in what came to be called “the battle of Toledo”; in June, eleven hundred workers went on strike against the General Tire and Rubber Company in Akron, initiating the first organized “sit down” tactic; in May, the Minneapolis Teamsters’ Strike organized somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 truckers and brought trucking traffic in the city to a halt for over a month. Police-initiated violence resulted in the death of two strikers and the wounding of sixty-seven, most of whom had been shot in the back. The funerals that followed drew tens of thousands of outraged strike supporters to the city; in July, employees of the Kohler Manufacturing Plant in Sheboygan, Wisconsin organized a general strike after their employer refused to bargain with them. This strike, too, garnered much popular support especially after deputies clashed violently with picketers, killing two and wounding over forty. Radical unionism in Missouri had a long tradition, especially in St. Louis, and by the mid 1930s, a strong, community-based unionism was developing to contest the political economy at local and regional levels. Throughout Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska and the Dakotas, farmers were rallying behind the militant Farm Holiday Movement, which introduced the strategy of the penny auction, and the Communist-led United Farmers League. And the Industrial Workers of the


5 In “Who Were These Farmer Radicals,” historian Kim Nielson argues that the Farm Holiday Movement was the most important farmers’ organization during the Great Depression: “Organized by Milo Reno of Iowa and Minnesotan John H. Bosch, the national group set the goal of uniting farmers in refusing to buy household and farm goods, sell commodities or pay taxes until they received a fair rate—called cost of production—for their labor” (271). See also, William C. Pratt, “Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s.” Great Plains Quarterly 8.3 (1988): 131-44.
World continued to develop a significant following in the region, especially among migrant workers in Nebraska and the Dakotas.

The development of agrarian radicalism and militant unionism throughout the region seemed to suggest the increasing power of the working class in the region. Yet, at the same time, unemployment was rising, and many Midwesterners found themselves out of work, with no where to go and little to do. This “enforced idleness,” Douglas Wixson notes, “produced writers and provided them with subjects drawn from their experiences and immediate surroundings” (174). Midwestern literary radicals, like Dale Kramer, Jack Conroy and Meridel Le Sueur cultivated this renewed spirit of revolt and encouraged farmers and laborers, employed and unemployed, to express themselves through writing as a means of social protest. At the American Writers’ Congress, a year after Rahv made his statements at the John Reed Clubs Conference, Meridel Le Sueur championed the Midwest as the foundation for a new, progressive regional culture:

We have never, in the Middle West, had ease or an indigenous culture. We have been starved since our birth. The exploiting class has not even made a culture for itself….An integral part of the Middle Western immediate experience is a quick adjustment, during danger, between the farmer, the industrial worker, the writer, the artist. They are forming a steady and quick phalanx on the prairie. Now we know where to put down our roots, that have never been put down, that have been waiting through a bad season….We, of the petty bourgeoisie and the working class, have been dissenters, individual madmen, anarchists against the machine; but now the Middle Western mind is finding a place, sensing a new and vigorous interrelation between himself and others. (“Proletarian” 138)
Here Le Sueur gestures toward the disjointed history of the region, which, unlike the other major regions of the country, appeared to lack an “enduring myth…a regional culture, or a regional psyche” (Greasley 11). Le Sueur, however, emphasizes the openness and viability of the region to create a culture entirely anew. Its geographical location gave it a reality and an identity; its history of progressive politics gave it a psyche. These were bold and ambitious claims, to be sure. However, Le Sueur was not alone in her belief that such a culture could emerge from the proletarian sentiments and revolutionary impulses developing in the region. As Wixson notes, by the middle of the decade a “coalition of midwestern [sic] radicals were intent on [this] realization” (359).

The Midwestern radicals interpreted the “new” revolutionary culture burgeoning in the region to be crucial for contesting regional injustices to the land and the people occupying it and for effecting broader-scale social change. The centrality of the region to national issues of economic and social justice was not only based on the material reality of Midwesterners’ experience; it also stemmed from a particularly positive idea of the Midwest as the center of America’s “core values—honesty, hard work, openness, and belief in the spirituality of life—values that people across America consider increasingly central and important to America’s meaning and its prospects for the future” (Greasley 2). This positive image occupied a significant place in the imagination of many Americans at mid-century (and still does for many today). As cultural geographer James Shortridge notes of the early twentieth-century, “Midwesterners were commonly perceived as sturdy, dependable yeoman farmers—strong, independent, and confident in their ability, realistic in nature, and possessed of the best in

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6 The designation of the region as the “Middle West” occurred late in the nineteenth-century. Prior to that it evolved from the “Old Northwest,” to the “West,” to the “Old West” and then to the “great interior region” before becoming the “Middle West.” The designation “Midwest” is synonymous with “Middle West,” and was first made by Frederick Jackson Turner in *The Frontier in American History* (1920).
youthful vigor along with the insight, experience, and dependability of maturity” (8). This view has gained currency overtime, making the Midwest, as geographer Brian Page writes, “our quintessential pastoral setting, a verdant land of rolling corn fields, distant silos, and family farmsteads where people work hard and care for their neighbors” (376). Such images can be traced back to the stories of early pioneers taming a wild, and at times, seemingly inhospitable frontier, with the aim of advancing American civilization and extending American democracy. And this was the view that Le Sueur and other Midwest radicals sought to exploit by championing the Midwest as the “center of American dreams and democracy” (Gelfant 326). Philip Greasley explains the connection between the region and the kind of American dreams of progress and success that Le Sueur is referring to:

Many of the myths created by an evolving Midwest contributed to a growing American myth. These have their foundations in complementary faiths. The open society has made possible the most endurable Midwestern myth, that of the possibility of change, at the center of which is the brooding figure of Abraham Lincoln. In Jeffersonian terms, there is no artificial aristocracy in the Midwest, and one may succeed, as did Lincoln, in one generation. The ‘log cabin to White House’ journey is an achievable reality, the ‘self-made man’ is an object of respect, and humble origins are virtually mandatory to a successful political career. One can go from ‘rags to riches,’ and the pantheon of Midwestern folk heroes is replete with such imagery. Tinkerers become industrialists, as personified by Edison, Ford, and the Wright brothers. Practical merchants become financial barons—perhaps even robber barons—as did Rockefeller, McCormick, and Marshall Field; the military heroes become political leaders—Jackson, Taylor, Grant, Eisenhower. (13)
However, the Midwest has been a paradoxical place since its inception: “to some, the Middle West is a place of idealism and democratic temperament but to others it is bland, materialistic, conservative” (Shortridge 2). Moreover, many people viewing the region from the outside, like Rahv, saw the Midwest as a “‘hinterland,’ an unsophisticated, provincial locale remote from America’s intellectual capital, centers of government and culture” (Greasley 3). That the region was neither entirely rural nor entirely urbanized contributed to an uncertain identity that has “plagued the Middle West throughout much of its history” (Shortridge 2).

Though it embodies a seemingly contradictory set of values and identities (e.g. self-sufficiency and rugged individualism versus communal dependency and cooperation, rural versus urban, regional farmer versus industrial worker) by the mid-twentieth century, the region was taking on the identity of America’s “Heartland.” As the “heartland,” the region “functioned as the status quo by which American history and culture was measured, and while it never always lived up to these ideals the fact that it was placed in this position is significant in understanding the Midwest’s function in regard to national definition” (Kosiba 35). In the 1930s and 1940s, the Midwest played an important role during a time of national crisis as touchstone for notions of both a homogeneous, conservative national culture and a distinctly progressive Midwestern culture that could guide America to positive social and cultural change. In building a movement of writers sensitive to issues of regional identity and experience, the Midwestern radicals were actively working to shape how Midwesterners saw themselves, regional culture, and how the rest of the United States would come to understand its “heartland.”

This project of defining and shaping regional identities and affiliations through literary production was not new to the Midwestern radicals of the 1930s and 1940s. They were, of course, drawing upon and continuing a distinct regional tradition of writing which contributed to
definitions of Midwestern identity and experiences. By the mid-nineteenth century, a literary culture was developing in the Midwest, as evidenced by the publication of two anthologies, William Gallagher’s *Selections from the Poetical Literature of the West* (1841) and William T. Coggeshall’s *The Poets and Poetry of the West* (1860) (Kosiba 36). Coggeshall’s anthology contained the work of an impressive number of Midwestern poets, 142 in total. In addition, multiple literary magazines, such as the *Literary Cadet, Western Review, Western Messenger,* and *Western Monthly Magazine,* were being published out of Ohio which gave voice to a wide range of Midwestern writers.

In the 1880s and 1890s, as Midwestern regionalism continued to grow into a deliberate, self-aware literary culture, the tradition developed a proclivity toward social commentary. William Dean Howells, the “father of realism,” composed multiple works during this period that “probe[d] the decay of moral values that seemed to…accompany the industrialization of agrarian America” (Sundquist 507). And Howells played an especially important role in developing the tradition through his promotion of emerging Midwestern writers in the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s.* One of whom was Hamlin Garland, a staunch Populist, who extended Howell’s realist techniques to develop a form of naturalism in the portrayal of the harsh realities of poverty and rural life. In 1894, with the publication of *Crumbling Idols,* Garland “crowned the Midwest realist tradition [with] his theory of ‘veritism,’” a theory that “heralded the native qualities of local color and demanded that American literature, in order to be both great and national, ‘deal with conditions peculiar to our own land and climate’” (qtd. in Sundquist 518).

As Midwest literary culture was coming into its own in the late 19th century, much of the literature produced was inflected with the region’s history of populist idealism. Midwest literary
scholar David Holman notes the ways in which this history contributed to the production of politically contradictory definitions of the region and regional identity:

At its simplest it is the belief in the American republic as the government of and by the common man. Implicit in the idea of the Midwest is the belief that it is a region that holds the promise of Jacksonian democracy, as opposed to the social and financial aristocracies of the South, the industrial Northeast, and New England. This ideal accounts for the rise in the Midwest of the labor movement, free silver advocacy, the Grange, and other populist causes. At the same time, the ideal also accounts for a nationalistic fervor that could oppose such movements as ‘un-American.’ (51)

Late nineteenth-century Midwestern writers, like Howells and especially Garland, produced writing that reflected and promoted this populist idealism that helped shape the regional identity and influence a generation of new, Midwestern writers who were committed to social commentary. From this earlier tradition, the twentieth-century would see the development of a significant strain of Midwestern regionalism that drew on populist impulses and sentiments but that also was influenced by Debsian socialism, which received a remarkable amount of support in the region during the first two decades of the century. 7

By the 1920s, socialism lost much of its appeal nationally and in the “heartland” after the Socialist Party of America became bitterly divided over America’s entry into World War I. As the Socialist tide ebbed, so, too, did the energy for left-wing radical politics. Ironically, the political pendulum appeared to swing the other direction. The most extreme shift is represented by the rapidly growing membership in the Ku Klux Klan throughout the region, especially in Indiana where, by the 1920s, the Klan achieved significant political power. As the crisis of the

7 Eugene Debs, a native Midwesterner, was a five-time presidential candidate on the Socialist Party of America’s ticket. In 1912, Debs won close to “one million votes—six percent of the total cast” (Nichols 103).
Great Depression loomed on the nation’s horizon, despite IWW presence in the region and pockets of militant unionism, and despite the attention Robert La Follette’s short-lived Progressive Party received, the region appeared to be defined less by populist and socialist idealism and more by a conservative nationalism inflected with palpable right-wing extremism. The Great Depression, however, rekindled a revolutionary spirit among many in the region, and by the 1930s, Meridel Le Sueur, Jack Conroy, Nelson Algren, and Mari Sandoz, the writers examined in this study, attempted to reimagine the Midwest as a bastion for left-wing protest movements and rekindle the tradition of social critique within Midwestern literary regionalism. Through a variety of means, including literary publications, editorial efforts, conference presentations, and documentary reportage, these writers sought to make visible the daily experiences of people struggling to live in the region profoundly affected by the consequences of capitalism and to redefine the region as a well-spring of social radicalism. They produced a body of regional literature, informed by anarchist, populist and socialist ideologies, which emphasizes complex intersections of class and place and the relationship between local places and larger-scale progressive social movements. Collectively, they worked to create a cultural movement, what depression-era folklorist and regionalist Benjamin Botkin would coin “proletarian regionalism,” that helped foster the creative energies and latent radicalism they saw “shimmering” in Midwest.

As cultural movement, proletarian regionalism synthesized elements from two important movements of the period: regionalism and the proletarian avant-garde. In the U.S. the proletarian avant-garde movement gained the most significant momentum as a literary formation during the 1930s. This coincided with the regional movement which B.A. Botkin notes began “curiously enough, about the same time as the Great Depression” ("Regionalism" The Next Step
By the early 1930s, both movements were growing rapidly, and there was a virtual “explosion in the production of American proletarian novels” (Booker 3), which “dominated the American literary world” (Denning 200). As much of the literature was produced by workers themselves, one of the movement’s most significant contributions was its cultivation of the tradition of the worker-writer. In the May 1928 issue of *New Masses*, Mike Gold, then editor of *New Masses* an “enormously popular speaker and debater” among leftist intellectuals and artists, called on “worker-writers” to send

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Confessions—diaries—documents  
Letters from hoboos, peddlars, small town atheists, unfrocked clergymen and schoolteachers—  
Revelations by rebel chambermaids and night club waiters—  
The sobs of driven stenographers—  
The poetry of steelworkers—  
The wrath of miners—the laughter of sailors—  
Strike stories, prison stories, work stories—  
Stories by Communist, I.W.W. and other revolutionary workers. (qtd. in Denning, 203)

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Gold appealed to the working class to produce realist writing that reflected the indignation of the American worker, writing that he and other leftist writers thought would enable readers to make sense of the fragmented and contradictory experiences of working class life and jumpstart the proletarian revolution toward a democratic socialist culture. In 1929, Gold appealed to the working class writers again in a *New Masses* editorial titled, “Go Left, Young Writers!” a key manifesto of the proletarian avant-garde:

In the past eight months the *New Masses* has been slowly finding its path toward the goal of a proletarian literature in America. A new writer has been appearing; a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America….A Jack London or a Walt Whitman will come out of this new crop of young
workers….Once more we appeal to our readers: do not be passive. Write. Your life in the mine, mill, and farm is of deathless significance in the history of the world. Tell us about it in the same language you use in writing a letter. It may be literature—it often is. Write. Persist. Struggle. (189).

Midwestern leftist writers were encouraged by Gold’s call and his editorship of *New Masses*, especially with Gold’s appropriation of the familiar “westering myth” to radical left-wing purposes. An early supporter of radical Midwestern regionalism, Gold “was anxious to show that conditions in the hinterlands would produce revolutionary peasant poets” (Wixson 162). By the time of the John Reed conference in Chicago in 1934, many of the Midwestern radicals had already been published in the *New Masses*. They aligned with the proletarian avant-garde, centered as it was in the left-wing literary culture of New York. However, as regional and ideological divides grew within U.S. literary and cultural left, the Midwestern radicals gravitated toward regionalism, and began to develop more explicitly leftist formations independent from the cultural programs pushed by the Communist Party USA through such journals as the *Partisan Review*.

Regionalism, on the other hand, was a multi-accented movement that served as a critique of American society from both the political left and right. For instance, in the early years of the depression, regionalism “encompass[ed] the white supremacist nostalgia of the southern agrarians, the remarkable historical murals of Thomas Hart Benton, and the new social science of ‘regions’” (Denning 133). As the United States underwent a rapid transformation from a largely rural, decentralized, farm-village society, to a consumerist, mechanized mass society characterized by the urban metropolis, regionalisms on the right proliferated. These regionalisms were largely reactionary movements to defend and preserve local cultures against the
destabilizing forces of modernity. On the left, proletarian regionalism,” along with “New Regionalism,” sought largely to counter the implicit and explicit racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, and belligerent nationalistic ideologies they located in much of the regionalism produced in the 1920s and 1930s. Advocates of New Regionalism, from which proletarian regionalism emerged, included Mary Austin, Carey McWilliams, and Benjamin Botkin, to name a few of the most ardent supporters. And New Regionalism primarily targeted radical, right-wing forms of regionalism that proliferated during the Depression. In particular, New Regionalists rejected the kinds of socially conservative, reactionary, and racist regionalism they identified with the Southern Agrarians. According to Botkin, these regionalisms took “for granted and accept[ed] as final a certain social order” (203). New Regionalists criticized Donald Davidson and John Gould Fletcher, founding members of the Southern Agrarians, for promoting a form of literary and cultural regionalism that praised southern novelists simply on the basis of loyalty to a perceived “southern tradition” that championed, in the process, a segregated and racist vision of an older agrarian Southern culture notable for its white-male aristocracy. In contrast, New Regionalists promoted culture pluralistically, and interpreted regional, local cultures as being in a constant state of flux, especially as regions were affected by changes taking place in larger-scale social and economic configurations in the United States.

Equally appealing to Midwestern radicals was New Regionalism’s commitment to illuminating regional differences in working-class experiences. New Regionalism insisted that there existed distinct, local cultures which possessed their own folk and folklore. Folk were considered “basic to regional society,” and New Regionalists insisted on the value of folklore to interpreting regional history and “examining culture in egalitarian, relativistic, and pluralistic terms” (Rodgers 32). Botkin, for instance, regularly argued that it was time “to recognize that
we have in America a variety of folk cultures, representing racial, regional, and even industrial cultures; that this very variety...constitutes the strength and richness in American lore, and that in the very process of transplanting, these imported cultures and traditions have undergone changes that make them a new tradition” (qtd. in Rodgers and Hirsch, 6). From this perspective, folk culture was both a rural and an urban phenomenon, and the range and diversity of folk cultures made up a rich and dynamic American culture. These elements of New Regionalism appealed to many Midwestern radicals; their intervention was in synthesizing New Regionalism’s notion of “folk” with the “proletariat,” and thereby creating a body of literature that politicizes geographical social and environmental space.

Midwestern writers led the “proletarian regionalist” charge, which resulted in their breaking from what they interpreted to be the metropolitan cultural left’s tendency toward theoretical abstraction and ideological dogmatism. As Le Sueur’s experience makes clear, this was not a break that was well-received by members of the cultural elite. Jack Conroy was also at the John Reed Conference in 1934, and by then he was a bit of a celebrity among the cultural left. He embodied Gold’s notion of the worker-writer: he labored most of his life throughout the Midwest, in railroad car repair shops, mining outfits, steel and rubber mills, and on highway crews. Yet he found time to dramatize his experience in short stories and fiction, many of which were published in New Masses and H.L. Mencken’s The American Mercury. He recalls the feelings he experienced while listening to Rahv and other New York intellectuals speak at the John Reed Conference in 1934: “The ‘easterners’...quoted Marx ‘chapter and verse,’ dazzling the Midwesterners who ‘had been raised on Sockless Jerry Simpson’” (qtd. in Wixson, 381).

8 “Sockless” Jerry Simpson was a populist from Kansas. He earned the nickname “Sockless” while campaigning for Congress in 1889 after “he referred to his wealthy opponent, who traveled in a private railway car, as a ‘Silk Stocking.’ An enemy newspaper had thereupon retorted that Simpson wore no socks at all” (Kramer, 8). Simpson appropriated this nickname into his campaign almost immediately.
Dazzled, perhaps, by the “easterners” knowledge of Marx’s work, but nonetheless alienated from conversation, Midwestern leftists felt that the “easterners” had little concern for and hardly any knowledge of regional differences, which the Midwesterners felt was essential to any large-scale class struggle. New Regionalism appealed to them because it resisted Marxist mythologizing and abstraction by highlighting and examining regional “acceptances and resistances in relation to the class struggle” (Botkin 203).

While Midwestern proletarian regionalists’ relationship to the metropolitan cultural left and Marxism was a complicated one, many felt that the metropolitan cultural left used Marxism as a means of gatekeeping, as a means of keeping others in the left in their place. Given Le Sueur’s sense of outrage at the statements made by Rahv in Chicago in 1934 and her likely awareness of the implications of those statements for regional writers like herself, it is perhaps not surprising that Le Sueur would become one of the most vocal critics of the metropolitan left during the 1930s, claiming “[T]hat’s what they were doing! Making this bureaucratic, intellectual, inhuman, nonhuman kind of thing of Marxism. And they were great and brilliant with all their marvelous theoretic [sic] ideological speeches, and none of us midwesterners—Jack Conroy, Nelson Algren, Richard Wright—we were all just mavericks. We didn’t even know who, or have any ideological constructs” (qtd. in Schleunig 131-32). And while the Midwestern radicals were predominantly anti-capitalists, they interpreted the metropolitan left’s penchant for Marxist theorizing as symptomatic of the kinds of sectarian attitudes and ideologies they strove to remain independent of.

However, much to the dismay of the Midwestern radicals, Rahv’s denunciation of their work in Chicago in 1934 signaled a critical division in the making between the cultural left in the United States. On one side were the largely self-identified intellectual elite, like Rahv, who
appealed to an internationalist version of Marxism and who rejected regionalism as ideologically incompatible. On the other side of the divide were the Midwestern radicals; they synthesized both movements and explored the regional dimensions of American radical traditions as a means to foster social change. Both groups shared essentially the same ultimate goal: to help through cultural productions to create the conditions for a radical democracy that would assist in the transformation of an oppressive class-based, capitalist society to a more equitable social and economic order. However, the Communist New York intellectuals and the Midwestern populist-socialist-anarchists fundamentally disagreed on how to realize this goal.

The conference marks just how marginalized Midwestern radicals were. Le Sueur recalls feeling intellectually and rhetorically outmatched in Chicago, ill-equipped to adequately defend her work against Rahv’s more theoretically-informed critique. While Alexander Trachtenberg did rise to the Midwestern radicals’ defense, it had little effect.9 Rahv’s *The Partisan Review* was the most prestigious of the John Reed Club’s literary magazines. It would receive the Communist Party’s official endorsement along with its channels of distribution less than a year later. Because of this, Rahv and co-founder William Phillips possessed a great deal of power with regard to the publication and distribution of leftist literature. And at the time of the conference Rahv, along with other cultural functionaries of the Communist Party had decided to “abandon worker-writing as a liability and to eliminate the term ‘proletarian literature’ itself from their publications” (Wixson 381). By abandoning the notion of worker-writers and eliminating the term “proletarian literature” from *The Partisan Review*, Rahv was attempting to elevate the discourse in the cultural left by courting well-established writers rather than amateur and relatively unknown writers. This had the effect of further isolating and excluding many of

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9 At the time of the Chicago conference, Trachtenberg as an influential cultural commissar for the Communist Party. He co-founded International Publishers in 1924, a New York-based publishing company that specialized in Marxist analyses of politics, economics, and history.
the Midwestern radicals from the more organized left-wing activities in the East. The Communist Party reinforced the power Rahv and Phillips had over the cultural and literary left, and this was made clear a year later in 1935 when *The Partisan Review*, with the support of the Communist Party, would stealthily absorb and quickly dissolve Conroy and Hagglund’s *The Anvil*—a popular leftist little magazine with a strong regional emphasis.\(^\text{10}\) The New York left, then, played a significant role in the marginalization and repression of Midwestern radical regionalism. Moreover, with the dominance of New Criticism during the 1940s and 1950s, U.S. leftist literature as a whole was considered a denigrated literary form, undeserving of a place in any serious discussion of American literature. During the Cold War years, New Critics advocated a focus on close reading and on analyzing the relationship between form and content, opposing literary studies that considered biographical, historical, and political contexts. This depoliticization of art reflected, perhaps even supported, the increasingly repressive culture of the 1940s and 1950s and the U.S. government’s aggressive restriction of political dissent and criticism. Their scholarship betrayed a strong anti-communist bias, and New Critical theorists largely dictated mid-century scholarly assessments of U.S. radical literature. Radical literature of the 1920s and 1930s was, they argued, not art but propaganda entirely prescribed by Communist Party aesthetic doctrine. Supporting the belief that politics and genuine art are somehow fundamentally opposed, the New Critics rejected radical (“proletarian”) art as a debased literary form limited by ideological constraints. Thus began decades of historical neglect of the U.S. literary left.

This study brings together three separate, though related, bodies of scholarship to better understand and appreciate Midwestern radicalism. First, this project participates in timely revisionist work on the mid-twentieth century Literary Left. The earliest studies worked to

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\(^{10}\) See Wixson for an overview of Rahv and Phillips’s power play.
renew interest in U.S. literary left by claiming the proletarian literature movement constituted a powerful shaping force in American literature and criticism. Walter Rideout’s *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (1956), followed by Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1961) together mark early interventions in U.S. literary history, both works focusing entirely on U.S. literary radicalism. Analyzing U.S. left-wing literature and its relation to the Communist Party, Rideout, and then Aaron, emphasize a more liberal approach to the field, contributing fairer treatments of U.S. radical literature, but both still assume a negative view of the Communist Party’s influence on writers in the period, and both texts woefully neglect radical women writers and people of color. Though some recuperative work during this the 1960s and 1970s “rediscovered” individual writers, like Le Sueur for example, Rideout and Aaron’s work represent the dominant paradigm until the “culture wars” and canon debates of 1980s and 1990s.

During these decades, major contributions to the field were made largely by feminist literary scholars who recovered neglected pro-Communist female writers. In *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995), for instance, Constance Coiner applies materialist-feminist methodologies to analyses of the work of Olsen and Le Sueur. As a result, Coiner succeeds in establishing points of contact between these writers’ (public) commitments to the radical politics of the Communist party and their (domestic) commitments to women’s justice. Coiner’s scholarship builds on important contributions made by Paula Rabinowitz who, in *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991) also shifts attention away from the contributions of male figures of literary radicalism to the works of radical women writers. Rabinowitz and Coiner, then, revise previous scholarship on the literary radicalism of the 1930s to include women’s participation, broadening, as a result, our understanding of who participated in literary radicalism, how women’s
participation shaped the forms and politics of literary radicalism, and the obstacles they encountered in their attempts to participate.

Other scholars, such as Barbara Foley in *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993) have further revised our understanding of the political and cultural context of the proletarian literature movement by arguing how much less prescriptive the Communist Party was on the radical writers of the 1930s than previous scholars were able or willing to acknowledge. Equally important for the field, Foley broadens our understanding of the role gender and race played in the leftist culture movements of the 1930s. She examines the extent to which many of the radical writers often reproduced racist and sexist stereotypes despite their revolutionary commitments. Foley considers the writing of women and African-American writers generally more adept at negotiating the issues of race and gender with radical politics. Moreover, she develops a focus on the forms characterizing depression-era radical fiction, linking her study of form to Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, (1910-1945)*, one of the first extended and informative studies of the tradition of radical poetry in the U.S in the first half of the twentieth-century.

More recently, scholars have complicated understandings of the U.S. literary left by extending research beyond the depression-era decades. Prior scholarship has tended to view the shift to the Popular Front politics, when around 1935 “unionists, Communists, independent-socialists, community activists, and…anti-fascists [united] around laborist social democracy, anti-fascism, and anti-lynching,” as the moment when the earlier proletarian rhetoric of class conflict seemed to have been abandoned.\(^\text{11}\) Because much of the U.S. leftist literature produced in the late 1930s (and beyond) lost some of its explicitly anticapitalist and antibourgeois charge,

\(^{11}\) Denning, p.4
scholarship has often been limited to the narrow confines of the 1930s (and usually the first half of the decade), “as if that decade were an aberration in U.S. history rather than part of a sustained resistance to capitalism.”

Michael Denning, however, in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), was one of the first to argue that the left cultural practices of the 1930s continued to be major forces in the 1940s and 1950s despite the widespread interpretation that U.S. leftist cultural productions essentially ended with the beginning of World War II.

Alan Wald has produced some of the most significant research in this regard, evidenced by the recent publication of a trilogy of studies. Taken together, these studies argue for recognition of the U.S. literary left as a powerful force in American literature beyond the depression-era decades. In *Exiles From a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (2002), Wald recovers the contributions of a number of “forgotten” women writers and African-American literary radicals, mostly poets, and he assesses the challenges many writers faced negotiating issues of race and gender with class identity. Wald demonstrates that African-Americans and women were a major force in the U.S. literary left between the 1920s and the 1960s. More recently, Wald examines intersections between race, gender and ethnicity in *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (2007). In this text, Wald focuses mainly on prose contributions made by Jewish, African-American, and other writers responding to the “anti-fascist crusades” in the U.S. during the 1930s through the end of World War II. And in the final work of the trilogy, *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (2013), Wald presents a compelling account of the struggle many U.S. leftist writers endured to maintain optimism during a period of political and social repression, a period that most scholars mark as the end of U.S. literary radicalism. Complicating these accounts,

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Wald provides evidence that a pro-Communist literary tradition survived this period, and is additionally noteworthy for its recovery of gay and lesbian leftist writers and the challenges these writers experienced negotiating mainstream American society and the prejudices of the Communist Party.

This body of scholarship has helped shape our understanding of U.S. leftist literature as a complex, multicultural tradition representing a range of identities and ideologies, a tradition with deep roots in American culture. Scholarship in this field has also moved beyond literary analysis of works of literature that “explicitly dramatize political ideals, as in the depiction of a strike or an account of a conversion to socialism, but rather has begun to identify a range of texts writers with radical commitments have produced” (Wald xiv).

This project continues work begun by Wald and others who have begun to identify forms of radical writing beyond social realism, such as proletarian regionalism, both a literary movement and a genre. Only recently have scholars begun to recognize this important intellectual tradition. Douglas Wixson’s monumental, Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism, 1898-1990 (1994), represents what is undoubtedly the earliest and most significant cultural and political history of this Midwestern literary radicalism. In the course of constructing Jack Conroy’s biography, Wixson also tells the story of the collaborative efforts he made to foster literary talent among the region’s working class. Wixson outlines the ideological underpinnings of Midwestern radicalism, and he presents a thoroughly researched account of the rise and ultimate decline of the tradition. And most recently, Michael C. Steiner’s Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West presents a collection of essays that focus on the literary and cultural expressions of sixteen left-leaning, western writers and intellectuals. This largely recuperative project traces the lives of
both known and neglected writers and considers their works in the context of the tradition of American literary regionalism. It seeks both to expand and broaden scholars’ understanding of American literary regionalism by locating “proletarian regionalism” in this tradition.

The second body of scholarship concerns American literary regionalism more broadly. Recent scholarship on American literary regionalism has done much to challenge long-held beliefs by critics that regionalism is a denigrated, culturally backwards-looking form, a crude cousin to American realism. More specifically, this project draws on the work of literary critics concerned with the political implications of regional writing. Feminist critics Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse have played a significant role in expanding the canon by recovering the work of neglected women regional writers, but they also present a compelling argument for literary regionalism as a form of social critique. In *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Culture* (2003), Fetterley and Pryse define regionalism as “that point where region becomes mobilized as a tool for critique of hierarchies based on gender as well as race, age, class, and economic resources” (qtd. in Duvall 244). Similarly, in *Regional Fictions: Cultural Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2001), Stephanie Foote argues against current reevaluations that insist regionalism represents “internally homogeneous regions,” and a “common national past” (13). Rather, Foote claims that regionalism participated in representing a common national past in the face of, and out of the raw material of, the increasing immigration and imperialism of the nineteenth century” (13). Regionalism must be understood, then, less a genre and more a literary strategy for “plac[ing] the ‘native’ and the ‘foreign’ in tension which has the effect of destabilizing discourses of universal, homogenous national identity (15-16).

The argument that regionalism is a literary strategy with significant cultural and political implications is also asserted in the scholarship on critical regionalism. In *Critical Regionalism:
Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape, Douglas Reichert Powell presents critical regionalism as strategy for refuting claims of regionalism’s “parochialism” by illuminating the extent to which marginalized communities are connected to broader cultural conflicts. For Powell, literary texts from/about particular places are one significant category of cultural artifacts that comprise the representational history of a region, a consideration of which can help people “take careful stock of their own locatedness with the social, political, and cultural structures of their homes, communities, regions” (185).

Finally, this study is only possible because of the recent scholarship in cultural geography, which provides an essential conceptual framework for analyzing twentieth-century proletarian regionalism. Just as the Midwestern radicals were concerned with how regions are culturally and economically produced, cultural geographers consider regions as both productive and continually produced. In other words, cultural geographers consider regions as dynamic and fluid spaces of human activity, spaces that are internally constructed by particular patterns of production for a world market, but spaces that also change in relation to wider-scale (i.e. interregional, national, international) economic pressures. Regions, therefore, are not cultural or geographical permanences, but rather are social spaces of production actively produced by processes of capital accumulation. Regions are, in other words, geographical expressions of capitalist divisions of labor.

In general, cultural geographers associate regions with the “geography of capitalism”—the differentiated and uneven spatial patterns and processes that characterize capitalist society. And for geographers such as David Harvey, Neil Smith, Cindi Katz, and Don Mitchell, to name those most influential on this study, geographical development is the hallmark of capitalism. Uneven development refers to “deindustrialization and regional decline, gentrification and
extrametropolitan growth, the industrialization of the Third World and a new international
division of labor, intensified nationalism and a new geopolitics of war” (Smith 1). In this light,
Smith argues that a theory of uneven development can help us understand the consequences, the
symptoms, of transformations in the geography of capitalism. “Capital is continually invested,”
Smith contends, “in the built environment in order to produce surplus value and expand the basis
of capital itself. But equally, capital is continually withdrawn from the built environment so that
it can move elsewhere and take advantage of higher profit rates” (6). Moreover, Smith claims
that “uneven development is social inequality blazoned into the geographical landscape, and it is
simultaneously the exploitation of that geographical unevenness for certain socially determined
ends” (206). Regions represent one scale of uneven development in which national territory is
differentiated into identifiable sections emanating from more general social divisions of labor.
Similarly, Harvey argues that “investments in the built environment effectively define regional
spaces for the circulation of capital” (Spaces of Global Capital 102). This body of work offers a
specific and distinctive way of understanding how capitalism produces regions. It provides for
this study a crucial conceptual framework for considering the historical circumstances that
shaped this strand of Midwest literary regionalism. And for scholars concerned with the political
implications of literary regionalism, cultural geography offers a particular historical perspective
that allows us to account for representations of local forms of conflict and struggle. In this light,
cultural geography is essential for understanding the critical function of this body of left-wing
Midwestern literature.

This project, then, is an experiment in reading a body of narrative fiction through the lens
of cultural geography. The texts examined in this study are primarily narrative representations of
social and spatial struggle that emerged in the context of uneven geographical development at
mid-century, while some attention is given to extraliterary texts as a means of illuminating the terms and debates about regional literature and radical politics at mid-twentieth. The central claim of this dissertation is that literary regionalism provides a crucial critical lens through which to interpret the complex geographies of everyday life and for coping with larger than local forces. Furthermore, because regionalism provides a means for interpreting situatedness within geographies of power, it is, I argue, a progressive force for engaging working class concerns. While part recuperative literary history, this dissertation’s primary focus is on reinvigorating a Marxist analysis of regionalism and broadening our understanding of the cultural and political significance of regional writing and the intersections between American regionalism, and the U.S. literary left.

In Chapter 1, I examine a range of writing by Meridel Le Sueur, one of the most vocal advocates and practitioners of proletarian regionalism during the period. By examining a range of fiction and non-fiction, I chart a project of regional production, which, I argue, a materialist understanding of uneven geographical development problematizes accounts of the Midwest as the center of "American dreams and of democracy." To revitalize this popular conception in the minds of readers, which Le Sueur claims is crucial for establishing broader forms of democracy, she synthesizes autobiography, journalism and lyrical, fictional prose in an attempt to make the Midwest come “alive with significance and myth” (*North Star* 327).

In Chapter 2, I analyze Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited*, a “canonical” text in the history of the U.S. literary left, but a novel that has yet to be analyzed as a regional text. Conroy incorporates traditions of orality, regional folklore, and workers’ speech and experience to shape an image of the Midwest as a kind of far-reaching community organized around structures of working-class solidarity and cooperation. I argue that *The Disinherited* presents a unique literary
representation of the contradictions of the mobility of labor. The novel charts protagonist Larry Donovan’s movement through the region in search of work. Despite its emphasis on the particular work spaces Larry find himself embedded in, and at times, entrapped in, the novel is suggestive of how when labor is forced to follow the paths of capital, ideological and material connections can be made among workers across places. Forced labor mobility, in other words, while it often disrupts “traditional support mechanisms and ways of life,” creates the conditions for new networks of affiliation and community to be established across regional spaces. Ultimately, I read the novel as representing a vision of a regional community that is both disrupted and strengthened by the contradictions of working-class mobility during the Great Depression.

In Chapter 3, I analyze Nelson Algren’s *Never Come Morning* as a profoundly regional novel in the sense that represent conflicts and social interactions that shape identities of deviant and delinquent in the context of a particular location: an ethnic slum in Chicago. My argument is that this novel deserves recognition for probing the heart-wrenching impacts of uneven urban development on the identities and life chances of youth who live in areas of concentrated poverty. Whereas Conroy’s novel recognizes hope in labor mobility for the development of a broad-based working class community, Algren explores the effects of uneven development on the development of an underclass. For the poor underclass, juvenile “delinquency” is depicted as a logical consequence, and in many ways, an appropriate response to, uneven geographical development when it fixes groups of people in place. Trapped within these circumscribed spaces, the urban underclass is organized around an informal economy, structured as a necessary means of controlling space and securing the use values necessary for daily survival. These economies, which rely on the formation of tight, though tenuous and often conflictual
communities, operate outside of the control of formal, state-sponsored economies. Much of the practices and services that define these economies are “illegal.” My argument in this chapter is that the novel represents a Chicago slum as an informal economic sector that, in order to sustain itself, requires the social reproduction of a set particular of values, attitudes and skills in its resident youth. The novel suggests that what people do, who they are, is shaped, though not entirely determined, by geography. The novel registers delinquency less the result of individual moral deficiency and more as an outcome of socio-spatial injustice.

In Chapter 4, I examine Mari Sandoz’s allegorical novel *Capital City* as an attempt to grasp and represent the relationship between cities and capitalism in the context of intensifying right-wing extremism in the Midwest at mid century. It presents a fictionalized urban center in which fascist organizations assist with the consolidation of capitalist power. More broadly, Sandoz’s novel explores the role cities play in shaping local and regional social relations and modes of living. The central claim I make in this chapter is that Sandoz depicts the city as a space for the concentration of political and economic power, a space in which particular definitions of identity and community are constituted. As sites of concentrated power, cities play a crucial role in shaping (manufacturing) public opinion and ways of life in urban regions. *Capital City* dramatizes this power by depicting the capitol city as a platform for the dissemination of a rhetoric of American exceptionalism that appears to speak to public interest but is in fact informed by a kind of fascist philosophy the functions as the vehicle for the capitalist class. By dramatizing a once-progressive city’s slip into fascism, the novel challenges claims that American exceptionalism is synonymous with democracy, and thereby resists the call being made by other Midwestern radicals that the region is the embodiment of this exceptionalism. And while it ends tragically by depicting the city as a site of brutal and violent
control, the novel gestures towards the potential to which urban public spaces can generate new rhetorics to inform politics of new, broader forms of democracy.
Chapter 1

“‘When the Radicle Plunged into the Soil:’ Meridel Le Sueur and Regional Production

*I came out of the secret pods of the Midwest. Out of the village. We all emerge from the little place.*

--Meridel Le Sueur

In September 1913, coal miners in southern Colorado went on strike against various mining operations in the region, the largest of which was the Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation, controlled by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Frustrated with the CF&I’s refusal to increase wages, maintain an eight-hour work day, uphold state mining laws and with the company’s rejection of miners’ demands for union recognition, miners walked off site after mine owners ignored their demands. Because the miners lived in company-owned homes, they were evicted from the property. Nearly 13,000 displaced miners and their families were relocated to tent colonies set up below the mines by the United Mine Workers union on open land and along railroad tracks to the mine. From these locations, striking miners prevented the passage of strikebreakers brought in from outside the region by the mine operators.

The mining industry represented the largest industrial lobby in Colorado, and tension increased as mine operators failed to control the strikers with hired thugs, vigilantes deputized by a local sheriff and detective agents employed by the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. During the winter months, increasing pressure was put on Governor Elias Ammons by mine operators, including Rockefeller himself, to employ the state militia in breaking the strike.

On April 20, 1914, as miners were celebrating Greek Easter in Ludlow, the largest of the tent colonies in the area, a militia made up of Colorado National Guard members, coal company
guards, and hired detectives, quietly encircled the camp, took position and waited for the signal before they began firing into the tents with machine guns and cannons. During the fourteen-hour battle, the militia set tents on fire with kerosene, shooting at anyone attempting to flee the camp. At an Industrial Commission meeting after the strike, Pearl Jolly, a miner’s wife, described the event:

They got the machine gun set better and at better range, for it was terrible how those bullets came in there; it does not seem possible how they were coming in. They would say if the bullets were coming in like that, why were there not more shot? Simply because the caves were there and the dogs and chickens and everything else that moved were shot. Between five and six o’clock they set fire to our tents. When they set fire to our tents we decided that we would go from cave to cave as fast as we could. They could see us going through, and we had to dodge their bullets.¹³

When the smoke cleared, twenty-five people were counted dead, including eleven children and two women who were suffocated or burned to death while huddling together for safety in a pit dug underneath one of the tents. In retaliation, farmers and miners from around the region joined with survivors in a series of violent, armed attacks on mines and militia members that spread from Ludlow to nearby mining communities in Trinidad, Lynn, and Aguilar. The fighting was intense, lasting a total four days, at the end of which, over sixty people lay dead.

Soon after the massacre, a band of survivors traveled to Fort Scott, Kansas seeking support for those fighting in Ludlow, which was quickly becoming occupied by the army. Their destination in Fort Scott was the People’s College, a non-profit Socialist college, founded by Eugene Debs (whose popularity among working people as a defender and protector of workers’

rights was nearing an all-time high, having won nearly 6% of the popular vote in 1912 as the Socialist Party’s presidential candidate) Helen Keller (a radical socialist who was then well on her way to becoming a world-famous speaker and author), Charles Steinmetz (a German-born mathematician and Socialist), and Marian and Arthur Le Sueur.  

By 1913, Marion and Arthur Le Sueur were becoming house-hold names among the working class in many of the rural villages and towns throughout the Midwest. Prior to arriving at the People’s College, Marian was a socialist lecturer in the Chautauqua circuit where she spoke frequently about women’s rights. While at the College, Marian was head of the English Department and while there helped found one of the most important publications in the U.S. labor movement: the Little Blue Books which were small, pocket-sized books containing excerpts from the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and Karl Marx, to name a few, which designed to be carried by workers and used in organized reading groups. Arthur Le Sueur served as President of the College, but by the time of his appointment he was already a seasoned lawyer who had defended hundreds of anti-war demonstrators, I.W.W. direct-actionists, and general working class dissidents. Marian and Arthur played crucial roles in creating the College’s correspondence courses in “workers’ law, workers’ English, history, bookkeeping, elocution, journalism” (Crusaders xx). Together they designed a curriculum intended to “make evident

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15 The Chautauqua Circuit was founded in western New York State on Lake Chautauqua by Lewis Miller, an entrepreneur, and John Heyl Vincent, a Methodist minister. Its initial purpose was the training of Sunday school teachers, but eventually the program expanded to provide a broader education to small, rural towns in the form of lectures on a variety of topics. The purpose was to provide self and civic improvement for disadvantaged Americans. (For a more detailed description see Charlotte Canning’s essay “What Was Chautauqua” <http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/traveling-culture/essay.htm/>). In Crusaders, Meridel Le Sueur describes her mother’s role and the personal risks she took while lecturing on the Circuit: “She spoke for the freedom of women over their own bodies and the right not to have children they cannot feed. The penalty for giving any information on abortion or contraception was ninety-nine years in prison. She was tried in Kansas City, Missouri, for giving birth-control information to a woman with fourteen children, but the woman refused to identify Marian and was given three years in prison. She left her fourteen children under Marian’s care” (xiv).
the viable reality, the responsibility of the democratic people to recognize the real world, to name it, to regain their humanism which had been stolen from them” (*Crusaders* xx).

Fort Scott, Kansas is considerably far from Ludlow, Colorado—over five-hundred miles. Yet, given the presence of such prominent labor figures as Debs, Keller, and the Le Sueurs, it seems clear why the survivors of Ludlow traveled such an arduous distance. The sense of hopelessness and despair in the light of experiencing such raw, violent corporate and state power was certainly overwhelming. For many of Ludlow’s laboring families, the People’s College represented a place of safety and security as well as a place of hope in their struggle to resist the corporate-political power responsible for the deaths of their sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, their husbands and wives.

Meridel Le Sueur was just thirteen when she stood holding her mother’s hand on the lawn of the People’s College. As the gaunt miners and their families marched toward the college in silence, Meridel recalls the people on the sidewalks either rushing to embrace them or remaining stolid and silent as they passed. Years later, Meridel remembers the sight vividly:

I saw the bodies bearing the mark of their oppression, of their stolen labor, and now their holy dead. Their bodies were hieroglyphs of their exploitation, their blood and bodies taken, their lungs turned to silica stone, a strange and terrible sadness and even humiliation in them but also something else, a terrible fire and grief. (*Crusaders* xvii)

When the march ended on the lawn of the People’s College, there was a flood of emotion; exhausted and nearly starved to death, the miners showed photographs of their children alive and pictures of their children dead. They showed pictures of Louis Tikas, strike leader, with “forty slugs in him as he tried to protect the children” (*Crusaders* xviii). To a young Le Sueur the photographs passing through the hands of the miners and the people on the College’s
lawn brought her face to face, perhaps for the first time, with realities of working class struggle. Their pictures, their stories, their physical *bodies* were testimony to a landscape of violence and the brutal power of the political force working people fighting for justice were facing. It was the same brutal force that only two years later would literally destroy the college “with fire and ax” and send the Le Sueurs fleeing Fort Scott for their lives (*Crusaders* xx). The photographs, like the scars on the miners’ bodies, made clear and visible to Le Sueur, the “path of the broken and massacred” and the enemy who “is always there, growing larger” (*Crusaders* xxviii).

Yet despite the miners’ profound losses and the grief, uncertainty and fear that must have felt unbearable, Le Sueur was amazed at the degree of humanity reclaimed on the lawn of the college and in the workers’ hall that day. At the People’s College, miners, faculty, and townsfolk grieved together, and they also sang and danced together. In Le Sueur’s depiction of the event, the People’s College, the place itself, was as fundamental to the healing of the Ludlow miners as it was to the development of Le Sueur’s political consciousness. In a particularly insightful passage in this regard, Le Sueur reflects on the power of the People’s College: “I saw them become human beings with each other [and] the landscape changed… I was never again struck alone or swamped with private sorrow, never a lone person. I knew we must be human again” (*Crusaders* xxii). For Le Sueur, something special was achieved in the People’s College: it operated as a specific site of geographical affect, generating sympathy and solidarity among the miners and faculty members precisely because of their embeddedness in particular circumstances of class struggle. It was a defining moment in which she realized that she could not understand her life as independent or somehow separate from the lives of others. Her life experience was relational to lived experiences of others. Moreover, there is the sense in her recollection of the power of place. While the People’s College certainly provided immediate, if
only temporary, physical protection, there was in fact a powerful symbolic dimension to the College. It functions as a locus of collective memory, of the regional struggles and communality of all working people. As such, the miners’ arrival to the People’s College helped constitute a sense of place across space, an “active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to future” (*Spaces* 306). It is the particular quality of the People’s College that it helped maintain and organize what was first a regional resistance. It became a place in which it individuals empowered themselves collectively by virtue of the College’s material and symbolic investment in working-class regional and interregional struggle. As such, the college demonstrates the power of place to reinforce class identity and mobilize this identity into political action.

In *Crusaders*, we glean the roots of Le Sueur’s commitment to particular struggles in particular places. And in even such brief passages as those quoted above, we get a sense of the importance that Le Sueur assigns to place and how essential place is to community and political opposition. In situating her writing within the historical realities of the (i.e. regional/national) community—the people, and their social and political struggles—Le Sueur attempts to create linkages between the particular experiences of a local community of people to the experiences common to all working class people. All culture, for Le Sueur, emerges from relations of power, and “the people” (in whatever meaning is assigned to this “floating signifier”) are always in the process of becoming. In Le Sueur’s sense of the art of politics, writing must be the expression of struggles and of the dynamic, collective significance of these struggles because it is precisely through these expressions that a “people” is constituted. Fort Scott and St. Paul illuminated taught her at an early age the value of community from which intimacy and compassion can be nourished, from which a collective “we” can emerge in the face of “struggles [that] did not stop, as they never do” (*Crusaders* xxvii).
The events at the People’s College in the aftermath of the Ludlow Massacre represents a particularly formative moment in Le Sueur’s political education when she began to grasp the extent to which economic and social forces pervade bodies and places, and the extent to which forms of political solidarity are intertwined with processes of place construction. In other words, as Le Sueur’s sense of self broadens to encompass a collective “we” marked, in part, by shared oppressions and common aspirations; she begins to understand herself as a social being for whom the possibilities of common values depends critically on certain forms of interpersonal relating that occur in particular places. Throughout her life, Le Sueur applied the lessons of The People’s College to her writing and of these working people whose song she labored her whole life to sing, Le Sueur writes:

The heritage they give us is the belief we have in them. It is the story of their survival, the sum of adjustments, the struggle, the folk accumulation called sense and faith we have in that collective experience. It was real and fast, and we enclose it. Many unknown people lived and were destroyed by it. What looks to us grotesque or sentimental is the humor of the embryo, the bizarreness of the unformed, and the understanding of it is a prerequisite to our survival. It was real, and created our day. Perhaps it encloses us. It is the deep from which we emerge. (North Star Country 11)

I begin this chapter with Le Sueur’s retrospective Crusaders to emphasize the importance of a Le Sueur’s regional perspective on place. The Midwestern region of the United States is central to Meridel Le Sueur’s lifelong struggle to interpret the processes of capitalism and the ways in which these processes transformed physical landscapes and regional cultures, . Geographically, the central Midwest Le Sueur most often explores in her writing includes Minnesota, Wisconsin, Kansas, and the Dakotas. Thematically, Le Sueur’s writing is grounded
in the historical realities of the people and their struggles to “create a place, a community, a nation” in relation to the geographical expansion of capital (North Star Country 4). As a category of analysis for Le Sueur, region becomes a rhetorical means by which to critique the injustices of capitalism on the region and people who lived there. At the same time, Le Sueur recognizes that regional places are necessary to establish in the struggle for social and cultural change. These kinds of places, like the People’s College, are necessary for mobilizing collective resistance to the destructive forces of capitalism. Throughout her career, Le Sueur’s writing was committed to interpreting the processes of regional production and expressing regional struggles, yet few scholars have noted the importance the region plays in her writing and her politics.

John Boehnlein, for instance, makes a compelling case for literary regionalism as both a “political and formalistic feature of proletarian fiction,” and he identifies Le Sueur’s writing as emblematic of a regional perspective among proletarian writers in the 1930s. In a brief examination of Le Sueur’s speech “Proletarian Literature and the Middle West” delivered to the 1935 American Writer’s Congress, Boehnlein demonstrates Le Sueur’s view that “writing by the working class can be understood only when read in light of its place and situatedness in a particular culture” (55). By underscoring the point Le Sueur made in her address that regionalism is a category of analysis in proletarian literature, Boehnlein encourages careful analysis of Le Sueur’s writing in the context of literary regionalism in order to illuminate the dynamism and political implications of her regional writing.

More recently, however, Julia Mickenberg gives sustained attention to Le Sueur’s regionalism. In “Writing the Midwest: Meridel Le Sueur and the Making of a Radical Regional Tradition,” Mickenberg points out that Le Sueur “has become relatively well known as a feminist with radical political leanings, but her rootedness in the Midwestern landscape has not
been read as integral to those commitments” (143-44). Mickenberg departs from the dominant trend in scholarship on Le Sueur which focuses primarily on her feminism in relation to the Communist Party of the U.S. While not downplaying the importance of the work, Mickenberg, like Boehnlein, sees regionalism as fundamental to understanding Le Sueur’s literary and political contributions. In addition, Mickenberg suggests that Le Sueur’s writing offers a challenge to those who claim regional literature is a minor, less significant literary form, one with limited social value. Mickenberg really offers the first sustained consideration of Le Sueur as a regional writer, and in doing so she participates in the broader project of redefining regional writing. And extending Mickenberg’s work are scholars such as Sara Kosiba who reads Le Sueur’s fiction alongside her essays and speeches on regionalism. In “The Strength of the Midwestern Proletariat: Meridel Le Sueur and the Ideal Proletarian Literature,” Kosiba reads Le Sueur’s novel *The Girl* in the context of Le Sueur’s speech at the American Writers’ Congress. Kosiba illuminates regional themes and aesthetics in a novel that is typically read as an attempt to “feminize the proletarian novel” by challenging “the masculine bias of many of the developing conventions of that genre” (Booker 180).

I share with these scholars the sense that the significance of Le Sueur’s life and work cannot be fully realized without examining it in the context of her regionalism. Indeed, analyzing her writing in light of her regional perspectives illuminates the particular politics and aesthetic ideologies that give her writing meaning and that distinguish her from many other left-wing (and regionalist) writers of the period. The writings Le Sueur produced from 1930 through the early 1950s present much more nuanced interpretations of regional space than scholars have previously recognized.16 For starters, Le Sueur’s regionalism is not limited by a narrow-minded

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16 During the Cold War years, Le Sueur’s career was virtually silenced by McCarthyism oppression. Le Sueur frequently referred to this period as “The Dark Time” when, as Julian Markels points out, “Le Sueur and her
reverence for a regional landscape somehow independent of or separate from the spheres of human activity. Regionalism is not, in other words, synonymous with romanticizing a “natural” landscape, an externalized “other.” Moreover, her writing avoids promoting a politically naïve nostalgia or defensiveness for a “traditional” way of life represented by images of isolated, internally ‘whole’ place(s). Rather, Le Sueur treats the region as a dynamic and fluid space of human activity, a space that is comprised of internal divisions connected to wider-scale (i.e. interregional, national, international) pressures. The region, in other words, is not a cultural or geographical permanence: it is, rather, culturally and politically produced, and the writing examined in the pages that follow reflects her lifelong struggle to interpret the processes and consequences of capitalist regional production and to articulate alternative practices of regional (re)production.

More specifically, I argue that Le Sueur’s writing develops a kind of sentimentalized proletarianism regionalism in an attempt to create and sustain a political, yet poetical, myth of the region. In what follows, I examine three of Le Sueur’s most important regional writings: “Corn Village” (1930), is one of her earliest publications concerned with the effects of capitalism on the Midwestern landscape; “Proletarian Literature and the Middle West,” the speech Le Sueur delivered at the American Writers’ Congress in 1935, in which Le Sueur offers her first formal account of the value of proletarian literature being regionally-oriented; and Midwest, a short-lived literary magazine created and edited by Le Sueur which best embodies the sense of regionalism as a cultural and political strategy vital in any large-scale project of progressive social change.

children were viciously hounded by the FBI just when her principal publication outlets—New Masses and Mainstream—also disappeared” (99). It was not until the progressive political activism of the 1970s gained momentum in the U.S. that she was able to reestablish an audience and her reputation.
I. “Corn Village” and the Domination of Nature

First published in 1931, “Corn Village” was awarded the Scribner’s prize for “personal experience of observation at first hand concerned with an aspect of American life” (qtd. in Boehnlein 84). It represents one of Le Sueur’s earliest and most complex treatments of regional space, and it marks a transition to her social and political focus on “the mid-center of America” that would challenge and inspire the rest of her career. In “Corn Village,” Le Sueur merges her poetic and journalistic sensibilities in an attempt to capture the emotional experience of life in a ravaged and depleted landscape, one marked by contradictions. As Blanche Gelfant notes, Kansas “is mysterious and elusive, imbued with beauty, not without terror, and capable of inspiring tenderness and a ‘sense of ruin and desolation’” (326). The narrator begins by asserting affiliation with a particular kind of collective experience in the region:

Like many Americans, I will never recover from my sparse childhood in Kansas. The blackness, weight and terror of childhood in mid-America strike deep into the stem of life. Like desert flowers we learned to crouch near the earth, fearful that we would die before the rains, cunning, waiting the season of good growth. Those who survived without psychic mutilation have a life cunning, to keep the stem tight and spare, withholding the deep blossom, letting it sour rather than bloom and be blighted. (7)

While this passage establishes the theme of the interrelationship between the people and the land its haunting power resides in the likening of Midwesterners with the image of the desert flower. To survive the capricious conditions of the desert and the scarcity of resources, desert flowers have had to adapt physically and behaviorally to the environment. The desert flower lies dormant much of year, blooming only briefly during periods of heavy rain. And like the desert
flower, Midwesterners are both “blighted” and nourished by the environment. Their existence, the passage suggests, is defined by the daily struggle to survive.

The next passage intensifies the sense of struggle. In addition to lacking adequate natural resources for survival, Midwesterners also appear to lack the cultural resources necessary for the cultivation of healthy, sustainable communities. The region is “a kind of void” in which the narrator confronts the people’s physical and emotional impoverishment and the lack of any kind of social cohesion:

Looking for nourishment, we saw the dreary villages, the frail wooden houses, the prairies ravished, everything impermanent as if it were not meant to last the span of one man’s life, a husk through which human life poured, leaving nothing behind, not even memory, and every man going a lonely way in a kind of void, all shouting to each other and unheard, all frightfully alone and solitary. (7)

There is no direct explanation for the environmental depletion and cultural poverty of the region. It is the search, the need, for understanding that marks the occasion of “Corn Village.” And crucial to this understanding is the relationship of the people with landscape.

The Midwest is both known and unknown to the narrator: “There are Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska. They were for a long time frontier states” (8). While these states represent what is perhaps “knowable” about the region insofar as they have histories and particular physical geographies, the region is also a “dream, an unreality,” and at times a nightmare, in which Le Sueur wanders “looking for sustenance…looking for something to live on…trying to grow, to come alive” (8). What Le Sueur discovers in “Corn Village,” however, is not sustenance, but rather “emptiness and ghostliness,” an expansive space in “the mid-centre of America [where] a man go blank for a long, long time” (8).
On the one hand, the narrator’s commentary in “Corn Village” focuses on representing the hostility of the Midwestern prairie spaces as a fact or universal law of nature. Yet, however vivid the images are of the people and the land struggling against one another, “Corn Village” is not an exercise in naturalism. Rather, it represents a complex and subtle critique of the domination of nature thesis that informs practices of capitalistic political economy. At its core, the domination of nature thesis embodies a set of values and attitudes—triumphalist and instrumental—toward nature. In capitalistic political economy, David Harvey claims “the prevailing practices dictate profit-driven transformation of environmental conditions and an approach to nature which treats it as a passive set of assets to be scientifically assessed, used and valued in commercial (money) terms” (Justice 131). “Corn Village” gestures toward a particularly pervasive capitalist tendency to see the natural landscape as primarily a source of resource extraction in the interest of profit. A capitalistic practice with regard to nature had, by 1931, made possible the expansion of industrial capitalism in the United States and the transformation of both landscape and laborer to a capitalist system of oppression and exploitation. The narrator’s concern for the “landscape’s curious hold on lives and imaginations of its people” marks an important development in her regional philosophy, but the strength of the essay lies in its critique of the domination of nature thesis—belief that it is the vocation of humans to dominate and control nature. And while Le Sueur is certainly not the first writer to critique the domination of nature thesis, “Corn Village” lays the groundwork for Le Sueur’s unique ecological angle to socialist politics, anticipating the work of Harvey, for example, who puts “environmental and social change into a dialectical and historical-geographical frame of thinking” (Justice 119). In 1931, Le Sueur articulates a progressive view of social change as equally an environmental issue.
Le Sueur’s short story is in opposition to a tradition of literatures of “conquest,” associated with a diverse range of writers, such as Cotton Mathers and Henry Nash Smith, who assert “[t]he wilderness is the antithesis of civilization; it is barren, terrible; even sinister, not just the home of the savage but his natural home. The wilderness and the savage were as one; they were obstacles to be overcome in the march of progress and civilization” (Uneven 20). In these literatures, the externality of nature is explicitly posited, and the nature-civilization distinction was frequently reinforced. Moreover, literatures depicting the conquering of an external nature were often infused with elements of morality, religion, and/or nationalism that relied on universalized conceptions of progress and/or civilization.

After the frontier was tamed and settled, a shift occurred in the poetic conceptions of nature. The dominant depictions were no longer those of fear or hostility, but rather nature was a “place to go back to,” especially in light of the country’s rapid urbanization and industrialization. The “back-to-nature” movement associated with nineteenth-century romanticism maintained a dual conception of nature as well: nature was something external to humans to get back to. Nature was something pure, virtuous, beautiful and dignified, whereas America’s expanding urban centers were seen as contaminated, degraded, and ugly (22). And nature was regularly associated with God or, in the case of Emerson, a divine presence, Universal spirit, running through all matter, human and non-human alike. In this sense, universalized nature united the human and non-human world (23).

While romanticism was a response to “the successful objectification of nature in the labor process”—a labor process that found its ideological support and justification, in part, in literatures of conquest—romanticism, with its back-to-nature emphasis, also worked to reinforce a distinction between nature and society. While the popular credence given to romanticism has
ended, universal nature, Smith argues, “lives on either in science, in the idealism of the contemporary ‘back-to-nature’ ideology, or as a mixture of both in the nostalgic wing of the ecology movement” (25). Poetic concepts of nature start with a concept of externality and move toward universality, whereas scientific conceptions of nature move from an assumed universal toward external objects of labor (27). The point is that while these two pervasive and powerful concepts of nature are interrelated and mutually contradictory, they are socially constructed. Moreover, they share a universal conception of nature, which can potentially function as an instrument of social and political control.

It is in this light that “Corn Village’s” critique of the bourgeois ideology of nature can be read. On the one hand, the story evokes the American tradition of conquest literature from the Puritan times through the nineteenth-century in which the “barren, terrible; even sinister” landscape must be conquered, tamed and controlled. In the Midwestern prairie spaces lurks “a malignant power;” the village is “a horror,” “out of the world,” “doomed” (9). Yet “Corn Village” is clearly not a traditional story of conquest. By 1931, the conquest of the American frontier had long been accomplished. The Midwest prairie the narrator struggles to comprehend is no longer the wild frontier in need of taming in the march of progress and civilization. Instead, “Corn Village” questions the extent to which the great swath cut by civilization through nature was actually in the name of progress: “The villages are yet the waste and ashes of pioneering, and the people too waste and ash, with the inner fire left out. There is still the pioneer tension as if something was still to be done, something conquered, something overcome, and there is no longer anything to conquer and no longer an enemy” (8). This image is haunting and evocative of the alienation and futility of modern history that readers confront in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” in which “the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief/And the dry
Like Eliot’s poem, Le Sueur’s “Corn Village” echoes a similar kind of post-romantic view of nature. Nature is not a place of interrelatedness and interdependence, nor is a restorative escape from the alienating experience of industrial society. As in “The Waste Land,” the natural world provides no sanctuary from the social disharmony and fragmentation of modern life—it is “fear in a handful of dust.”

The references in “Corn Village” to pioneering and the act of conquering recall Smith’s concerns with the treatment of nature on the American frontier: “The hostility of external nature justified its domination and the spiritual morality of universal nature provided a model for social behavior” (28). Legitimizing and realizing such widespread and aggressive conquest of the country necessitated a large-scale adoption of a particular ideology of nature. However, if this ideology was once the source of meaning of the practical experiences of the pioneer, “Corn Village” suggests it has much less coherency with subsequent generations and perhaps is responsible to some extent for the absence of social cohesion.

The vivid descriptions of “meaty men liv[ing] in this delicate world, their bloody lives,” and a land “misused through dreams of power and conquest” which make up the first part of “Corn Village,” orient readers to Le Sueur’s critique of the bourgeois ideology of nature and beckons readers to consider what, exactly, it is that we’ve made and what it is that we’ve done with this inheritance. If the “rigors of conquest” were oriented toward “progress,” “Corn Village” asks in what sense of the term? Progress for what? For whom? The earlier values of frontier life find residual expression in the corn village, yet there is an absence of progressive living. Rather the progress achieved by the “rigors of conquest” points to the appropriation and transformation of nature, including human nature, into the machinery of capitalism. The impulse
to conquer and to fight simmers just below the surface of the villagers, but there is, in the sense of a wild, externalized nature, “nothing” left to conquer.

In this light, one explanation for the villagers’ suffering is that the tradition they’ve inherited is a tradition of domination that forecloses possibilities for more progressive, communal social relations. “The rigors of conquest,” Le Sueur writes, “have made us spiritually insulated against human values” (8). If the tradition of conquest, or the domination of nature, made extensive use of individuals’ powers of cooperation, these powers, “Corn Village” suggests, were not developed. Instead, once appropriated by the machinery of capitalism into the means of production, individuals became alienated from their power of cooperation. “Human values,” by which Le Sueur seems to be referring to the values and powers of cooperation, community, personal liberty, and solidarity, are secondary to the value of extraction and appropriation. While the Midwest acquired much of its character from the people who live there and shaped the land with their collective activities, Le Sueur suggests that there is a loss of connection to and identification with the common practices and discourses which Midwesterners’ share and which shape their environment. The powers that the Midwesterners put to use to modify their environment—the regions—ultimately, do not appear conducive to their own sustenance and reproduction: “There is no community,” laments the narrator, “to give him life; so he can go lost as if he were in a jungle. No one will pay any attention. He can simply be as lost as if he had gone into the heart of an empty continent” (8). These lines are suggestive of what community means to Le Sueur. While this concept is fraught with ambiguity in ways similar to the concept of the region, Le Sueur emphasizes the importance of community to living, and “Corn Village” seems, in part, to be a meditation on just what, exactly, community might mean. While Le Sueur doesn’t offer a direct definition, community appears to be
synonymous with life, suggesting, in a sense, that community is the means by which alternative “human values” are fostered, preserved, and protected. Moreover, she associates community with the “heart of a continent,” a clear evocation of the familiar image of the Midwest as the heartland of America. What ails the villagers in “Corn Village” can, in this light, be seen as symptomatic of a larger-scale (i.e. national) crisis. Therefore, when Le Sueur writes “Look at the face of the Middle Westerner and you know he has been nourished in poor soil and without one day of good growing weather”, she encourages readers to associate the body of the Midwesterner with the human equivalent of a depleted but persevering national landscape (9).

Here Le Sueur assumes the role of observer, guiding her readers to pay attention to the malnourishment of the Midwesterner and the poverty of the soil and consider the relationship between the depleted Midwestern communities to the larger body politic. Le Sueur asks: “What does an American think about the land, what dreams come from the sight of it, what painful dreaming? Are they only money dreams, power dreams? Is that why the land lies desolate like a loved woman who has been forgotten? Has she been misused through dreams of power and conquest?” (10-11). While capitalist development in the twentieth-century relied on the bourgeois ideology of nature, “Corn Village” considers just how corrosive such an ideology has been to the growth of a healthy regional, and by extension, national community.

The narrator’s concern is with making visible the communal and environmental devastation wrought by “that neat, hygienic and sterile success that we all must have” (17). But more than this, “Corn Village” probes the ideology that informs the villagers’ activities and the roles they play in the community. As the story vividly suggest, something has changed drastically since the “frontiersmen have put themselves aside,” and the narrator is “baffled to know the meaning of the people in the mid-West towns” (15). In part, “money dreams, power
dreams” have been realized in the region through processes of capital accumulation, which involve appropriating more than merely natural resources as objects of production. As Smith points out, “[t]he search for raw materials, the reproduction of labor power, the sexual division of labor, and the wage-labor relation, the production of commodities and of bourgeois consciousness, are all generalized under the capitalist mode of production….capitalism sweeps before it all other modes of production, forcibly subordinating them to its own logic” (71). Capitalism, in other words, must also “conquer” human nature as well as human consciousness in order for expansion to occur. In “Corn Village,” villagers momentarily regain their “human nature” during moments of violence when they are temporarily startled out of their listlessness and discontent: “the only time the reality is revealed,” moments which “erupt the awful lethargy, the fading away of the soul” (17). After one particular instance, in which a “distraught man…[shoots] his sweetheart straight through the heart” in the middle of a busy street in a Midwest village, the narrator recalls sharing in a unifying outpouring of emotion with the other townspeople: “It broke in every breast and bound us all together. We turned looking at each other at last, not as ghosts distant and distraught, but now bound together alive, knowing ourselves” (18). The violence has the momentary effect of bringing the people together until “the great mid-continent vacuum swallows everything again. Everything is quiet until the corn-husking, and that means work and competition” (24). Competition and work, Le Sueur suggests, social behaviors concomitant with capitalism, are so deeply ingrained in the villager that the behaviors seem natural—these are the behaviors the villager reverts back to. “Corn Village” is particularly sensitive to the difficulties and dangers facing people and environments when capitalist relations of domination and subordination are constituted as normal or natural and are
subsequently adopted by populations on larger scales. The moments of violence suggest, however, the power of local experience to unsettle and disrupt what appears normal and natural.

While these moments rouse the villagers who are otherwise “like somnambulists,” “as ghosts distant and distraught,” to see “each other at last… [as] bound together alive, knowing ourselves alive” (18), the embrace of community, purpose and meaning is temporary. “The lethargy looms again, everything closes up, the streets are as they were before, and men become again only traders, movers, buyers, sellers, farmers” (19). The village and villagers are once again defined by economic relations. “Corn Village” suggests that healing power the Midwest town so desperately needs resides in the writer with a deep commitment to place:

Oh, Kansas, I know all your little trees. I have watched them bud and the pools of winter frozen over, the silos and the corn-blue sky, the wagon-tracked road with the prints of hoofs, going where? And the little creeks gullying with delicate grasses and animals, the prairie dog, the rabbit, and your country with its sense of ruin and desolation like a strong raped virgin. And the mind scurrying like a rabbit trying to get into your meaning, making things up about you, trying to get you alive with significance and myth. (24)

In this final section of “Corn Village,” Le Sueur suggests the rhetorical influence writers have over the construction and meaning of regions and places. By creating “significance and myth” the narrator can get the region “alive,” and in the context of the short story, to be alive means, in part, being cognizant of the exploitation of both the land and the people living on it. Being alive means reestablishing the social bonds of togetherness and solidarity that needs to breathe new life. And if a writer is to have this influence, the story suggests, she must be committed to working within local cultures. The story concludes with just this affirmation: “Not going to Paris or Morocco or Venice, instead staying with you, trying to be in love with you, bent upon
understanding you, bringing you to life. For your life is my life and your death is mine also” (25). The sentiment prefigures Powell’s assertion that, for the critical regionalist, “a commitment to inhabitation forged out of a working relationship to the land and to other people—not to some mystified, metaphysical ‘sense’ of place—augments the cultural and material resources that people use to counter unjust forces and pressures” (171).

II. “Let Us Seek Each Other in the Villages of the Earth”: The American Writers Congress and Midwest

Le Sueur’s strongest statement about the region and the power of the local was made at the First American Writers’ Congress held in New York City at the Mecca Temple. In response to the apparent “crumbling of capitalism” and reactionary dangers posed by “Mussolini in Italy, Hitler in Germany, [and] Hearst in America,” the conference aimed to bring together revolutionary-minded writers to discuss the relations between culture and society and the art of writing (Hart 9). Delegates from Mexico, Germany, Cuba, and Japan joined over two hundred of the most politically engaged writers in the United States. Over the course of three days, writers addressed two interrelated problems: the problems of effective political action, and the problems peculiar to writers. Le Sueur’s speech, “Proletarian Literature in the Middle West,” in which she stresses the value of regional perspectives to revolutionary politics and cultural practices, was the only speech at the Congress to explicitly focus on regionalism. In the speech, Le Sueur articulates concerns about the geographical and economic relations between regions and larger national and transnational spaces of capitalism. As such, it challenges conceptions of regions as permanent, delineated, or fixed spaces. Rather, Le Sueur interprets regions as dynamic and
flexible spaces, where social and economic relations are provisionally constituted and transformed in particular places in relation to broader, dominant spaces of capitalism.

The beginning of Le Sueur’s speech illuminates what she refers to as the “laissez faire colonization” of the region:

Banks, watered stock, trick practices, have driven the worker and the petty bourgeoisie over the prairies like sheep going from industry to the farm, and from the farm to industry, and being milked dry. Whole villages have been incorporated by shysters, immigrants brought from the old country and the village then bankrupted, and the people wandering on to be fleeced in a better climate….In the Middle West there are entire villages ravaged since the passing of the lumber industry. There are thousands of families, men who were the fellers, whistle punks, who have been sitting in a waste land since the last of the lumber barons passed, as a most awful testimonial to one of the worst and swiftest exploitations that the world has ever known, when the Middle West, a rich fertile sleeping valley, was, in the space of practically fifty years, laid waste. (135-36)

Le Sueur’s concern for the region is at first a concern with the process of regional devaluation, a process that occurs after people (labor) and places become obstacles to further accumulation, and growth-oriented capital must necessarily move on and construct new places to open up fresh room for accumulation. And Le Sueur is careful to point out the devastating impact capital flight can have upon regional place: the old village, she writes, becomes a ghost town. The ensuing crisis results, as David Harvey puts it, from capitalism’s drive to “create a social and physical landscape in its own image and requisite to its own needs at a particular point in time, only just as certainly to undermine, disrupt and even destroy that landscape at a later point in time” (Justice 333). Moreover, as the regional space becomes less coherent, identities, too,
become increasingly unstable; no longer the “Fellers” or “whistle punks,” they are like “sheep,” wandering in the wake of “passing…industry” (135). Here Le Sueur’s point is clear enough: “the dissolution of regional places amounts to a loss of identity” (Justice 308). Midwesterners, reduced to the equivalent of herd animals, were left with little choice between blindly following the flows of capital in pursuit of economic and social stability and wandering a ravaged and depleted landscape. Le Sueur witnessed first-hand how either option often culminated in disorienting experiences of dispossession and a profound sense of alienation for many people in the region. Such was the case for Le Sueur’s own grandfather, who she claims, became “so ill…that he got drunk and sat in a corn field in Iowa for two years without speaking” only to be buried sometime later with “a picture of Ingersoll on his coffin” (135).

While Midwesterners share a uniquely transient history in relation to the geography of capitalist accumulation, one characterized by uncertainty and movement as process of capital unevenly developed the region, Le Sueur locates the possibility for regional class alliances precisely within this shared experience of movement between places. She describes this movement “on the range [and in] the wheat belt, the coal fields, the blown and ravaged land of the Dakotas, the flour mill, the granaries” as a movement toward “something better” (135). And for Le Sueur, the “something better” are secure communities characterized by social cohesion and solidarity.

For Le Sueur, cultivating a literary movement comprised of writers, who by virtue of shared experiences of dispossession, alienation and transience, was integral to building new communities of resistance around affective experiences and class solidarity. It was precisely from these places, that Le Sueur believed a broader, progressive movement could emerge. In her speech, Le Sueur makes a somewhat ambiguous claim about language: “Writing,” Le Sueur
argues, “is nearer experience than a trade. This is a new and buried body of experience the skilled writer can help draw up and refresh his own knowing at the same time. The emphasis must not simply be on skill and technique, but on a new experience, a communal relationship and revolutionary ideology” (137). This view of writing as a social activity—a philosophy and practice—in which history (experience) is grasped would guide Le Sueur’s work throughout her career. In a letter written to her biographer, Neala Schleuning, years after she delivered the speech, Le Sueur elucidates her view of writing as socially and politically necessary:

You wrote in a Socialist world more like a prophet, a conduit for the suffering of your people. A cry out…a whoop or a holler—more like the ballads of the people come to sing sorrow—a common sorrow….I look upon writing as a revealment, underground, subversive exposition (sic). I mean exposing the enemy. Remarks on Kansas caves, underground journals, newspapers, leaflets, posters, mass chants. To write to expose and to rouse, awaken, wake up. Watch out. Art as action, as deep image of struggle and not bourgeois reflection. (qtd. Schleuning 120)

For Le Sueur, writing is a political activity in which social injustices are revealed; it is a important tool by which we might begin to create a blueprint for a “something better,” and she champions such skilled writers in her speech as James Farrell, Jack Conroy, and Nelson Algren, whose writings illustrate how cultural forms can be used to articulate alternative spatial dynamics and relations. In comparison to “Corn Village,” Le Sueur’s speech articulates a more militant sense of the importance of place to political identity and action. Regional literature, she argues, functions as discourse and as such participates in the production of regional identities, especially when it strives to express collective, locally circumscribed experience.
In this sense, Le Sueur regionalism, with its heavy emphasis on the importance of place, is what Raymond Williams would call militant particularism. For William’s, militant particularism is the idea that all political engagement is grounding in place:

The unique and extraordinary character of working class self-organization has been that it has tried to connect particular struggles to a general struggle in one quite special way. It has tried set out, as a movement, to make real what is at first sight the extraordinary claim that the defence and advancement of certain particular interests, properly brought together, are in fact the general interest. (qtd. JNS 32)

In other words, political engagement begins locally; it’s particular and affirms ideas and solidarities, which then “extends out from its own local and community experience to a much more general movement” (qtd. in Justice 32). Le Sueur’s characterization of progressive regionalism is, indeed, a form of militant particularism. Her speech is a rhetorical strategy organized around a set of ideals intended to regional identifications an orient Midwesterner toward engaging local conflict.

Therefore, Le Sueur recognizes the importance of sharing localized, communal experience and the value of organizing the many unknown working-class men and women and encouraging them to write (recall: writing was as important a political action for Le Sueur as the picket line). In her speech, she champions worker writers for playing an integral role in the construction of progressive regional places and political identities. “Last winter,” she noted, “a hundred and fifty women from factory and farm wrote down their great proletarian experience under slight guidance. This was not only a terrific and gigantic experience of an exploited and dispossessed class, it was also, fragmentary perhaps, literature” (137). This commitment to democratizing writing was for Le Sueur a commitment she maintained all her life. For instance,
in 1939 when Le Sueur was then working for the Minnesota Works Progress Administration, she authored a manual designed to help instruct workers on developing basic literary techniques by which they could articulate their experience and expand in the process the canon of American:

Our literature which has been the possession of only a handful of people, a small group whose experience has become more and more limited and parasitic, is changing to become something created by those who participate first hand in productive life. We are learning that the word as a tool is likely to be used best by the worker, the producer. Who has kept language alive, freshened it out of his or her own experience? Who put the new words in the dictionary? It’s the worker who has the new experiences first, who makes up a word, adds a word, creates new tools as need in the work….We want to share a rich, communal experience. (Worker 5)

“Proletarian Literature and the Middle West” calls for the establishment of a space for these worker writers within the existing relations of radical cultural workers. Many of those in attendance at the conference were quite influential within the literary left, and yet they tended to ignore or trivialize regional concerns and the political implications of regional places in favor of broader, more universal considerations and abstractions, such as of the working-class, for instance. But Le Sueur was quick to remind them that “revolution can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as the wheat” (138).

Le Sueur’s promotion of a radical politics grounded in regional perspectives was a response to Philip Rahv’s censure a year earlier. Given the many reactionary and conservative regionalisms emerging during the period, it’s not entirely surprising why the cultural left would be wary of promoting regionalism as a literary-political movement. Despite, however, Le Sueur’s apparent failure to validate her brand of regionalism in the minds of her contemporaries
and initiate a broad cultural movement, her speech represents one of earliest and most formulated articulations within the literary left of the political implications of the militant particularism underscoring her regionalism. It provides the philosophical and ideological underpinning to her editorship of *Midwest*—a little magazine sponsored by the Midwest Federation of Arts and Professions, which Le Sueur launched the very next year. It was intended to coordinate the regional activities of a range of artists and writers’ groups and professional organizations in opposition to war and fascism and to defend them from “censorship, usually pitiful remuneration, and from...anti-cultural repression[”] (Midwest 2).

In 1936, the only year of its existence, Le Sueur published three full-length issues of *Midwest* before it, like many of the little magazines of the period, folded from lack of funding. However, the magazine played a crucial role in creating a space of collaboration and publication during a time when Le Sueur and many other Midwestern writers experienced a sense of isolation “particularly as their reputations became tarnished by the academic critics and former leftists who set up new cultural hierarchies in New York, anxious to divorce themselves from the taint of ‘vulgar populism, which they assigned to radical writers from Illinois small towns, Iowa farms, and Minnesota sawmills” (Wixson 455). The inaugural issue of *Midwest* is particularly significant because it reveals, for one, the energy of Le Sueur’s creativity and her commitment to promoting the “socially and politically conscious literature of place” that she discusses in her speech (Mickenberg 150). *Midwest* functioned, in part, as a point of convergence for both well-known and lesser-known radical and liberal Midwestern writers and artists, and functioned, therefore, as an important community-building device. On its editorial board sat, among others, Jack Conroy and Weldon Kees, a close friend of Mari Sandoz’s. In its first issue, *Midwest* featured an article by B.A. Botkin titled, “Regionalism: Cult or Culture?”; journalism on the
Spanish Civil War submitted by Hilde Abel; a short story title “Minnesota Portrait,” the first publication of Olive Felt Bosch, then wife of the president of the National Farm Holiday Association; poetry submitted by Edgar Lee Masters and Norman MacLeod—two Midwestern regionalists; books reviews on recent publications, including Dos Passos’s Big Money, Carl Sandburg’s The People, Yes, and James T. Farrell’s Judgment Day, the third novel in the Studs Lonigan trilogy; and a section titled “Midwest Letters” in which workers and farmers submitted stories about life and work in the region. While an in-depth analysis of the magazine is beyond the scope of this project, a brief look at Le Sueur’s piece “The American Way” illuminates the rhetorical strategies Le Sueur uses to promote the magazine’s progressive regionalism.

The article begins with a quotation from Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, in which Whitman wrests the concept of democracy from mere political rhetoric. Rather, democracy is practice that Whitman believes marks the “highest form of interaction between men” (5). He calls for a literature that draws inspiration from the particularities of local places and that aims to illuminate native traditions of “ensemble and equal brotherhood, the perfect equality of the States, the overarching American ideas” (5). Clearly, Whitman is asserting the active role such writers can perform in making “democratic ideas” available for circulation within the public sphere and thereby garner popular attachment to “democracy” via the aesthetic components of literature.

Whitman’s words would have resonated powerfully with readers sympathetic to leftist politics. Frequently cited in leftist literature, Whitman was used to emphasize the affective dimensions of political life in light of the perceived failure of the promises of American democracy. And in the “The American Way,” Le Sueur uses Whitman to recapitulates the litany of complaints made in her speech—it begins by presenting readers with a kind of tour of a
wasted and depleted Midwest. This tour serves as an occasion for reflection on the failure of democratic promises and to emphasize “that those who built the nation’s riches were its rightful inheritors” (Mickenberg 152).

Le Sueur associates Alfred Landon (then governor of Kansas and Republican Party nominee for President of the United States) and William Randolph Hearst with the corrosive confluences of politics and capitalism that have wreaked social and economic havoc on the region. Landon and Hearst, Le Sueur contends, “say a great deal about this being their country, about the American way of life. But it is doubtful, if, by virtue of care, good usage, or love, America belongs to them” (5). According to Le Sueur, Landon proffers an erroneous view of American life, what he refers to as the “American Way.” In his view, American life is best characterized by the image of “men and women together in homes, traveling from the cradle to the grave without ever feeling the coercive or directing hand of government except in so far as they may have transgressed the rights of others….The American way of life has left men and women free from these restrictions. Our people have been free to develop their own lives as they saw fit and co-operate with one another on a voluntary basis” (5). Le Sueur challenges his account and asks:

What else did the lead and zinc miners of Kansas think, were they not following the American way when they banded together to strike for improved conditions and a living wage. And Mr. Landon, as governor of the sunflower state, called out troops, used violence against the miners and broke the strike. And called out troops also against the relief protests in Fort Scott, where the American way of life provided a $1.08 a week for a family of three to live on. (5)
Rejecting Landon’s sense of the American way of life as defined by seemingly “free competition,” Le Sueur points to the campaign support he received from “the Rockefellers, Morgans, and duPonts” as well as from William Randolph Hearst, “ally of Hitler and Mussolini” (6). All of these people, Le Sueur claims, were “marauding competitors,” responsible for abusing the land and the people who lived and worked on it. Their sense of an “American Way,” was for Le Sueur based on opportunism and a belligerent sense of individualism. Worse, their American Way legitimized and sustained powerfully corrosive relations between capital and labor. Inspired by Whitman, Le Sueur argues that it was up to the “writers, artists, professionals, those who care for the traditions for which America has always stood” to check “their lying word” (5).

For Le Sueur, Midwest opens up a space for regional writers to refute deceptive political rhetoric and reconstruct the image of American life in the interest of progressive social change. Such change required collaboration and cooperation, and Midwest provided a means for tapping into a latent regional radicalism:

In the middle west the historical movement of pioneering, of the Populist movement, the great agrarian revolts against the piracy of eastern capital, against the looting of the prairies, and the forests, against the wanton destruction that has destroyed now the land, high bred herds, and has started upon the people themselves, taking toll of their rich, obscure and anonymous lives. These things must come alive and historically progress.

History is a thing you can feel and must feel. (6)

It is suggestive of the power and potential of the form of the little magazine to mediate a community of writers. The magazine is a collaborative project, the form of which suggests the extent to which the form might engender ideals, affirm experiences particular places and
generate regional solidarities. As such, the ideological underpinning of the magazine is that political engagement is facilitated in particular places. In this sense, the magazine presents a sense of the local that anticipates Harvey’s assertion that “for most people the terrain of sensuous experience and affective social relations (which forms the material grounding for consciousness formation and political action) is locally circumscribed” (Spaces 85). And yet despite this emphasis on the local, on the political implications of regions and regional places, the magazine is careful to avoid promoting conservative, exclusionary notions of the region as a bounded territory to be protected from outsiders or regional cultures and traditions as static relics of the past to be preserved and defended. To be sure, Le Sueur does privilege the long-standing image of the Midwest as “the most American part of America—egalitarian [and] progressive” (Mickenberg 148). And in “The American Way,” Le Sueur claims that the history and economics of America is inscribed in the landscape and the bodies of the unnamed and anonymous people of the Midwest. “In the face of the prairie women,” Le Sueur finds “written the history and economics and also the future” (6). While Le Sueur locates the seeds of radical democracy squarely in the Midwest, she extends the concept of radical, regional communities to a broader, model of progressive national culture:

Nothing should be remote to the growth of this profoundest culture, deepest meanings of place, race, nationality will absorb, effuse, itself, not like Tory’s to preserve by bloody violence dead and dying, but to create the further democratization of these states, to speak at last the rich speech that has been going on in the night, in the oppressed, in the low murmur in factory and city, to create and protect against the further ravages of madmen those ideals for which we have consistently fought and struggled. (32)
*Midwest* keeps in tension a dialectic of radical politics grounded in highly individualized creative expressions of regional places and regional identifications with a political aesthetic emphasizing a collective “we.” While short lived, *Midwest* suggests the potential role alternative modes of publication such as the little magazine have on defining regions and regional identities and creating new spaces for social exchange by which progressive collective identities can be defined and affective social relations established.
Chapter 2

Mobilities of Labor and Community in Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited*.

The Great Railroad Strike of 1922, otherwise known as the Railroad Shopmen’s Strike, was one of the most significant events in U.S. labor history. It occurred in the context of a postwar recession and a large-scale campaign organized by railway management to roll back wartime gains made by railroad unions in wages and working conditions. Representing a multitude of railroad executives, The Association of American Railway Executives (ARE) argued persuasively before the Wilson’s Railroad Labor Board (RLB) that the economic recession necessitated wage reductions and changes to work rules, such as abolishing overtime rates for work on Sundays and legal holidays. The railroad unions, represented by the American Federation of Labor’s Railroad Employees’ Department (AFL-RED), opposed ARE’s attempts to neutralize union power and vehemently opposed the board-sanctioned wage reductions and changes. ARE’s response to contract work out to non-union shops was the proverbial final straw for union members, and when the RLB refused multiple requests made by AFL-RED to resolve its dispute, the department organized a national strike. On July 1, 400,000 railroad workers walked off the job in what was one of the largest work stoppages in U.S. labor history.\(^\text{17}\) During the strike tension continued to mount between the strikers and the Railway executives. Conflict escalated, and in a particularly violent clash, approximately eleven people, mostly strikers and their family members, were killed by armed company guards and detectives.

The strike affected the lives of tens of thousands of people and disrupted numerous working-class communities across the nation. One such community was Moberly, Missouri, a

division point on the Wabash Railroad which ran west from “Montreal through Detroit to Illinois and beyond to Moberly and Kansas City” (Wixson 13). Like many railroad towns, the central station was the hub of Moberly. Expanding from this center was the roundhouse, offices, and machine and repair shops, which, combined, covered close to 25 acres.\(^{18}\) The machine shops alone employed over a thousand workers, and hundreds of workers lived in Moberly. It was more commonly referred to as “Magic City,” in light of its rapid growth in conjunction with the expansion of the railroads in the late 19\(^{\text{th}}\) Century. It was quite literally “a town that the railroad built” (Wixson 46).

Jack Conroy, who would in just a few years time become one of the central figures in the Midwestern literary radicalism movement, was a 23-year-old union member at the start of The Great Strike, working as a journeyman in the Wabash shops in Moberly. He came to Moberly from a nearby mining camp known as Monkey Nest where he was born. Hoping to avoid the fate of his father Tom, a miner and militant union leader, and his two brothers, Everett and Joseph, all of whom died in separate mining accidents, Conroy began an apprenticeship in the Wabash shops. The close proximity between work spaces and residential locations helped reinforce workers’ collective identities and establish a sense of community:

The Wabash shops formed…occupational subculture with…initiation rites and storytelling. It had a union ‘brotherhood,’ with its emphasis on self-improvement and mutual assistance, and an identification with an industry that had some of the richest legends and history of any, a site of labor struggle and a symbol of America’s growing industrial strength (Wixson 48).

Organized around the Wabash shops, Moberly was, at least before the strike, overwhelmingly in support of labor, and Conroy embraced the Wabash working-class community and the labor

\(^{18}\) Roundhouses are generally circular or semi-circular buildings used for servicing locomotives.
activism that thrived in the town. He was an avid reader, having been inspired by his mother’s own literary interests, and as a young boy he produced his own broadsheets on camp life which he circulated among the miners and their families. As he worked his way toward becoming a master mechanic, “car toad” as was called in the shop, he honed his writing skills as recording secretary for his union local. As a regular contributor to the *Railway Carmen’s Journal*, a monthly union paper intended “to instruct and ‘elevate,’” Conroy regularly reported on wage reductions, lay-offs, and assaults against union members in Moberly. Despite considerable effort made by union members to avoid a strike, on July 1st Conroy joined nearly seven hundred Wabash shopmen and walked out in solidarity with railroad workers across the country.

Despite some concessions made, the Great Railroad Strike of 1922 was generally considered a loss by labor. In Moberly, however, the outcome was particularly severe. The Moberly strike and community support of labor was deeply affected by localized violence that was perpetrated by armed guards on company payroll and replacement workers as well as violence committed by strikers. The pivotal moment for the Wabash community, though, occurred on December 1st, 1922, when one striker, George Comstock, was shot to death by Loring Heddinghaus, a replacement worker who was assaulted by Comstock and several other strikers while on his way home from work in the shops. Most of Moberly’s residents sympathized with Comstock’s family, but the violence weakened many workers’ commitment to the strike. Moreover, it soured public sympathy and support of the strike, which the striking workers relied on. A particularly harsh winter forced many strikers to leave Moberly in search of jobs elsewhere. Many never returned. Without question, the Comstock incident, if not caused, certainly hastened the dissolution of the Wabash work community.

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19 In the Wabash shops a “car toad” was the highest repairman position one could hold without entering management.
The strikers’ defeat in Moberly was a defining moment in Conroy’s life. In the immediate aftermath of the Comstock killing, credit dried up for the strikers and their families. As strikebreakers’ wages began circulating in Moberly, they quickly gained acceptance. Radical working-class culture no longer dominated Moberly. Instead, what became increasingly clear to Conroy was an increasing and disturbingly antagonistic divide between the interests of labor and the business class. Conroy lamented the breaking up of what was once a strong, working-class community committed to developing its trade and committed to collective political action and solidarity. Not long after the defeat of the strike, Conroy, wrote a letter to the editor of the *Moberly Weekly Monitor* in which he bemoaned “The cold, commercial spirit…and unbridled greed for wealth that brought about the dissolution of the Deserted Village is seething in the hearts of some Moberly men….Surely Moberly’s merchants are unwilling to sell the respect and friendship of their patrons for the goblin gold of the Wabash birds of passage” (qtd. in Dixson 85).

In a later interview, Conroy recalled how “The Depression started early for me” (qtd. in Wixson 72). The events of the Great Strike and the defeat in Moberly provided Conroy direct engagement with the powerful forces of business and the U.S. government, sealing his commitment to working class solidarity and collaboration. Ultimately, economic necessity forced Conroy, too, to leave Moberly in search of work. He had by then a family to support. In 1931, nearly a decade later, Conroy returned to Moberly after “tramping” across the Midwest in an endless pursuit of work for nearly a decade. Back in Moberly he joined the ranks of the unemployed. The strike and the dissolution of working class community shattered any illusions about achieving the American Dream. Rather, as Wixson notes, “another course of action appeared”: that of the worker/writer. It was during this time that Conroy committed to writing.

20 A colloquial term in the period for hopping freight trains as a free, though illegal, means of transportation.
He felt compelled to tell the story of what he had witnessed, what he experienced first-hand as one of the dispossessed millions. Like many politically-minded writers of the time, Conroy believed in the power of art to elevate consciousness. But the material conditions of his life never afforded him the luxury of writing full-time. Instead, he worked manual labor jobs during most of his life, in steel mills, rubber factories, on highway paving crews, and in auto factories across the Midwest. In the evenings, he struggled to stave off sleep long enough to write about what he’d seen or heard or felt in these work spaces. His first literary publications were short stories in radical journals, such as *New Masses* and *American Mercury*[^21]. By the early 1930s, Conroy was not only an icon of, but also a strong advocate for, the figure of the worker-writer. In a speech at the first American Writers’ Congress in 1935 Conroy argued that the worker-writer’s task is to:

> [V]ivify the daily struggles, the aspirations, triumphs, despairs of the future masters of life—the workers….Our first duty is to attempt an interpretation of those aspects of American life important to the masses, and the next duty is to communicate this material as simply and clearly as we are able to the largest body of readers we can command.

(“The Worker as Writer” 86)

By the time Conroy delivered this speech, he was a bit of a celebrity among U.S. leftist writers and critics, embodying Mike Gold’s ideal of the worker-writer. Conroy had by then published his first novel, *The Disinherited*, after much encouragement by H.L. Mencken. Among scholars of the U.S. literary left, *The Disinherited* is considered “one of the more important and effective works of American proletarian fiction from the 1930s” (Booker 70). *The

[^21]: Conroy credits H.L. Mencken for helping launch his writing career. In an interview with Robert Thompson, Conroy recalls fondly Mecken’s mentorship: “H.L. Menken…knocked a lot of the romance out of me. A great gentleman was Mencken. Despite his jeering at the wood tick and the Bible belt, he was naturally a very gentle and tender heart. He did more than anybody else towards getting me started” (149).
*Disinherited* is a fictionalized autobiography of Larry Donovan, a character whose experience is based on the raw material of Conroy’s actual experiences traversing the Midwest during the late 1920s in search of work. His goal in writing the novel was to “vivify the contemporary fact,” a phrase he borrowed from Whitman (qtd. in Thomspoon152), by illuminating and dramatizing working class experience and marginalized people and places. It draws on regional traditions of orality and humor to represent working class dialect and speech, thereby giving voice to those many people who Conroy felt too often left no record of their own existence behind.

While much of the scholarship on the novel focuses on the “authenticity” of Conroy’s representations of working class life or the question of the novel’s status as a “radical” novel, in what follows I present a geography of the novel in which I focus attention on representations of space and spatiality and how characters are depicted as moving (or not) through these spaces of labor activity. In what follows, I argue that *The Disinherited* maps the ways in which class struggle is organized spatially in and across geographic scales. As Larry Donovan’s experience traversing the Midwest demonstrates, not only do the demands of capital often require labor to move in and out of scales of activity, but in these places of activity labor and capital struggle over how to shape and control mobility. Mobility is not an unfamiliar theme in Depression-era writing, a theme in the many migration narratives published during the period. John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* is, perhaps, the most popular migration narrative, but like many narratives in this tradition, migration is depicted as a profoundly negative experience for people during the Great Depression. I argue that *The Disinherited* presents a more complex perspective on migratory labor. Indeed, the novel charts Larry Donovan’s migration in search of employment, and in the course of the narrative readers are presented with vivid, often heart-wrenching images of struggle and the precariousness of life on the road. However, it offers more than mere
fictionalized reports of the experience of migration and labor conditions in particular places. Larry’s movement across the region, through urban and rural places, links seemingly disconnected individuals and places. His migration following the paths of capital, then, functions as act of affirmation of a common experience, a common humanity, among workers in seemingly discrete and disparate places. The novel is a representation of how labor migration can create the conditions by which workers establish ideological and material linkages between localized places, thereby providing contour and giving shape to a region and regional identities. In establishing these linkages, a sense of regional identity and community is not only created within the novel, but by making a particular community “knowable” to readers, The Disinherited is suggestive of the ways in which regional literature can connect local histories of social and political struggle to broader terrains of social experience.

I.

For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.---Walter Benjamin, Illuminations.

Published in 1933 at the nadir of The Great Depression, The Disinherited tells the story of Larry Donovan’s political education culminating from his childhood in a mining camp through the tumultuous work experiences he has as a young adult. It represents, notes Conroy in the introduction to the 1982 edition of the novel, “writing done over a period of years while I studied as a participant the effects of joblessness in various parts of the country and in different industries” (25). His intention in writing the novel, he later notes, was “to be a witness to the times, to show how it feels to be without work and with no prospect of any, and with the imminent fear of starvation, to move people to think about these things, and, what was more
important, to do something about it” (28). Conroy drew heavily from his own experience, but not in an attempt to simply report. Rather, Conroy strives to provide readers with an affective geography, sense of particular places of labor and the social relations and structures produced within these spaces.

In comparison to much proletarian fiction published in the decade, *The Disinherited* is unique insofar as it avoids reductively universalizing or essentializing the worker. Donovan’s character, in other words, is not made to represent the homogenous “worker of the world,” the proletariat as the universal agent of historical change who is depicted towing this or that party line. This fact was a point of contention among many Marxist critics of the time who “complained that Larry Donovan was an untypical specimen, not representative of the main body of workers, especially the militant workers” (*Disinherited*, “Introduction” 27). Rather, the novel emphasizes the ways in which capitalism organizes and shapes social life and the ways in which workers, too, shape the geography of capitalism. In a departure from the tendencies of literary naturalism to interpret human experience as entirely determined by external forces, *The Disinherited* registers social life dialectically and relationally in which humans beings shape their environments which in turn shape human character. As Donovan traverses Midwestern spaces in search of work, he is embroiled in the social and environmental degradation brought about by processes of capitalist uneven development; moreover, the transformation of Donovan’s character (i.e. his heightened political consciousness) occurs in relation to transformations of working spaces. Conroy’s imperative to represent “the times” results in the production of geographical knowledge in which readers come to understand place/space as relational sites of situated struggle.
Conroy’s geographical imagination focuses on two concerns: the first is location, and the second is the worker’s mobility in relation to capitalist geographies of production and consumption. Conroy’s representations of place in the novel anticipates David Harvey’s claim that “for most people the terrain of sensuous experience and of affective social relations (which forms the material grounding for consciousness formation and political action) is locally circumscribed by the sheer fact of the material embeddedness of the body and the person in the particular circumstances of localized life” (*Space of Hope* 85). The local, in other words, is the scale of familiarity and experience, a site from which identities are constituted and affiliations established. In *The Disinherited*, The Monkey Nest coal camp, a small mining community outside of Moberly, Missouri, is represented as a powerfully decisive terrain of affective experience. It functions as the controlling metaphor of the novel—one that imagines the spatiality of capitalism and how space influences the social lives of workers.

The beginning of the novel presents readers with a haunting image of Monkey Nest, a vacated mining camp. The novel begins with what is in effect a conclusion:

The Monkey Nest coal mine tipple stood twenty years; its dirt dump grew from a diminutive hillock among the scrub oaks to the height of a young mountain. Stubborn shrubs, wiry grasses, and persistent dewberries struggled for a roothold on it, but the leprous soapstone resists all vegetable growth, even decay. Cold and white like the belly of some deep-sea monster incongruously cast out of the depths, the dump dominated Monkey Nest Camp like an Old World cathedral towering over peasants’ huts. To begin with, Mr. Stacpoole, the owner, had christened the mine the Eagle, but the miners had decided otherwise. Somebody had dubbed it the Monkey Nest, and so it remained—so it is yet in the memory of those who recall it or its history. (39)
This vivid passage depicts Monkey Nest as a kind of waste land, devoid of human life and activity. The “dump” appears to have taken on a life of its own—one that stands in antagonistic relation to what might be thought of as the natural environment. In the vicinity of the growing dump, Monkey Nest appears as a space where the natural order of things, the cycles of “growth” and “decay,” life and death, are seemingly suspended by the power of a monstrous “Other.” Moreover, the dump stands as a monstrous monument of sorts to a previous labor process that produced something horrific and unnatural, and in the likening of the dump to an image of an Old World cathedral with connotations of servitude, hierarchy, supremacy, domination, repression, social forces are obscured by what appear to be larger than local, supernatural forces. In this light, the camp appears both alien and alienating, a blighted, restricted place of refuse and disposal, a sign of departure from what is right or normal.

Although it is the daily work of the peasant-miners that cast the “leprous soapstone” “out of the depths,” an activity that arrests growth and suppresses decay, their labor and their complicity with the production of the place is implied. This passage parallels in certain ways Marx’s concerns, particularly in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* but also in *Capital*, over alienated labor. At the center of the concept alienation is Marx’s theory of species being, what many scholars interpret to be a theory of human nature: humans are inherently inquisitive, creative beings whose ontological vocation (i.e. labor) is to actively transform the world around them. Most importantly, for Marx, humans are social beings embedded in a world of nature, and in volume I of *Capital*, he construes social and environmental history dialectically through the concept of labor:

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through, his own actions, mediates, regulates, controls the metabolism between himself
and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. (283)

The central theme of alienation, then, involves the predicament humans experience when they are prevented or restricted from realizing their species being, that “conscious life-activity” (Economic 76) of creative social and environmental transformation. The alienated laborer, however, instead of experiencing himself as the active agent of his labor in relation to other people and to nature, the alienated individual feels estranged from both. One dimension of Marx’s theory of alienated labor, then, concerns the relationship of the worker to the products of his/her labor, when “the worker confronts the commodity as “something alien, as a power independent of the producer” (71).

Another dimension of alienation concerns the production process. In commodity production, the laborer expends labor-power to produce a commodity that is not for the satisfaction of his own needs, but rather produces a commodity to satisfy needs external to the laborer. Marx continues:

The external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual—that is, operates on him as his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (74)
The worker’s labor, in this sense, doesn’t belong to him; it is not the product of the worker’s conscious engagement. The alien being is not god or a diabolical nature; it can only be, Marx argues, “man himself.” In a capitalist society, alienation is caused by the exploitation of the laboring class by capitalists, owners of private property (i.e. the means of production). Marx continues, “If the product of labor does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker. If the worker’s activity is a torment to him, to another it must be delight and his life’s joy. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man” (Economic 79).

In the passage from The Disinherited quoted above, the mine camp appears to have been constituted around alienating forces of power and we are left to imagine the ways in which the social life of the miners who once worked in that space played out. After gesturing toward a sort of odd combination of supernatural and terrestrial powers, the passage settles on the figure of Mr. Stacpoole, “the owner, [who] had christened the mine Eagle.” Stacpoole’s naming of the mine is both a claim of ownership, one that symbolizes class relations and the miners’ alienation. The miners’ job is to bring about transformations in the geographical landscape that benefit Stacpoole and his company. But the passage also gestures toward place as a locus of oppositional politics. As Harvey notes, “estrangement from immediate sensuous engagement with nature [our species being] is an essential moment in consciousness formation. It therefore is a step on a path towards emancipation and self-realization” (Justice 197-98). In what might be interpreted as a step, albeit a minor one, in the direction of emancipation, the miners reject the name given to the mine by Stacpoole: “Somebody had dubbed it the Monkey Nest, and so it remained—so it is yet in the memory of those who recall it or its history.” On the one hand, Conroy suggests naming contributes to how a space is lived or experienced. In response to what
is an alienating space, renaming is a creative act, one through which identities are constituted.

Identity and solidarity established among those who remember.

History and memory, then, are vital to the meaning of Monkey Nest and to understanding how the miners’ lives were spatially embedded. However, as Harvey argues in *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* “history and memory in places are quite distinct from one another.” Walter Benjamin, he notes, provides a frame for understanding this distinction: “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory that flashes up at a moment of danger” (179). In other words, history fixes in time and secures events to the past in the form of particular narratives, whereas memory is incomplete and fragmented; it is an unanticipated response during a moment of crisis. Memory of this kind works to connect seemingly disparate events (179). For Benjamin, then, different historical moments have different moments of legibility. Consciously attending to the moment of legibility is, for Benjamin, the task of the historian concerned with class struggle: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (*Illuminations* 255). Memory of the past, as opposed to historicizing the past, Benjamin suggests, provides occasions for critical ruptures of dominant discourses. Memory initiates movement toward hope, toward imagining future possibilities. And as Harvey suggests, the link Benjamin establishes between memory and hope has considerable significance for understanding the politics of place: “The preservation or construction of a sense of place is then an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to future. This is, one suspects, why so many people locate the possibility of politics in actual places. Places are
sites of collective memories that hold out the prospects for different futures” (*Cosmopolitanism* 178).

If place is the locus of collective memory and meaning, then a key question regarding the novel becomes what kind of place, ultimately, is Monkey Nest? If it’s both a place of entrapment and possibility, what strategies does Conroy use to construct this sense of the place? What memories are attached to place and what prospects do these memories hold for alternative futures? In contrast to the image of Monkey Nest as both threatening and alienating material place, Monkey Nest is also a relational space in which Larry experiences a sense of community. The gravity and solemnity of the place as it was described in the first passages is punctuated by Larry’s memory of the mine as a place of playfulness and humor. Larry recalls Old Man Vaughn, a seasoned miner, scooping him up by the arms and swinging him down into the mine shaft, “then he threatened to keep me there indefinitely” (39). Rather than induce terror, Larry recognized Old Man Vaughn’s actions for what they were: “miners’ joshing” (39). However, Larry’s memory holds a sense of the place in dialectical tension between degradation and elevation:

Three taciturn Italians were slicing the tough white clay with keen tile spades and throwing it clear of the edge, grunting ‘hah!’ at each spadeful. Mike Riordan, the peg-leg sailor, was in the pit, and so was Larry Stafford. Stafford was ruefully peeling blisters off his white hands. He said something to Mike about the iniquity of a world which forced a man with a bachelors degree to toil at such arduous labor. Mike couldn’t spade with his peg, and if he bore down too hard on it, it sank into the earth. So he shoveled the crumbs from the Italians’ and Stafford’s spades. He pinched me playfully, and then gazed nonchalantly in another quarter. (39)
With the image of three Italians “grunting ‘hah!’ at each spadeful, Conroy works to hold in tension the sense of place that is both communal, life affirming and life threatening. On the one hand, “hah!” is an interjection, a meaningless utterance in conjunction with the physical act of digging. On the other hand, “hah!” is an exclamation that can be used to express, among other things, surprise, wonder, suspicion, and indignation. But “hah!” also connotes sarcastic or mocking laughter, and in this usage can be read as the Italians’ laughter in spite of the tediousness and drudgery of their labor. Insofar as “hah!” might be an involuntary response to the physical exertion of their labor, it represents something beyond them, something external to the miners, echoing back to them, perhaps, from the mine itself.

There is, though, a sense in which all of these meanings of “hah!” can be read in the passage simultaneously, providing an interesting backdrop to Stafford’s complaints, positioned as he is between the Italians and Mike Riordan. While his education apparently over-qualifies him for the “arduous”, seemingly condescending, labor of digging a mine shaft, the sense of repeated “hahs!” being uttered seems to mock his complaints, and in doing so there is a comic undertone to the image of Stafford with an inflated self-worth complaining about the “iniquity of a world” beyond his control. Yet, Stafford’s complaints and the physical toll of his labor in the pit underscore the level of human depravity experienced by Mike, who, because of his disability, is forced to shovel crumbs “from the Italians’ and Stafford’s spades.” Yet, Mike’s actions to “pinch [Larry] playfully” momentarily suspends the sense of indignation and degradation of the work.

This suspension of drudgery in light of conscious joviality is carried over immediately into the next scene in which Old Man Vaughn calls Larry over to examine the bottom of crawfish hole he uncovered while digging:
Looky here, Larry….A dad-blamed crawdad’s hole and a crawpappy hisself at the bottom of it. I’ve followed that scoundrel from the grassroots and here’s the bottom o’ his hole finally. You know, when I’ve been diggin’ a ditch or somethin’, lots o’ times I strike a crawdad’s hole, and wonder just how far it runs in the ground. But I never did see the bottom o’ one before, did you?

The crawfish, a small lobster-like creature, angered and bewildered at this rude violation of his retreat, waved furious and menacing pinchers. Vaughn was delighted, having realized a long-cherished ambition; and I was tickled, too, because I had often wondered just how far a crawfish burrowed into the soil. I have felt that thrill of accomplishment only a few times since. (39)

In this passage, the image of Vaughn stands in stark contrast to that of Stafford for whom digging is alienated labor, “a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification” (Marx, Economic 74). Stafford’s labor yields only bitterness and blisters, whereas Vaughn’s digging is both divorced from and a condition of the alienating labor of the mine. In “realizing a long-cherished ambition,” Vaughn’s labor satisfies a kind of natural inquiry. What on the surface appears to be the satisfaction of a relatively banal and childish curiosity can be read as Vaughn’s, albeit momentary, reassertion of what David Harvey calls ‘species being.’ Taking his lead from Marx, Harvey sees ‘species being’ as an attempt to articulate a working definition of human nature, albeit in relative terms: “We are, at root, curious and transformative beings endowed with vivid imaginations and a certain repertoire of possibilities that we have learned to put together in different ways at different places and times” (Spaces of Hope 208). If this conception of “species being” suggests that “we are at root curious and transformative beings,” then being in command or control of one’s practices of inquiry is fundamental to one’s humanity. In this light,
following the crawdad hole was, for Vaughn, an opportunity to explore and satisfy a genuine curiosity of his own. There is, then, something subversive about the way he transforms the labor of the mine into something seemingly removed from the processes of production. His labor at this moment was not “merely a means to satisfy needs external to it” (Marx, *Economics* 74). Rather, if alienated labor is equivalent to dehumanization, “following the crawdad hole” was for Vaughn a movement of inquiry toward humanization. And this is, perhaps, what Larry gleans and experiences as a “thrill of accomplishment.” Yet, there are, of course, limitations to this reading. Old Man Vaughn’s creative play occurs in the process of digging the mine shaft. While he may have satisfied a “long-cherished ambition,” he did so in the context of what is an overall alienating work experience. In other words, his humanization through inquiry was temporary. After the discovery, Vaughn still finds himself in a pit in the shadow of the Monkey Nest’s tipple, which Larry notes is “like a gallows, especially if you chance to see its black timbers etched against a setting sun; and the cage dangles from the cathead like a hangman’s rope” (40). Vaughn’s momentary departure from the dictates of work to his own motivated labor concludes with him standing in the shadow of a monument to and symbol of his alienation, holding what some refer to as a “mud bug,” underscoring a rather humble accomplishment.

II.

From the outset of the novel, Monkey Nest is depicted as both a place of death and deformation as well as a place of tenuous safety and community. Conroy maintains this duality in respect to places of work throughout the novel. In Monkey Nest, for instance, inhabitants are depicted as collectively embedded in practical, particular activities of reproducing themselves and their social relations “through working, consuming, living, engaging in sexual relations, reproducing, communicating, and sensually/existentially engaging the world” (Harvey,
Cosmopolitanism 238). And these activities effectively bound a piece of space, thereby defining the place. As a particular place, then, Monkey Nest is contingent upon the “relational processes that create [and] sustain” it (Harvey, Cosmopolitanism 190). As such, it is marked by exclusions, and this is evidenced in the friction between the miners and farmers in novel.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, miners were racially and ethnically diverse. Mining was, for the most part, an occupation that only the most desperate sought. Miners as a class “were scorned by farmers, who bore prejudices against ‘foreigners,’ dirt and strange ways” (Wixson 30). “The farmer boys were our natural enemies,” Larry recalls, “and because of our communal life we easily triumphed in every combat….Smarting under the implication—and, alas, the conviction—of social inferiority, we battled with extraordinary ferocity, fashioning spears out of horse weeds that grew rank in the creek bottoms, and charging the fleeing hinds with all the fervor of King Arthur in the lists of Camelot” (42). Larry recalls an occasion when he attempted to introduce himself to Bonny Fern, a local farmer’s daughter for whom he had been developing romantic feelings. After presenting her with a flower that he “hunted and hunted,” one he thought she’d like, he inadvertently identified himself as a “camp kid” (44). Bonny shrieked and fell back from Larry “as from a leper.” In response, Bonny’s father Ben, “the most prosperous farmer thereabout” (43), raced across the field, chasing Larry, the “young shitepoke,” away. To Ben, as well as the local farmers whose fields lay just beyond the densely wooded hillside that surrounded Monkey Nest, Larry and the other camp kids embodied all of the undesirable characteristics of the miners; in the farmers’ eyes they were merely “camp trash” (44). Larry recalls the painful and humiliating moment when Ben chased him away from Bonny: “He fired clods at me as I retreated hastily into the woods. The clods were soft; they burst on tree trunks and showered me with dirt, but the hurt sank deep and
intensified as I ran” (45). It is not just the particular labor and social activities of the place that constitute class identity and relations. Class identity and class relations in Monkey Nest, as this passage suggest, are construed between space and place. Larry’s interaction with local farmers, then, essentially brings him into relation with a wider world. Recurring feelings of social inferiority, the unrelenting sense that “camp children were pariahs everywhere they went,” contribute to Larry’s developing class consciousness and identification with miners and the Monkey Nest community (72).

While the meaning of the term community is contested among scholars, Raymond Williams suggests that despite the variegated ways in which it is used, “unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be giving any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (Key Words 76). As a social space, Monkey Nest represents a sense of community informed by shared identity and collective activities in a bounded space, but it’s also community in a negative sense. As suggested above, the collective memory that is inscribed in Monkey Nest contributes to a sense of collective identity and belonging. Yet, what bonds the miners and their families so tightly, is the ever-present threat of death. “The mine,” warns Larry’s father Tom, “is a tomb and once the earth gets over you, it’s hard to hump up and cast it off. It crushes them all in the end” (41). With two young sons working in the mine, their childhoods robbed from them, and already “bowed double,” too tired to do more than limp “into the house to bed” each night, Tom recognizes that it’s only a matter of time before the mine “crushes them all.” He urges Larry to “study hard;” education, it seems, is the only path out of Monkey Nest. However, the notion of education as a means of escape, as a way out, is undermined by both Tom and Stafford’s experience. Although
both men possessed a “superior education,” implying social and economic mobility, they both remain “fixed” in Monkey Nest with seemingly no prospects of escape.

The circumstances of their arrival to the camp are not entirely clear. What readers do learn about Tom, though, is that he made his way to Monkey Nest from Montreal where “he had been a priest,” experiencing at some point what appears to have been a loss of faith (45) When asked by Larry and his daughter Madge about a rosary and crucifix they found in his desk, Tom angrily exclaims, “Beads! Nothing but beads!...and this is a bit of gold, nothing else” (45). Long before miners in the camp discovered Tom was educated, “Everybody wondered why Father worked in the mines” (52). Stafford’s presence in the camp was a “mystery, too,” the only explanation offered is that “Some grotesque whim of Fate had deposited him in Monkey Nest” (45). Education it seems is not a guarantee of socio-economic mobility. Moreover, while some “miners occasionally escaped from Monkey Nest camp to the outer world,” Larry notes, “…Father never did. His face became speckled more and more with blue lumps of coal under the skin. His shoulders stooped and his breathing was tortured by asthma” (59). Tom’s body bears the tell-tale markings of a miner living on borrowed time. He’s aware of the signs, knows the dangers, and yet he remains rooted in place: “I’m in a deep ravine,” Tom says, “with no path to the heights again. I must follow my rut to the end” (41).

With the exception of a rare few, most miners do not escape Monkey Nest. The “deep ravine” Tom finds himself in, his rootedness in Monkey Nest, calls into question the conditions that govern his mobility. Tom’s embeddedness, his entrapment, in the camp is the effect of both economic necessity as well as a willful commitment to working class struggle. Simply leaving Monkey Nest for something better doesn’t present itself as an option for Tom. On the one hand, the fact that two highly educated individuals are “forced to toil at such arduous and menial labor”
suggests that there might not be any better place to move to. So while Tom is free to sell his labor power for whatever purpose and to whomever he chooses, the irony is, as Marx makes clear in *Capital*, “he has no other commodity for sale, [he] is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labour power” (qtd. in *Limits* 380). In other words, he has no other option than to sell his labor power to capitalists in order to survive. Relocating would simply result in being situated in another place of social and political struggle with capital. The miners can either flee Monkey Nest to seek a better life elsewhere, or they can remain in Monkey Nest and fight.

Choosing to leave poses a particularly challenging burden on the miners; it would mean leaving, ironically, a place of relative social security and support, an established way of life (though tenuous and precarious), a place in which the residents of Monkey Nest have worked to build what Harvey would call “an island of strength…within a sea of class struggle” (*Limits* 384). Through the creative efforts of miners and their families, “networks of personal contacts,…support systems and elaborate coping mechanisms within the family and community, institutional protections…[and] mechanisms for political mobilization” (*Limits* 384) were established in Monkey Nest. And for many miners and their families, such as Donovan, this was worth fighting for.

In Monkey Nest the fight most often took the form of the strike. By striking, Tom and fellow miners fought to gain control over the conditions of their labor as well as protect their “island of strength.” This culminated for Tom in a deep loyalty to the community and is seen most explicitly in the novel in Tom’s unwavering contempt for scabs. In one scene, an unknowing scab knocks on Tom’s door in the middle of a stormy night requesting directions to town: “Before he finished, Father emerged from his trance and plugged him a resounding smack on the jaw. Then he scrambled to his feet and sloshed off into the night before Father could
wrench his shotgun from its antlers above the door. ‘You scab! You damned scab!’ he roared, the shotgun booming and a red flash momentarily lighting the doorway” (58). With powder fumes still lingering, Tom gathered the children, crying passionately “Boys! Boys! Listen to me! If you must be one, be a thief, a murderer, anything, but don’t ever be a scab! You hear me? Don’t ever be a scab!” (58).

At first glance, it may seem difficult to see scabbing, taking a striking worker’s job, as a worse moral transgression than theft and/or murder, in which case Tom’s imperative can seem like the kind of political rhetoric and didacticism that many critics of proletarian literature find so unsavory (a thinly-veiled imperative to readers). Yet, it is important to note that historically scabbing has constituted a very real and formidable threat to organized labor and the lives of many involved in class struggle. And in the United States, organized labor has remained particularly hostile to scabs.

In a speech titled “The Scab” given before the Oakland Socialist Party Local on April 5, 1903, Jack London illuminates the motivations for the deep-seated contempt organized labor has toward scabs. As one who “gives more value for the same price than another,” the scab is an inevitable consequence of capitalist society, what London refers to as a “tooth-and-nail” society (4). In what is a more balanced account of scab labor than London is typically given credit for his speech, illuminates the extent to which scab labor is a matter of life and death. 22 The opening is worth quoting at length:

22 For instance, London’s views on scab labor have often been attributed in the labor movement to a short, caustic denunciation similarly titled “Scab”: “After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad and the vampire, he had some awful substance left with which He made a SCAB. A SCAB is a two-legged animal with a cork-screw soul, a water-logged brain and a combination backbone made of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts he carries a tumor of rotten principles….A strikebreaker is a traitor to his God, his country, his family and his class.”
[H]e who takes from a man's purse takes from his existence. To strike at a man's food and shelter is to strike at his life; and in a society organized on a tooth-and-nail basis, such an act, performed though it may be under the guise of generosity, is none the less menacing and terrible…When a striker kills with a brick the man who has taken his place, he has no sense of wrong-doing. In the deepest holds of his being, though he does not reason the impulse, he has an ethical sanction. He feels dimly that he has justification, just as the home-defending Boer felt, though more sharply, with each bullet he fired at the invading English. Behind every brick thrown by a striker is the selfish will "to live" of himself, and the slightly altruistic will "to live" of his family. 23

Scab labor, London argues, emerges in the “struggle[e] tooth and nail with one another for food and shelter, (which is to struggle tooth and nail with one another for life)” (11). In a society in which people must sell their labor power in order to live, the “less generous worker,” one who is unwilling to give more of his labor for less, confronts the “more generous worker,” the scab, as a real and viable threat. For striking workers, scab labor can literally mean the difference between securing better lives or starvation and homelessness. It seems no wonder then that workers’ violence directed toward scabs, at least in principle, should carry “no sense of wrong-doing.” It is in this context that we might better understand Tom’s violent reaction to the arrival and presence of the scab and his furious command to his children: “don’t ever be a scab!” His behavior might be understood as a visceral reaction to deep-seated fear. To be sure, scab labor disrupts working class alliances and action from within, and it is one of the most powerful weapons capitalists can use against organized labor. Therefore, the scab’s presence in Monkey Nest signals a genuine threat to the power of collective bargaining and the miners’ fight for

23 Whereas, the passages quoted illuminate the reasons for strikers’ contempt of scabs, London is careful to present a balanced account of strike breaking. “Nobody,” he argues, “desires to be a scab.” The entire speech can be accessed at the following site: http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/WarOfTheClasses/scab.html
higher material living standards and better working conditions. But perhaps more worrisome is that the arrival of strikebreakers threatens to deprive miners of the opportunity to reproduce their own lives and livelihoods (i.e. food, clothing, shelter, etc). For Tom, lashing out at a strikebreaker is to defend home and community from capital. For were it not for scabs, as London notes, “there would be no trouble, for the strikers are willing to remain out peacefully and indefinitely so long as other men are not in their places, and so long as the particular aggregation of capital with which they are fighting is eating its head off in enforced idleness” (3). But unfortunately for the miners in Monkey Nest, trouble does arrive. For Tom and the striking miners the “other” workers must be excluded. Their lives, it seems, depends upon it. But the novel, unlike many proletarian novels of the period, does not justify violence as a viable strategy in collective movements against capitalism. Rather, it is more ambiguous regarding the viability of violence to protect an “island of strength and privilege in a sea of class struggle.”

Like London, who neither condones the strikebreaker who “kills with a brick” or the “capitalist [who] breaks [the striking worker’s] skull by means of a club in the hands of a policeman,” Conroy neither idealizes nor romanticizes violence. This is message he works to make clear to readers throughout the novel, and it is underscored at the end when Hans, a radical labor organizer, warns Larry about holding such romantic ideas: “You used to live in a world of poetry, you know. The kind of poetry we live and see is terrible as well as majestic, sometimes it’s bloody and grim and it takes a stout heart to keep knocking away” (283). And in the scene with the scab, Conroy could have depicted the outcome much differently. Things could have ended much worse for the unwitting scab who arrived on Tom Donovan’s doorstep, but that is not how the scene unfolds. Rather, Conroy juxtaposes Tom’s indignation and violence with the image of his terrified children wreathed in gun smoke. They were terrified, it seems, not by the
scab’s intrusion, but rather by witnessing their father’s rage. He is not the proletarian hero, but rather someone who nearly took another human being’s life. While dominating and commanding space is crucial to anti-capitalist movements, Conroy calls into question the morality of violence used in class struggle.

The novel further undermines claims made by some revolutionaries that violence is a viable, and at times necessary, political strategy when Larry, in his early twenties, accompanies his Uncle Rollie to confront a man he believes is responsible for taking his job at a railroad company during a strike. As the strike wore on, Rollie, a passionate union member with a stubborn faith in the union (125), refused to consider whether the strike was lost or that “the strike leaders were not doing their best” (126). And while other strikers were leaving town, Rollie never considered it an option on account of having a family to support: “A man with a wife and a mess o’younguns can’t traipse off so easy” (126). Given Rollie’s circumstances, choosing to stay and fight seems to him his only option.

Strikebreakers not only pose a serious threat, in the ways London describes, but strikebreakers give strikers like Rollie and Tom something to fight against. Strikebreakers are tangible in ways that capitalism as a spatial system is not. John Steinbeck would similarly explore the apparent difficulties (futility?) of fighting against capitalism a few years later in The Grapes of Wrath. One particularly powerful scene describes the eviction of tenant farmers who, like property owners, “were caught up in something larger than themselves” (31). The banks, the company, the landowner with “fifty thousand acres” represent the amorphous, seemingly omnipotent force of capitalism (32). “When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size” (32). And while the bank is made of men, “the bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank
is something more than men….It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it” (33).

When one tenant farmer threatens to shoot the driver of a tractor sent to demolish his home, the
driver cautions him: “You’re not killing the right guy,” he says, and goes on to describe the chain
of orders that led to his arrival on the farm. For the farmer, it becomes clear that shooting the
driver of the tractor wouldn’t in the long run save his home. What is more sobering for the
farmer, however, is the notion that it might be impossible to determine who is ultimately
responsible for his eviction. He asks: “Where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don’t aim to
starve to death before I kill the man that’s starving me. I don’t know. Maybe there’s nobody to
shoot. Maybe the thing isn’t men at all” (38). Confronting the genuine possibility that there is
“nobody to shoot,” that the enemy is force that incorporates humans but is simultaneously
something independent paralyzes the farmer with a profound sense of powerlessness. In the end,
he stands impotently with “his rifle in his hand” alongside his family, “and all of them stared
after the tractor” as it tore into their home (38).

The feeling of impotency in the face of a seemingly intangible opponent frustrates Rollie,
too. “Jesus,” he complains to Larry, “I gotta get my hands on somethin’ solid ‘r I’ll go plumb
cuckoo. I can’t fight a box car ‘r tear up a rail, ‘r dynamite a bridge” (129). For Rollie,
something solid amounts to a “cornfield canary that took my job on the wheel press” (129).
Strikebreakers are tangible; they are “solid.” Therefore, terrorizing a strikebreaker would be a
means of empowerment for Rollie. It would be a gesture of hope. Reluctantly, Larry agrees to
go with his uncle “just to keep you out of trouble, if I can” (129). The next evening they wait
together in a car on the side of a dark country road for the man to pass by on his way home from
work. Upon his arrival, Rollie jumps out of the car, immediately confronts the man, and
challenges him to a fight. Somewhat astounded, the man asks why he should fight, noting that
he doesn’t even know who Rollie is. Rollie becomes incensed: “You’re a scab, that’s why! My kids is barefoot and ragged, and my wife is ashamed t’go down town because the likes of you can dek yer women out in silks and satins” (131). He dismisses Rollie’s accusation by pointing out that the strike is long over and that “they’re talking of organizing us into the union” (131). The thought of the strike’s dissolution and of scabs being incorporated into the union proves too much for Rollie. “As long as I live,” he shouts, “the strike is never over!” and lands a blow that sends the man sprawling against a barbed wire fence (123). No sooner does Larry jump out of the car than gun shots ring out and bullets zing past his head, shattering the windshield of the car. The man flees quickly on his horse, leaving Larry and Rollie to assess the damages. “Nix! A bum shot!” says Rollie and insists he’s not hurt. Rollie climbs back into the car and begins to drive away as Larry chases after him. Larry runs after the car, jumps on the running board, but a punch in the face from Rollie forces him to let go but not before he saw “blood dribbling from his chin and gushing from his nose” (131). Rollie made it town before finally crashing the car into a street light which was sent crashing through the front window of the Alamo Pool Hall.

Eventually, Larry arrives on the scene, and learns from spectators how a crowd had gathered to gawk at the sight of a man “crumpled under the steering wheel.” With the exception of a “pimpled pool player” who was annoyed that glass showered “the sticky pink depths of a yum-yum sundae” he was eating, no one seemed particularly affected. There is a sense in which he functions as the spokesperson for the crowd. For the pool player, the crash could only have meant that the driver was “Stewed to the gills!” His response is not only unsympathetic, but it’s also a gross misinterpretation of the events that led to the crash, a conclusion reached without sufficient evidence. The crash is an interruption—a trivial inconvenience to what is arguably another trivial experience: playing pool and eating ice-cream. The accident is easily and quickly
dismissed, allowing the pool player to return to “his yum-yum, grumbling and pondering over the iniquities of the world” (132). For the pool player and the crowd, Rollie’s death has little meaning or relevance. Yet, “it was another who came from the other direction that saw the crimson stain flooding the running board and overflowing to the sidewalk. A man drilled twice through the lungs bleeds like a stuck hog. The strike had finally ended” (132). For Larry, the on who “came from the other direction,” Rollie’s death carries more significance. He understands Rollie’s frustration and desperation as he was reduced to begging for “soup bones and dry salt belly” from a local grocer, as the children of scabs “tantalized his own with ice cream cones” (129). He understands Rollie’s need, then, to confront the “cornfield canary” that took his job. Perhaps most importantly, this person understands the tragedy of Rollie’s death. That the strike had finally ended with Rollie’s death suggests that he alone was responsible for keeping it alive. Rollie was committed to an idea, faith and hope in the power of the union to fight against “the company.” Yet, in a sense his fight with the scab seems prefigures Steinbeck’s farmer’s fight with the tractor driver, but Rollie’s aggressive action is misdirected. The source of his unemployment and his family’s destitution is ultimately not the scab. It is the “something else than men.” Essentially, Rollie dies as a result of “not killing the right guy.” In the novel then, be it on the side of labor or capital, violence begets nothing more than violence. While Conroy illuminates the desperation behind violent class struggle, it is effectual for advancing command over places from which progressive social and political movements can emerge. In the end, Rollie’s militancy appears to have little effect beyond creating a brief localized interruption, a minor spectacle. In the end, it rouses the attention of an indignant pool player, who standing for a brief moment over the crumpled corpse, goes on eating ice cream all the same.
III.

*The Disinherited* represents the extent to which mobility—or really control over the conditions of occupying and moving through space—“is thus an aspect of class power and struggle” (Mitchell, 85). Rollie has limited options regarding geographical mobility, and as a result he has little range of social and economic movement. The daily responsibility for providing for the needs of his family rules out the possibility of moving to a new place where there are no guarantees regarding employment, housing, etc. He has little choice but to scab or stay put and fight. Staying put and fighting connects class struggle and power to particular places; however, the novel raises questions about just what shape fighting for social change can/should take.

In *Monkey Nest*, Larry’s father Tom, despite occasional violent confrontations, advocates a non-violent form of direct, political action: the strike. Through Tom’s organizing efforts, the miners collectively work to win changes in *Monkey Nest*—changes that would result in better living standards and working conditions. But as the novel consistently points out, there are no clear winners when workers decide to stay put and fight. During a strike, external pressures (capital’s use of scab labor and repressive state apparatuses, etc.) and internal pressures (the private needs of family, ineffectual and/or corrupt union leaders, etc.) make maintaining a strike extremely difficult. For some, such as Rollie, pressure finds release in the violent act. Moreover, Conroy suggests how capitalist command over time (and money) contributes to control over space.

Because the mine-owners can afford to wait, they are at an advantage over the miners. In *The Disinherited*, capitalists’ waiting out the miners takes its toll on Tom. As the strike wore on, Tom became deeply in debt to both local merchants had his landlord as a result of credits
granted. “It’s hard,” Tom acknowledges, “to get the bills paid up between strikes” (62). As the bills stacked up, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the strikes: “The mine-owners,” Larry recalls, “depended upon the miners’ starving into submission; the miners upon the owners’ cupidity dictating that is was cheaper to capitulate than to maintain the luxury of armed guards and inefficient workers who would themselves eventually organize. But hunger was esteemed by the operators as an effective gentling influence, and the miners knew they had better tighten their belts” (55). When belts could be tightened no more, the miners were forced by economic necessity back to work.

The implications for why miners’ remain in Monkey Nest are revealing. It is, for one, a base for political struggle. Moreover, depictions of Tom, Rollie, and Stafford’s lives suggest the extent to which mobility and fixity influence the lives of workers. For instance, Tom’s decision to remain in Monkey Nest is motivated, in part, by the knowledge that there is no escape route from Monkey Nest. Escape is blocked off by yet another landlord, another property owner, another company store, another class struggle. While he has the freedom to sell his labor power, he has no choice but to sell his labor. Don Mitchell notes the irony of this form of freedom: “The freedom of the labourer to move is converted into its exact opposite. In search of employment and a living wage, the labourer is forced to follow capital wherever it flows” (84). Tom’s fight, then, amounts to a fight over the conditions of mobility. There is a glimmer of recognition in his actions of the fact that for as long as workers have to sell their labor power as a commodity in order to survive, workers will never be able to “entirely escape from the clutches of capital” (Limits 385). Until wage labor is abolished, the novel suggests, localized struggles can at best win limited improvements. Yet “short of this dramatic solution,” notes Harvey, “labour and capital are forced into curious patterns of struggle and compromise over the
geographical mobility of labor. Both capital and labour have rights to move, and between two rights, force decides” (385). And between capital and the miners in Monkey Nest force yields no clear winners or losers: “Each faction battled doggedly, but had to surrender something finally” (59).

The final surrender made by the Donovan family came when Tom joined his two sons “beneath the gumbo in Sugar Creek graveyard” (60). After a particularly long and challenging strike, Tom went back to the mines working extra hours shot firing, a “single man’s job,” his wife objected, “that nobody ever lasted long at” (70). But this was a desperate time for the Donovans. Coal prices in this period, Wixson notes, “did not keep pace with demand, since mines were overproducing. Blasting, cheap labor, and the introduction of machines only worsened the miner’s situation. The strike seemed to be the miner’s only defense; yet strikes, sometimes lasting months, reduced the miner to poverty and left mines in worse condition than before owing to lack of maintenance” (18). Just as Tom is starting to get caught back up and it looks as if he may actually be able to pay off his debts and still be able to send Larry to school, he is nearly crushed to death by a “huge lump of coal” dislodged by an overcharged shot fired by other miners working nearby. For three days he lay unconscious in the family’s home. On the fourth day, “he tried to raise himself in bed but stiffened out. His hands clenched on the counterpane and could scarcely be pried loose” (77).

Tom’s death defers the family’s hopes for Larry to go to school and receive a formal education, the means by which he could presumably escape the hardships of working class life. Yet, despite the fact that Tom “wished it more than anything else and Mother dreamed about it

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24 Shot firing involved the use of homemade explosive cartridges to blast loose coal. Douglas Wixson notes: “No activity in mining bore more risks….Shot firers entered the mine after the day’s workers had left. The incentive was of course additional pay. A shot firer could earn a day’s wage in fifteen minutes of firing” (22). On July 11, 1909, Conroy’s father Tom died from injuries suffered as a result of an accident shot firing five days earlier.
over the wash tub,” the novel undermines any faith or belief in school as emancipatory (89). In capitalist society, as Stafford and Tom’s experiences suggest, formal education is no guarantee of class transcendence. An unskilled worker who becomes skilled is still, in the end, a worker forced to sell his labor power as a commodity in order to survive. For Stafford and Tom, two formally educated people, all roads, it seems, eventually lead to Monkey Nest. And for Larry, a poor camp kid, school is to remain an abstraction. It’s an idea, a place “out there,” something separate and removed from Monkey Nest. And while the family’s dreams to make Larry an “educated man” die with Tom’s passing, the novel emphasizes the realm of localized experience as a powerful site of education. Conroy represents Monkey Nest as a space of another kind of education, a school in which Larry, instructed by both his family and various members of the working-class community, begins to develop the fundamental power to think about his place and develop strategies to find his way in life.

Larry’s mother plays a particularly powerful role in his political education after his father dies as he and his sister Madge spend most of their time at her side. In many ways, she reinforces the allegiance to working-class struggle that Tom championed and modeled. When another strike is organized, Mr. Stacpoole, the mine owner, served eviction notices on all strikers living in camp houses, “imported a gang of strikebreakers and some city pugilists for guards,” and sent his superintendent to see Larry’s mother about cooking and cleaning for them (89). She refuses the job offer without hesitation even though it would likely mean she’d be evicted also: “‘You’d better get somebody else to feed the scabs,’ Mother said quietly, but with such finality that he knew it was no use to argue further” (89).

Yet despite her contempt for strikebreakers, Larry’s mother is capable of displaying empathy for those who are otherwise unequivocally considered enemies. One evening, not long
after Tom’s funeral, Larry stood alongside his mother as she opened the door of their home to a stranger, “a huge Negro…[who] had evidently been beaten” (80). When asked what happened, the stranger tells them ‘they jes’ beat me up an’ called me a scab, and tol’ me not to come back no more.” “‘Oh, you were scabbing!’ Mother said accusingly. ‘You were taking another man’s job. You should expect to get beaten up for that’” (81). While she initially reproaches him for scabbing, it becomes clear quite quickly that the stranger had no idea what he was getting into when he took a job offered to him by a “White boss man,” in Mobile, Alabama. He describes how, almost immediately after he arrived in Moberly, he was beaten up by a group of “white folks.” “They th’owed me in that air coal car, and heah I am. I certainly didn’t aim t’ do nobody no dirt” (81). Without another word exchanged, his mother made sure the stranger had enough to eat and drink. This subtle, mature gesture of empathy becomes the occasion for Larry to reflect: “I had always regarded a scab as a sub-human beast endowed with an inherent vileness. I had never before regarded a scab as a puppet manipulated by those who stood to gain the most” (81). By the end of this experience, Larry, whose mother consistently stressed “anything which lives also feels” transitions from sympathy to empathy for those who, like the Donovans, are caught up in something bigger than themselves (84).

His early experiences in Monkey Nest form the foundation of his consciousness and the social and ethical values which would guide his political action in his adult life. At the camp, Larry learns to recognize and care about the suffering of others. Conroy depicts it as a relational space in which Larry learns to relate to other, both within and beyond the boundaries of the camp itself. For example, his mother’s experience taking in wash from Mrs. Koch, the wife of a local butcher to whom the Donovan’s were still in arrears, offers him particularly heart-wrenching insight into poor women’s experience:
Mother’s hands were always puckered and grey while she was washing, but when they dried for a while at night, her palms were red and shiny. The wrinkles never smoothed out. Her ordinarily pale face became flushed as with a perpetual fever. Her head was enveloped in a cloud of steam all day. The washboard kept her waist frayed, and the front of her dress was always moist with soapy spray. She bobbed up and down, up and down, as tirelessly and as mechanically as an automaton on a peanut roaster, pausing only long enough to hang out a batch of clothes or to stir those in the boiler with a stick. (84)

In Monkey Nest, Larry becomes aware of the links between the particularities of his mother’s struggle and, more generally, poor women’s experience in the 1930s. For instance, he becomes conscious of the differences between his mother and Mrs. Koch, whose “shirt bosoms were resplendently pleated” (84). Throughout the novel, Conroy demonstrates awareness that there is no singular “poor woman’s experience.” Different places, different social relations (of which class, while primary, is only one alongside race, ethnicity, etc) constitute different experiences for women. He works, in other words, to keep in the particular in tension with the general or universal.

The memory of watching his mother’s body deteriorate, “humped,” as it was, “all day over the steaming tub” marks a decisive spatio-temporal shift in the narrative. Larry’s associates the memory of his mother in Monkey “push[ing] her graying hair back from her eyes with her suds-wrinkled hand….Blinding sweat dripp[ing] from the tip of her nose and from her chin” with an experience he had “years afterward” while working on a railroad crew:

It was so hot that the rails were said to stretch a foot a day. The ballast heated like live coals; the rails ahead warped and writhed in the heat rays. One of the bullies holding a spike with a pair of tongs while another started it in the tie with a maul toppled forward
sunstruck and the point of the maul crashed through his skull as though it were an eggshell. We propelled the hand car back to the bunk cars. We all felt woozy and sick as we sat down to supper. The cook brought in a stew and when we whiffed the steam off it, we felt our stomachs rolling. It stank like something dead of a long time. One fellow found two flies in his dish. He sprang to his feet and flung the mess full in the cook’s face, howling like a wolf. Instantly, we were electrified with unreasoning rage. The cook leaped from a car and bounded down the track with all of us after him in full cry.

We hurled rocks after him and hunted him clear to the city limits of a small town. (85)

Steam: the symbolic connection between his mother’s own seemingly isolated and private form of struggle and Larry’s more public form of struggle. While both struggles occur in different places and are discrete by virtue of history and geography, here Conroy’s use of symbolism emphasizes how seemingly discrete, localized struggles are produced amid common political-economic processes. Both experiences are suggestive of the ways in which human beings are alienated under capitalism. Both Larry and his mother are estranged from the objects of their labor, from their species-being. Whereas free, creative labor “frees us from the unconscious life-activity of the animal world,” as Laura Hudson notes, “alienated labor under capitalism requires human beings to produce in order to maintain and reproduce themselves, like animals” (106). Moreover, in the necessary struggle for self-preservation in capitalism, “human beings are pitted against one another in the struggle for survival, producing competition and antagonism rather than universal freedom. That which is to have distinguished us from animals is obliterated” (Hudson 106).

While the depiction of Larry’s mother “bobb[ing] up and down, up and down…as mechanically as an automaton” evokes the image of instrumental, dehumanized labor, the
visceral response to the cook’s injustice by the railroad workers drives home the idea of how an alienated mode of humanity under capitalism can be experienced. The railroad workers are depicted like animals—one “howling like a wolf,” the others “electrified with unreasoning rage.” Together they “hunt.” These images suggest the level of human depravity under capitalism, which “does not merely strip human beings of the capabilities that make them unique…but denies them even the basic dignity of other animals” (Hudson 107). Conroy underscores the sense of dehumanization concomitant with alienated labor when he described the arresting gaze of woman who, with a “haughty manner,” hugged her child closely out of fear when Larry and “a hard looking lot, [of] unshaven” railroad workers ran past. Larry notes how the anger immediately died out “and we felt only sick and shaken and ashamed” (84). This memory prompts Larry to reflect back on his mother’s situation as a poor woman:

[W]hen they spread the goo on Mother’s Day. I don’t get any lump in my throat….What could you say to a coal camp mother ironing away at midnight on someone else’s clothes? I never found one of those Western Union canned greetings that fitted my mother—I never saw one that I could send her in remembrance of the nights she sweated over the irons or the days she spent bend over the steaming wash tub. (85-6)

This narrative shifting between the experiences of his own and other wage laborers to his mother’s experience illuminates the spaces of gendered divisions of labor under capitalism. While women may occupy the same absolute space as men, Conroy emphasizes the extent to which men and women may live space differently. For instance, in Monkey Nest women are excluded from working in the mines. Most do not hold wage earning jobs, and their lives, therefore, are primarily confined to the home. As feminist geographer Cindi Katz claims, “gendered divisions of labor within the household, which is itself historically and geographically
contingent, commonly presumes women’s responsibility for most of the work of [social] reproduction including child-rearing, food provision and preparation, cleaning, laundering, and other tasks of homemaking” (713).

While the women in Monkey Nest may experience the space differently in terms of daily activities and social relations, the women in Monkey Nest play a significant role in shaping the geographical structures and relationships in which they live. In part, this is realized their role in social reproduction. Katz explains social reproduction as “hinging upon the biological reproduction of the labor force, both generationally and on a daily basis through the acquisition and distribution of the means of existences, including food, shelter, clothing, and healthcare. [Moreover], according to Marxist theory, social reproduction…it also encompasses the reproduction of the labor force at a certain (and fluid) level of differentiation and expertise” (711). During a typical day, Larry’s mother “bustled about filling dinner pails with water and food,” and, when necessary, “shake and shake the boys to arouse them from their heavy sleep” (41). The domestic labor Larry’s mother performs assures that the “boys” are fed and able to return to work each day. She, like many camp women, contribute to the social reproduction of a specific class of male workers—bituminous coal miners. And in the process of reproducing these workers, “a female class of workers or potential workers” is also produced (Mitchell 86). We see this in the wage labor available to camp women like Larry’s mother, emerge as a certain class of workers; she is primed to accept a certain form of wage labor once she seeks work outside of the home, in part because she’s been limited to reproducing herself “at a certain level of differentiation and expertise.” Conroy conceptualizes the home similar to contemporary feminist geographers who interpret the home as a space powerfully participating in the class polarization concomitant with capitalism. Barbara Ehrenreich explains:
The subjugation of women, in…capitalist society, has been key to this process of class atomization. To put it another way, the forces which have atomized working-class life and promoted cultural/material dependence on the capitalist class are the same forces which have served to perpetuate the subjugation of women. It is women who are most isolated in what has become an increasingly privatized family existence (even when they work outside the home too). It is, in many key instances, women's skills (productive skills, healing, midwifery, etc.), which have been discredited or banned to make way for commodities (76)

In taking in Mrs. Koch’s wash, Conroy works to show how under capitalism the distinction between public and private spaces is blurred. Spatially, there is no clear separation between home and workplace. The home is a place of work. It is a site of interaction between seemingly private processes of social reproduction and the public processes of capitalist production. The depiction of Larry’s mother’s entry into this “other,” public world is precisely what allows Conroy to connect the seemingly isolated Monkey Nest, a geographically specific site of social reproduction, to the broader geographical relations of capitalist production. Neither Monkey Nest nor the relations of capitalist production cannot, the novel suggests, be understood in isolation from gendered social relations and divisions of labor.

When Larry’s mother can no longer “find washings,” presumably one of the only waged jobs a camp woman could obtain, Larry must look for work beyond the camp. While he is motivated in part by economic necessity and a sense of obligation to help support his family, he also clings to a myth of upward mobility he absorbed in “some of the Alger stories of boys making their way in the world” (90). It is a myth that is at odds with the political education he received in terms of his exposure to labor activism and the dehumanizing conditions of gendered
work in Monkey Nest. Still yet unaware of just how far the relations of capitalist production “stretch out over space,” Larry is interpellated by a male-centered, naïve belief in socio-economic mobility; he sets out “to make a start” (90). However, when he finally departs for an apprenticeship in a railroad shop in town, he is struck by the sight of his sister gathered in his mother’s lap: “I thought this was ridiculous, for she was nine years old and her legs dangled on the floor” (96). He worries that “Mother might still be afraid to stay in the old house with its creaking timbers, the rats stamping in the garret, and the memories of her dead” (97). Despite Larry’s seemingly unsophisticated point of view, Conroy deploys a narrative strategy that emphasizes political education as a process, one that is grounded in place. These are vivid images of economic oppression, the systemic sources of which a young Larry is only just beginning to apprehend. Here Conroy it at his literary best. By subtly and deliberately juxtaposing the images of the women embracing in a dilapidated domestic space with the image of Larry in the open space of the “lane,” a space symbolic with possibility, Conroy gestures toward the extent to which discerning spatial embeddedness and entrapment is a key to understanding social and political behavior. With virtually few options available and based on gendered differentiations and expertise with respect to work, Larry’s mother and sister cannot follow the flows of capital in the same way that Larry can—at least it is unlikely that if they do that they’ll be able to “mak[e] their way in the world” in the way Larry aspires to. But even young Larry is suspicious and fearful of what “might be hiding in the mysterious depths between the rows” (97). For Larry, “Monkey Nest Camp retreat[s] into the dark” (97). The Donovan women, however, are relegated indefinitely it seems to the domestic space. Now that the household labor has changed decisively, the home is no longer a site of capitalist social reproduction in the ways it formally was; with its “creaking timbers,” and “stamping” rats it is
depicted, in dialectical relation with the camp, as a devalued place that produces only “memories of the dead.”

IV.

In The Country and the City, Raymond Williams considers the development of the regional novel in England during the late 19th and early 20th century. The regional novel, he argues, was typically written by writers who came from the city to the country. According to Williams, it is a distinctly middle-class formation that “almost captured the idea of the country” (262). In an effort to describe rural spaces and account for rural laborers’ lives, regional writers work to “absorb a country by a class.” They can provide only a partial sense of the “real history…the authentic feeling” of a “whole dimension of modern life” (262). Rural laborer writers are uncommon, but what their writing offers is a different way of seeing the country and observing history. For Williams, these writers provide “a real sense of context: the ways in which men without land or money move from one job to another, in a changing economy, experiencing directly what is ordinarily abstracted even in the true history. This is the recognizable world of the intelligently observant twentieth-century worker” (263).

Such is Jack Conroy’s The Disinherited, which contextualizes this very movement that Williams is concerned with. Through Larry’s observations of and reflections on life in Monkey Nest, Conroy demonstrates an acute awareness of the contradictions of mobility under capitalism, and he presents this as salient feature of modern American experience. For some time after moving beyond the boundaries of Monkey Nest, Larry clings to the belief that education is his ticket to freedom, the means by which he could avoid the life of a “working man.” Education was “the way of escape” (106). For Larry, finishing his course of study in accounting meant securing a comfortable middle-class life: “There would be a cozy bungalow.
I’d sit smoking my pipe, a baby or two at my knee, wife leaning lovingly over my shoulder” (156). This is a bourgeois, middle-class fantasy that is consistently critiqued by the novel as complicit with capitalist oppression and exploitation.

In charting Larry’s migration and maturation, the novel suggests that class mobility—securing a better life in a better place—can only be achieved through collective action. One of the most important moments in the narrative occurs when Larry is working in a rubber plant in Missouri. There he meets Hans, a Marxist intellectual and former follower of Rosa Luxemberg, who, after working together for a period of time criticizes Larry’s ambitions to leave his class behind:

“So you want to be an accountant,” Hans said to me one night. “In America students think of making money, not preparing for a fuller intellectual life. The majority of them are bound to be disappointed. I hope you won’t be one.”

“What kind of intellectual life is there here?” I asked. “I want to get into a better environment.”

…”Listen!” Hans almost shouted. “We fought on the barricades. Men—and women, too—dying for the Revolution! Do you wonder why these dull apes turn my stomach? Don’t think you’ll escape them if you get a better job….Find something to take hold of beside the ambition to rise above the factory. (171)

Han’s encouragement of Larry to turn his educational ambitions toward helping his fellow workers as opposed to escaping the working class reinforces the idea that workers must work together to improve the conditions of their lives.

It is only after moving from steel mill to rubber plant to auto factory, to surviving the harsh winters of the Midwest by “holding a dozen jobs for short periods” that Hans’s lesson is
understood. Larry becomes aware that despite his apparent geographical mobility, he “never really escaped by quitting and changing jobs. All the factories had the same conveyors, the same scientific methods for extracting the last ounce of energy. The same neon tubes pulsing with blue fire and the same automatons toiling frantically beneath the ghastly rays that etched dark shadows under their eyes and blackened their lips to resemble those of a cadaver” (207).

This is defining moment of crisis in the novel which forces Larry back to Monkey Nest. Coincidentally, Hans reappears and together they organize a “penny-auction” to prevent the foreclosure of Ben Haskin’s farm. With Larry’s return to Monkey Nest, Conroy locates labor, rural and urban, within a geography of capitalism. And while the processes of capitalist accumulation profoundly shape both physical landscapes and the ways in which social life is constituted, Conroy suggests that workers play an active role in shaping the landscapes of capitalism. On the one hand, Ben’s house is more than just an object. It is a place of experience, memory, and psychological attachment. Losing it is equivalent to being dispossessed of a sense of security and power and command over space; in short, it amounts to dispossession of identity. As David Harvey puts it: “in making places (such as a home), we make ourselves, and as we remake ourselves, so we perpetually reshape the places we are in, materially, conceptually, as well as how we live in them” (Cosmopolitanism 176). In this light, the fight to reclaim Haskin’s home is imbued with symbolic meaning. The Haskin farm becomes a specific site of social and political struggle, a site in which farmers and industrial laborers are brought together out of common concern; it represents is a place of affective experience and collective action, a site in which solidarity is forged. For Ben Haskin, victory amounts to controlling space and the conditions of one’s mobility. Through organized collective action, Haskin is able to resist

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25 The penny auction was a tactic used to sabotage foreclosure auctions in which bids on equipment and land would be made for pennies. High bids were discouraged by threat of force, and after bidding stopped, the equipment and land would be “sold” back to the owner very often for a penny.
capital’s mandate to move, and in doing so he reclaims power over what is a fundamental site of
reproduction. While the home is often regarded as a predominantly, private place, for the
farmers and laborers, Haskin’s farm becomes a rallying point for the disinherited. The events
leading up to and including the auction make the Haskin farm a site for radical socialization and
an emergent oppositional culture, underscoring the significance of place as a locus of struggle, in
this case over whose agencies will predominate. Not surprisingly, it functions as the material
grounding of Larry’s radicalization: “after the place was sold for fifty cents [and] the sheriff and
his deputies drove away,” Larry decides to join Hans in the struggle to organize labor, turning
the particular experience of solidarity in one place into a generalized solidarity with workers
across regional space. In essence, it marks the end of his education: “The only way for me rise
to something approximating the grandiose ambitions of my youth would be to rise with my class,
with the disinherited: the bricksetters, the flivver tramps, boomers, and outcasts pounding their
ears in the flophouses” (265).

While Larry’s decision to join Hans is, indeed, suggestive of a conversion narrative, the
novel offers more than a simple bildungsroman concluding with an image of heroic
proletarianism. Rather, as I’ve attempted to show, it functions as a kind of artifact, the
recordings of one “observant 20th century worker” who struggled to make sense of the massive
environmental and social transformations he experienced first-hand. Despite its emphasis on the
particular work spaces Larry found himself embedded in, and at times, entrapped in, the novel is
suggestive of how when labor is forced to follow the paths of capital, ideological and material
connections can be made among workers across places. Labor mobility, in other words, as much
as it might result in the disruption of “traditional support mechanisms and ways of life,” creates
the conditions for new networks of affiliation and community to be established across regional
spaces. Moreover, it implies an unresolved tension between permanence and change, between the past and the future. In this light, *The Disinherited* marks an attempt to construct a sense of community among readers by mapping the inscription and effacement of social spaces onto the terrain through which Larry Donovan moves.

Nearly thirty years after *The Disinherited* was published, Conroy returned to Moberly from Chicago, to see if he could find “the refuse dump that is the sole monument of Monkey Nest Camp, the place where I was born” (“Home to Moberly” 41). What he discovered was a plowed field with only scant traces of the place that he found so affective: “The frolicsome miners under the trees with their merry accordions, their Fourth of July kegs of beer. All gone in everything but my memory, and when mine is dusted over, who else will remember them?” (42). Conroy’s question should direct our attention to the novel as an important example of how places are social inventions. The existence of Monkey Nest depends, in part, upon stories like Conroy’s and their reception by readers. As Douglas Reichert Powell argues, “Place, as it is, is past and present, and it is dependent upon human intervention to have a future” (183). The novel links readers to the local and to the distant, to the past and to the present, to memory and to hope—hope of the kind expressed by Conroy’s that those whose lives have been effaced from the many spaces of labor like Monkey Nest will be remembered. Hope that the histories of these places are seen as relevant to the present. To see in regional history, then, a history that, as Williams notes, is repeated in many lives and many places. And by linking readers to memory and history of local places, *The Disinherited* demonstrates how regionalism can be understood as a vital representational strategy for creating the broader material and ideological connections among workers, connections which help facilitate projects of social and economic justice.
Chapter 3

“‘Behind the Billboards with the Painted Smiles’: Informal Economies and Social Reproduction in Nelson Algren’s *Never Come Morning.*”

_Do you know it is impossible to charge man with sins, to burden him with debts and turning the other cheek, when society is organized so meanly that man cannot help but perpetuate villainies; when, economically, he has been brought to villainy, and that it is silly and cruel to demand from man that which, by the very laws of nature, he is impotent to perform even if he wished to...? ---Dostoevsky, The Diary of a Writer_

Nelson Algren was a Midwestern regional writer with a deep sense of connection and commitment to the city of Chicago. He spent most of his life living among the poor in Chicago’s Northside, “an old-time proving ground for Chicago hoodlums,” and he experienced first-hand the social and spatial segregation of Chicago’s underclasses (Drew 126). Like many of Chicago’s inner-city neighborhoods, high concentrations of poverty defined specific sections of the Northside until urban renewal projects in the 1950s pushed the slums eastward. Algren’s writing frequently presents socio-political domination and economic oppression as profoundly geographical affairs. Structural and spatial constraints depicted to significantly limit individuals’ abilities to move; the urban slum literally circumscribes people’s lives and cuts them off from many of the resources and privileges not only enjoyed by people in different neighborhoods but those resources necessary to escape a life of squalor. In much of his writing, spatial inequalities make it virtually impossible for characters to leave impoverished neighborhoods, and the impact
of place, and uneven development in general, on the lives of the poor is presented in Algren’s writing as having profound and persistent generational effects.

Algren, a close personal friend of both Richard Wright and Jack Conroy, was quite active in the literary left during the decades bracketing World War II, especially in his role as Secretary of the Chicago chapter of the League of American Writers. While it remains unclear whether he ever officially joined the Communist Party, his work presents a unique contribution to the literary left: his writing moves away from the kind of agitprop proletarianism that had plagued his first novel, *Somebody in Boots*, and soured the taste of many writers and critics across the political spectrum to the proletarian avant-garde; Algren’s experiments with a range of literary techniques and forms, most notably surrealism and satire in his novels, demonstrates a richness and sophistication not normally associated with U.S. leftist literature. Algren began to hone his craft in the 1930s, when working alongside Conroy on the urban folklore project sponsored by the WPA, he spent much of his time interviewing prostitutes and investigating the “lore of the packing house, auto plant, post office, and steel mill” (Drew 109). Work on the WPA sparked his lifelong commitment to telling the story of America through the lives of those condemned to the margins of society in order to challenge the dominant social values that sustain gross disparities of privilege, making possible the condemnation of the poor.

Branded the “poet of Chicago Slums” by Malcolm Cowley in 1940 Algren remained committed throughout his career to imagining the many social spaces of the inner city and dramatizing the outcast, society’s “losers,” who strolled “the littered hinterland…[t]he unswept streets where most of humanity has always lived” (*Nonconformity* 41). In these sealed off urban spaces, survival often required acts of both predation and cooperation, leading to the rise in these spaces of what Harvey refers to as “informal sector activity… (illegal practices such as drug-
trafficking and prostitution and legal production and trading of services) (267). Yet despite the precariousness of life in these spaces, Algren witnessed routine lives being made “with values that seem to be a little more real, a little more intense, and human, than with those people who are freer to come and go” (Anderson 9). This experience sparked within him a kind of “irritability” with how the “people on top [were] so absolutely unaware of these other people, and so sure their values are the right ones” (Anderson 8).

A powerful symbol of this kind of social separatism and neglect for Algren is the billboard. For Algren, the billboard symbolizes the transition from a production-based economy to an increasingly consumer-based economy—a transition which Algren believed contributed to an even greater kind of social apartheid in Chicago and in urban centers across America. One of Algren’s most explicit commentaries on the kind of destructive social stratification he witnessed in Chicago appears in his essay Nonconformity. Here he critiques the idea reinforced in capitalistic political economy that one’s self-worth is measured according to one’s consumption of things. Insofar as actual billboards inundate capitalist geographies, mediating individuals’ desires and values, to go behind the billboard is to reveal a spiritually desolate landscape in which consumption and ownership register as success and “success [is equated] with virtue” (Nonconformity 50). Failure to succeed, then, is the equivalent of a “moral defeat” (50). Algren observes that while many people in the United States are able to eke out just enough of a little pile to furnish a private space in which to live relatively comfortably, there are “those who live out their hand-to-mouth hours without friendship or love” (Nonconformity 35). These are the people Algren sought to know. Therefore, to see behind the billboards is to see society’s most forlorn, those who “failed” to follow the billboard’s commandments, those for “whom nobody prays” (Nonconformity 41). As hyperbolic as these statements may be, this commitment to see
the “unseen millions” is what motivates much of Algren’s writing. The literary provides Algren, and his readers, with a point of entry into places that are for many inaccessible, to represent the lives of people in ways that cannot be grasped by other means. In *Never Come Morning*, the focus of this chapter, Algren insists “if we [do] not understand what [is] happening to men and women who share[] all the horrors but none of the privileges of our civilization then we [do] not know what [is] happening to ourselves” (Author’s preface, *Never Come Morning* xv).

In this chapter, I examine the literary representation of mid twentieth-century Chicago slums in Nelson Algren’s *Never Come Morning*. Published in 1942, *Never Come Morning* is Algren’s second novel. Like James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932-35) and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), two novels published around the same time that deal with the urban experiences of Chicago’s racial/ethnic youth, *Never Come Morning* takes readers on a gut-wrenching exploration of the spatial dimensions of urban underclasses, specifically the geography(s) of poor adolescents. In the “Author’s Preface” in later additions of the novel, Algren describes the novel as “nothing more than a thinly fictionalized report on a neighborhood where, if you cared to get hit on the head and dragged into an alley, it was as likely as any. The book drew for its details…upon the lives of half a dozen men with whom the writer had grown up, as well as upon the newspaper reports of the trial of Bernard ‘Knifey’ Sawicki” (*NCM* xv). 26 Algren challenges readers to identify with those outcasts we often feel we have little in common

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26 Bernard Sawicki was a nineteen-year old reform school parolee from Chicago who, in 1942, was executed by electric chair for the murder of four people during a crime spree. Algren’s biographer, Bettina Drew, suggests Algren was captivated by the story because it represented a tragic case of juvenile delinquency: “A three-day-old doorstep foundling, [Sawicki] had been taken in by the Polish Sawicki family. His stepfather, a heavy drinker, had beaten him excessively, and from a young age Bernie began running away for extended periods. He had played with guns in the fifth grade and also acquired the nickname “Knifey” as a child. Seemingly completely remorseless, Sawicki held it a point of honor to maintain outward composure at all times while in custody” (134). In an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* on January 17, 1942, the day of his execution, Sawicki is reported to have “cursed the judge who had sentenced him. He had made bets with his attorney that he would get the death sentence. He had said ‘I know I’ll die, and I don’t care’ (“Killer” 1). The *Tribune* reports Sawicki’s last words: “I got it coming!”
with. For Algren, identifying with people whom we feel we have no identification with is the first step toward social justice.

While *The Man With the Golden Arm* (1949) is considered by many critics to be his greatest literary achievement (it was the winner of the First National Book Award), *Never Come Morning* recounts seventeen-year-old protagonist Bruno Bicek’s mystified and tragic entanglement with social and economic forces seemingly beyond his control. As a radical regionalist deeply committed to place, Algren’s novel presents an important and distinctive polemic on the affects of uneven geographical development on the lives of the urban underclass, and it underscores the fact that cities and ways of life are built through human actions. Implied throughout the novel is the notion that social segregation is not a mere accident, but rather, indicative of place construction under capitalism. Algren’s novel probes the differentiated spaces of “otherness” “behind the billboards.” In the horrors depicted in the alleyways and littered streets of Bruno’s neighborhood, the novel raises an important question: what kind of city, what kind of world are we building?

My central claim in this chapter is that *Never Come Morning* represents what is perhaps one of the most problematic aspects of uneven development—its impact on the identities and life chances of youth who live in areas of concentrated poverty. Juvenile “delinquency” is depicted as a logical consequence, and in many ways, an appropriate response, to what cultural geographers refer to as informal economies. These economies, which “focus on illegal practices such as drug-trafficking and prostitution” as well as “legal production of trading services,” frequently develop in low-income neighborhoods out of economic necessity (Harvey 267). In the novel, delinquency is registered less the result of individual moral deficiency than as an outcome of socio-spatial injustice. The novel, then, participates in the kind of critical regional work that
other writers in this study accomplish, by shaping an understanding of the spatial dimensions of poverty. *Never Come Morning* is profoundly empathetic in both theme and tone, and its affective quality is undoubtedly the product of Algren’s close proximity to his subjects. It encourages readers’ to imagine how people who possess none of the material markers of success, who live such seemingly meaningless lives in such deprived spaces, can have lives so full of meaning. Blending elements of gritty realism with surrealism to present an affective geography of impoverished communities, *Never Come Morning* deconstructs a culturally pathologized identity (e.g. delinquent) by imagining the socio-spatial contexts of its (re)production.

The novel takes place during the depression and tells the story of Bruno “Lefty” Bicek, a poor Polish-American youth, as he develops from “boyhood to manhood,” from “vandalism to hoodlumhood” (50). At the start of the novel, Bruno is just shy of eighteen; at the end of the novel he faces the electric chair, not yet twenty-one. Organized in four books, Book I is titled “Below the Belt” and introduces Bruno, “divided in his ambitions between being a big-league hurler and becoming a contender for the heavy-weight championship of the world,” and his involvement with a gang called the Baldheads, small-time hustlers who receive orders from neighborhood crime boss Bonifacy, “The Barber,” Konstantine. In this book, Bruno becomes deeply involved in criminal activity: he steals a slot machine, rapes his girlfriend Steffi, and finally murders a Greek outsider who “shouldered his way” into a line of Baldheads that had formed to gang rape Steffi in a space below the street. Books II, “A Bottle of Milk for Mother,” and Book III, “Others,” deal with Bruno’s six-month incarceration for a crime he didn’t commit, his growing guilt with regard to Steffi, and Steffi’s experience working in a brothel. Book IV, “Toward Evening Lands,” describes Bruno’s heavyweight fight with Honeyboy Tucker—a big-
ticket fight that, were he to win, would provide him with enough money to free Steffi from the
brothel and together escape the slum.

The novel begins in a boxing ring and concludes in a boxing ring, thus linking notions of
social space to struggle and violence. The opening pages of the novel posit readers in media res,
at “the ten-second warning to the evening’s first preliminary” between “a Mexican
featherweight” and “a Pole with an army haircut” (1). Spatially, the ring functions to constrain
and limit the movement of the fighters. The contest is essentially over the command and
dominance of space. Victory in the ring results from a combination of spatial practices in order
to gain advantage: keeping a desired distance between oneself and one’s opponent; maintaining
or closing gaps; feinting attacks and skillfully-delivered counter-punches; dominating the center
of the ring, or avoiding it all together. And for these fighters dominating the space means
controlling the action, and possibly securing the win. However, the ring is circumscribed by an
anonymous “crowd” that, in many ways, exerts its own pressure and control on the movement
inside the ring, first through the judges and then through the referee before it’s finally imposed
on the fighters:

The Mex slapped his left across the Pole’s teeth and skittered sideways, arms at his sides.
The Pole’s rag mouthpiece popped half-way out, looking like a wad of dirty cotton in the
light; the mouth unhinged and he stood drooling under the lights. The Mex looked at the
ref.
The ref looked down at the judges.
The judges listened alertly to the crowd behind them.
The ref nodded the Mexican in. (2)
While the Mexican fighter wins the boxing match on the merit of his own skills as a boxer, he’s not entirely autonomous. The fight is, in part, mediated by an anonymous crowd, an external force that influences the activity in a small space occupied by two ethnic fighters. Seen in this light, the novel links them to some of Chicago’s most socially and economically oppressed populations. Historically, boxing has been a means by which many poor, working-class men have sought to transcend poverty. But Algren is critical of the spectacle of brutality and the pleasure it provides spectators. Ian Peddie asserts: “the boxing match is symbolic of the meaninglessness of ethnic/racial rivalry” given the common class positions shared by the boxers, and it functions to “condemn[] those who by their presence sanction such violence” (129). Yet this scene becomes even more revealing when we consider its spatial dimensions of the ring.

Power both directs and shapes the space of the ring. It is socially and spatially located and, though dynamic, is mobilized hierarchically in a particular way: The two boxers act as individuals, each with his own strategies and skill sets seeking to impose his will on the other; yet, it is their mutual movements and actions in relation to one another that define the space and, to a limited extent, the power dynamic of the ring. The ring is penetrated by a social power just beyond the ropes—the judges act as mediators between the referee and the crowd, consumers of the spectacle. The power exerted by the crowd outside of the ring has direct influence on the action within the space of the ring. The referee could have stopped the fight, clearly the “army haircut” was not capable of defending himself, yet the crowd demanded a knock out. The ring, then, must be seen as a dynamic rather than static space. It is not merely a container, nor is the ring simply a surface on which one stands or occupies. Rather, Algren’s depiction of the ring as fluid and dynamic suggests that we conceive of space in relation to power and social relations. For in the novel, these are precisely what constitute the scales of urban spaces and imbue them
with meaning. In this, then, the first scene of the novel, Algren adumbrates the extent to which the city’s spaces are sites of conflict, especially as the need to appropriate and control various spaces in informal sectors is often a means of survival for poor populations.

In the narrative, the boxing ring functions metonymically as the center of Bruno’s world, and it is suggestive of the degree to which his experience is defined by struggle and circumscribed by conflict. Moreover, the ring is the means by which he not only proves himself but defines who he is: a fighter. By proving himself a formidable fighter, Bruno is awarded with a degree of cultural capital that provides him greater recognition and mobility within the neighborhood. Moreover, accumulated successes in the boxing ring (continued domination of space) are also the means by which he hopes to escape the neighborhood.

From the policed micro-space of the boxing ring, Algren locates the “Pole with the army haircut” within another powerfully policed social space: the neighborhood. The Pole is Casey Benkowski, a small-time hood who dutifully took a dive in the fight with the Mexican, a dive orchestrated by neighborhood crime boss Bonifacy, “The Barber,” Konstantine. Standing in the doorway of Konstantine’s barber shop, Benkowski reflects on the meaning and the power of the place: “He had seen this room a thousand days of his life and wished he had seen it not once. In it he had become a bicycle thief when he was ten, a pimp when he was fourteen, and a preliminary boy at sixteen. Now, at twenty-nine, he had come, with the alley light behind him, to learn what the room wished him next to become” (4). Under The Barber’s corrupt tutelage, Benkowski was indoctrinated into a life of crime, and as an adult he has taken over for the Barber recruiting neighborhood youth: “He coached the underage youths of the 26th Ward Warriors S.A.C. in baseball, boxing, theft and hoodlumism” (5). On this occasion, the Barber concocts a scheme to reorganize the Warriors under the name “Baldheads.” Membership
requires having one’s head shaved exclusively by the Barber, for which he’ll collect a small fee, of which Benkowski will receive a percentage. Now, with “forty-odd youths, from every corner of the Triangle formed by Chicago, Ashland, and Milwaukee Avenues, who claimed membership in the Warriors S.A.C.,” Benkowski sets his sights on Bruno “Lefty” Bicek. Because of his athletic prowess, Bruno has a fair amount of clout with the boys in the Triangle, and Benkowski seeks to exploit his reputation, and Bruno’s potential as a prizefighter, for his own gain. Benkowski’s logic: “Somebody got to bring that lefthander along. It might as well be me” (11).

Such is the milieu in which Bruno grows. Algren strategically draws readers’ attention to the socio-spatial context in which Bruno is trained to adopt values conducive to the class practices of the Triangle, a training that began long before Benkowski decides to bring him “along.” The only surviving son of a widowed Polish immigrant, Bruno and his mother barely survive by selling milk and day-old bread out of their dilapidated storefront, Bicek’s Imperial Milk Depot and Half-Price Day-Old Bakery. His mother longs for the “Old World” where honest work was valued and sufficient, and where “if they had stayed, she felt, her son would have been a good one”(16). However, her longing and her “Old World” values are, to Bruno, irrelevant and ineffectual in light of the social and economic forces that have left them virtually immobilized. She lies sick and defeated, “half in sleep and half in waking” in the back of an empty store. For Mama Bicek, “the American Dream has flickered and expired” (98). Bruno, on the other hand, recognizes early on that his mother’s “peasant faith in work as a cure-all” is insufficient in their daily struggle to survive. As an occasional visiting social worker is quick to remind him, so that “he knew it all by rote”:

Mama Bicek needed an orange.
Mama Bicek needed meat.
Mama Bicek needed medicine.
Mama Bicek should get sunshine. (12)

But these words carry as little weight for Bruno as does his mother’s faith in honest work. Later in the novel, Bruno reflects on his attempt to go the honest route via legitimate work. As an uneducated, ethnic “other,” Bruno’s employment options were limited. He “hadn’t had a job outside of freight handling” (33). Freight handling was uncertain work at best: “The shippers were never able to tell a man how long he was going to work because they never knew themselves” (33). While Bruno handled the uncertainty of employment and the 40 cents an hour he received to push a hand truck around well, Bruno quit the job along with many of the other freight handlers after a significant pay cut was made. When replacement workers were quickly hired, eager to work at the new rate, Bruno grew disillusioned by the precariousness of “honest” work and how easily replaceable he was: “any man with two arms and two legs could learn how to shove a truck, and the right place to shove it, in five minutes” (34). Yet, his neighborhood, organized as it was around an informal economy of most illegal practices, offered a means by which he could secure the use values necessary for survival, and the degree to which the neighborhood as whole sustained itself primarily through an informal economy validated it in Bruno’s mind. It appears perfectly natural and is, in Bruno’s narrow milieu, generally acceptable. That he’s internalized the values and attitudes that make informal economic practices appealing and acceptable, is eluded to when, during this reflection on “honest work,” Bruno begins humming to himself: “Grzmoty zabili diabla…a diabla zabili rzyda” (34). This translates to “When thunder kills a devil, then a devil kills a jew,” a cryptic phrase that gestures toward the hostile clash between Polish and Jewish communities in America in the early 20th
century, and one the Barber, a key figure in the informal economy, utters regularly to caution the young gang members against being out-cheated. However, when Bruno begins humming this expression he doesn’t remember that it’s the barber’s “tune” or “where he had heard it” (34). Instead, he further pontificates on the futility of wage labor:

> Why hang around a crumbly relief station, with a mob of crumbly greenhorns, for a fifty-five a month pick-and-shovel job, when you could get by never going near the relief, beating some sprout at rotation in back of the widow’s for a quarter a game or pitching softball on Saturday afternoons for a dollar a man or league ball on Sundays; or by picking up a half dollar off Mama Tomek for bringing her a couple customers? (34)

Economic conditions beyond the boundaries of the Triangle shape Bruno’s orientation toward work and life within the Triangle, and humming the Barber’s tune suggests how pervasive Bruno’s teaching is; it operates at the level of Bruno’s subconscious. When wage labor seems no guarantee, when the State relief programs offer no relief at all (the Bicek’s receive no aid despite being clients of the visiting relief worker), the Barber’s tune functions as an implicit reminder of an alternative way that people left to fend for themselves survive.

For Bruno, learning to survive in the Triangle requires an education in exploitation and corruption. The neighborhood becomes a classroom in which he learns the skills necessary to participate in the informal economy of the neighborhood. While outside perspective might interpret this “classroom” as simply a training ground for corruption (a view that contributes to pathologizing impoverished spaces and branding as “criminal” the people who live in these spaces), for Bruno it’s a training ground for survival. Moreover, the novel’s depiction of the

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27 Dominic Pacyga’s illuminates “various reasons for the clash between Poles and Jews in Europe and America including the growth of national consciousness for both groups, mutually antagonistic ideological programs, economic competition, traditional anti-Semitism, and the policy of the Russian government which was designed to promote conflict between the two groups” (64). See Dominic A. Pacyga, “To Live Amongst Others: Poles and Their Neighbors in Industrial Chicago, 1865-1930,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16 (1996): 55-73. Print.
Triangle as an informal economy is suggestive of how place is constructed through particular forms of social interaction. As a marginalized place, the neighborhood is a crucial place for bonding and collaboration, and the shape the community takes is in direct relation to historical-geographical location. Theorizing how the spatial empowerment of oppressed and impoverished urban populations requires the construction of particular communities, David Harvey posits:

Low income populations, usually lacking the means to overcome and hence command space, find themselves for the most part trapped in space. Since ownership of even basic means of reproduction (such as housing) is restricted, the main way to dominate space is through continuous appropriation. Exchange values are scarce, and so the pursuit of use values for daily survival is central to social action. This means frequent material and interpersonal transactions and the formation of very small scale communities. Within the community space, use values get shared through some mix of mutual aid and mutual predation, creating tight but often highly conflictual interpersonal social bonding in both private and public spaces. The result is an often intense attachment to place and ‘turf’ and an exact sense of boundaries because it is only through active appropriation that control over space is assured. (*Urban* 265-66)

Bruno learns to recognize opportunity in the card or dice game, in the hustle and manipulation that people like the Barber, who assumes that everything in America is crooked, perform on a daily basis. In a world in which the game seems fixed, the Barber devotes his time to “outcheat all the cheaters in a country where Old-World principles are only cheater’s bait” (Cox 98). He takes the neighborhood youth under his wing in an effort to bring them “along” into his gang because he knows they are an easily exploitable resource. In her work on social reproduction,
Cindi Katz explains that social reproduction, “at its most basic, hinges on the biological reproduction of the labor force,” but it also “calls forth a range of cultural forms and practices that are also geographically and historically specific, including those associated with knowledge and learning” (711). Social reproduction “entails acquiring and assimilating the shared knowledge, values, and practices of the groups to which one belongs by birth or choice” (714). Together the Barber and Benkowski participate in the social reproduction of an illicit labor force. It is in part through the Barber and through Benkowski that Bruno adopts many values and learns the skills necessary to navigate and participate in the informal economy of the Triangle. The pursuit of use values preoccupies life in the Triangle. Encoded in the expectation “to be regular with the boys,” is the value of sharing an appropriate amount of resources, “and to be regular was all [Bruno] had ever been schooled to accomplish” (133). Initiation into the gang, then, provides Bruno with social support as well as with opportunities to learn how to secure use values. But in a space in which the basic means of reproduction aren’t guaranteed, informal economies are dangerous places; the mutual aid and “supportive patterns of appropriation” that define such economies, on the one hand, are tenuous and quite often provisional because of the predatory tendencies such spaces also cultivate. Commanding space, as Harvey notes, is accomplished through the “mobilization of… particular configurations of power” (249). And Bruno learns the hard way that the practice of being “regular” is easily, and often devastatingly, exploitable.

Algren underscores just how essential location is to the characters’ identities, and as Carla Cappetti points out, to their “sense of being at home in the world” (161). “We have,” she notes, “‘Catfoot N. from Fry Street’, ‘Bruno B. from Potomac and Paulina,’ ‘Playboy Pinsky from Roosevelt and Lawndale,’ ‘Cowboy Okulanis from by the Nor’twes...
caseworker from the Sangamon Street Relief. Steffie talks about her ‘girl friend Okulanis from Moorman Street,’ and her ‘girl friend Masurczyk from Ellen Street’ (161). Through nicknaming, Algren “attaches” his characters to place. And in doing so, he not only underscores the extent to which their basic means of survival are grounded in place, in the neighborhood, but the extent to which the geography of the Triangle is virtually inscribed in the identities of the characters. Bruno, for instance, is not in any significant way more socially or geographically mobile than his mother. Bruno’s first major crime with the gang to steal a slot machine from roadhouse takes him outside the neighborhood; he “had never been that far west of the Triangle” (20). Being out of the Triangle amounts to being out “into the world” (25). And being out in the world for Bruno means leaving the relative safety of the neighborhood. It is what he knows and where he has a sense of agency. It’s a social space that he’s learned how to navigate, how to survive.

By putting the Triangle at the center of the narrative, Algren direct readers’ attention to the role geography plays in the formation of consciousness. In doing so, Algren connects the spatial dimensions of Bruno’s life to the moral codes he inherits from the gang by which he interprets and interacts with the world. While Bruno commits a number of horrendous actions, there is a sense throughout the novel that Algren is positioning the reader to question her or his valuation of certain classed and raced young people who live in these ignored and neglected spaces of deprivation and impoverishment, and he accomplishes this, in part, through his depiction of the profound sense of alienation and isolation that the Bruno and Steffi experience. Algren gestures toward this sense of alienation during an uncomfortable conversation between Bruno and the social worker who visited the store to check on Mama Bicek. There is a mutual distrust of one another. The social worker feels Bruno lies to her “as fast as a dog can trot,” an
accusation that “was true so far as she was concerned” (13). But what is unclear to Bruno is why he lies to her:

Perhaps it was partly her consistent failure to regard him as the Warriors’ mainstay;
perhaps it was chiefly his realization that she came from the same world as did detectives and truant officers and park policeman. Perhaps too he had sensed that she stopped to question him chiefly in order that she might be able to leave feeling she had been most deliberately, brazenly and wantonly betrayed by a client she had trusted completely. (13)

Being the “Warriors’ mainstay” has value for Bruno. It denotes his rank, his success in proving himself in the neighborhood. It is a role and an identity that has currency in the neighborhood, so for the social worker to fail to recognize and acknowledge Bruno’s status and positioning in the neighborhood illuminates the fundamental differences in their values and their worlds. Moreover, Bruno associates the social worker with repressive state institutions which connote punishment and control rather than social assistance. Indeed, the social worker offers no financial assistance. In fact, her motivation in talking with Bruno, whose reluctance to acknowledge her entrance into the store “irked [her] a little,” is to “cure him of the habit [of lying],” to have a “heart to heart talk with the boy before she left. Perhaps all he needed was Social Guidance” (12). This interaction concludes when the social worker, after being told another lie by Bruno, storms out of the store slamming the door behind her, “a proper slam,” Bruno notes, “righteousness had been betrayed again” (15). While Bruno suggests that it’s unclear why he lies to her, it seems likely it’s because he senses a general lack of understanding on her part which she glosses over by projecting a position of moral superiority. Therefore, the Social Guidance she offers has little value for Bruno in the streets of the Triangle. The Barber and the gang who work to appropriate the space of the neighborhood do so under a drastically
different moral code. The depiction of such a seemingly different values and ethics gestures toward the experiential divide between the individuals isolated in the Triangle and the institutions of mainstream society that the social worker represents. In this light, Algren positions readers to contemplate the extent to which the social worker’s moral righteousness reinforces Bruno’s sense of his status as a second-class citizen.

Bruno’s sense of being second-class, being separate and somehow apart from the mainstream, is underscored in the second chapter of the novel, “The Trouble with Daylight.” In this chapter, Bruno wanders underneath the El, the elevated rail line that serves as the city’s main transportation system, “in the heart of the city” (31). It is a place of shelter and security for Bruno, and he recalls the significance the space has had for him since his youth:

As a child he had learned that the safest place to play was beneath the El. For the streets belonged to streetcars and walks to people who lived in houses and not behind stores or above poolrooms. Nobody but pigeons owned the littered places under the steep Division Street steps. Nobody owned it. And from beneath it a small boy could hear conductors call something in English; different conductors but always the same word; could see feet coming down with no one seeing him watch at all. That was the safest part. Nobody came there to make you play in the sun; nobody could find you when you slept, an underfed, shoeless six-year old of the cageworked city’s curbs and walks. (30)

This scene illuminates the profound sense of alienation experienced by the poor. The sense that he’s cut off from the rest of society is suggested by the image of disembodied feet. He sees but is not seen. Ironically, Bruno learns to avoid the public gaze by seeking refuge in a seemingly meaningless space, occupied only by pigeons. That he finds safety in a space of refuse suggests how he feels about his own self-worth. Moreover, his lack of social and geographical mobility
within a “cageworked” city is juxtaposed by the movement embodied by the images of the El and “streetcars and walks;” “he felt the roar of the passing cars above like a wall between himself and the world” (31). Bruno’s freedom to move is extremely limited such that much of the public space of the city seems off limits to him. His sense of social alienation from mainstream society is reinforced by his experience of geographical isolation. By seeking the shelter of the spaces below the tracks, he renders himself invisible. In essence, he polices his own behavior such that by shielding himself from the gaze of the “people who live in houses” he shields them from having to confront the poverty that is indicative of uneven development and an unequal social order. It is to the advantage, in fact, of the wealthy and privileged that someone like Bruno simply disappears. This population simply doesn’t need Bruno and the underclass he represents. So he wanders below the El along with others like him. There he’d find “Catfoot or Fireball Kodadek or Finger [who] always had a pair of dice or a deck of worn out cards,” other “children of the poor [who] preferred the crowded adventure of the alleyways to the policed safety of the playgrounds and settlements” (30). Whereas Bruno and the others find shelter beneath the El, it, like the Triangle, works to separate and partition, to keep class relations an abstraction.

In the chapter “The Trouble with Daylight,” daylight has the power to both reveal and conceal. When Bruno is above ground in the light of the public spaces of the city beyond the boundaries of the Triangle, he risks exposing himself as the “underfed, shoeless six-year-old,” as Other and “out of place.” That Bruno experiences such a profound sense of exclusion from the

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28 While the concept of underclass is used in variety of ways, I am using Erik Olin Wright’s definition, in part, because it avoids the pejorative. For Wright, the underclass is “a category of social agents who are economically oppressed but not consistently exploited within a given class system….They are oppressed because they are denied access to various kinds of productive resources, above all the necessary means to acquire the skills needed to make their labor-power saleable. As a result, they are not consistently exploited” (48). See Erik Olin Wright, *Interrogating Inequality*, London: Verso, 1994.
world above suggests how the poor internalize the troubling attitudes many Americans have toward poverty. In *Interrogating Inequality*, Erik Olin Wright demonstrates the persistence of the “culture of poverty thesis” in which “the most salient [public] explanation for why the poor are poor is that they lack the right values, they are lazy or in other ways have flawed motivation, they are too present-oriented and unable to delay gratification, they have low self-esteem, etc.” (34). His lust for “personal triumphs in public places” is suggestive of a desire to establish and legitimize his presence in mainstream society. But like his other lusts for “tobacco…for meat, for coffee, for bread, for sleep, for whiskey, for women,” which “rode him” day and night, Bruno’s lust for public acknowledgement and recognition, for legitimacy, “was never fully satisfied even for a while” (31).

But daylight also works to dampen and conceal Bruno’s self-reflective capacities, precluding him from developing class consciousness. When he is below the El, he is the most reflective. He recalls seeing wolf’s head in store window after which “he thought dimly of himself…as a hunter in a barren place. ‘I been hungry all my life, all the time,’ he told himself, ‘I never get my teeth into anythin’ all my own’ (32). Life for Bruno is constant quest for opportunities to secure use values like food and shelter, but also for symbolic capital, those codes and symbols that function to distinguish an individual socially:

Things you couldn’t live another hour without, that were yours and yet not yours: a steady job, a steady girl, a clean place to sleep where you could be with the girl without her whole family and your whole family and every sprout in the block knowing exactly where the two of you were and maybe listening at the partition too. And jeering the girl on the street about it an hour after. These were the things that made you a man if you
possessed them, or a wolf—if you were born where such things were only to the hunter.

(32)

Bruno’s reflection emphasizes the role of possession in relation to his identity. It is reminiscent of Sartre’s meditation in *Being and Nothingness* that “possession is a magical relation; I am these objects which I possess….What is mine is myself” (755). Because Bruno for most of his life does not have things, because he lacks possessions, he feels he is less than a man, something less than human. In this way he identifies with the wolf and the wolf’s predatory instincts toward survival. The object also provides Bruno with a means to interpret his actions and place with regard to the neighborhood:

there were different hunters as there was different game. The informer and the pay-roll bandit were equally hunters. The barber hunted women for the woman called Mama Tomek, and Mama T. sheltered a little Jew called Snipes. And all were equally hunters; though the Jew hunted only cigarette butts and a place to sleep. The alderman’s brother-in-law, at the Potomac Street station, sought convictions; and Bibleback Wrobinski, with his hair in his eyes, sought converts to the church in order to save his own harassed soul. Both were equally hunters. (33)

This image of hunter and the predatory behaviors the image connotes offers a particularly compelling insight into Bruno’s character, especially since this reflective moment occurs in the narrative shortly after he rapes his girlfriend Steffi. After the rape Bruno reflects on the sense of ownership he experiences toward Steffi and he considers the responsibility he has to preserve her integrity and character. He asks “But what could you do with a good girl once she was yours? You couldn’t keep on just sleeping around, above a poolroom or on the beach or in the corner as though she were some Clark Street tramp” (35). But the sleeping around that Bruno voices
concern about implies her consent; he refuses in this moment to specifically consider how the rape has impacted Steffi; nor does he acknowledge responsibility. Instead, he declares “I’ll make it all up” to her (35). But Bruno betrays significant doubt about his ability to do so. There’s sense in which Bruno feels his warped values and dangerous personality traits are deeply embedded and inherent aspects of his nature. He understands that he betrayed her, yet because he sees himself as inherently untrustworthy and dangerous in a neighborhood of equally untrustworthy and dangerous people, he redirects the blame for his violence he committed back onto Steffi:

She had put trust in him, who had no trust in himself. He felt irritated with her for that; a girl ought not to trust anyone these days. Why should she trust him any more than he trusted the barber, he wondered as he walked. How could you trust the barber, who was nobody’s friend, when you couldn’t trust Benkowski, who was anybody’s friend? You couldn’t trust the barber because he kept Mama T. running a fourth-rate house by the Northwestern tracks….And you couldn’t trust a Benkowski because he didn’t have anything. You couldn’t trust the ones with brains, because they had them, and you couldn’t trust the ones without, because they didn’t. (35-36)

The novel doesn’t present economic or sociological justification for Bruno’s actions. They are reprehensible. But the novel does seem to question the extent to which socio-geographical context matters. In the space below the El, Bruno begins the process of critical reflection on his own actions and the geography in which he performs them. When Bruno is above ground, the rules of the street demand different activities and practices than the kind of self-reflective practices that he engages in under the El:
Bruno Bicek from Potomac Street had his own cunning. He’d argue all day, with anyone, about anything, in daylight, and he’d always end up feeling he’d won, that he’d been right all along. He’d refute himself, in daylight, for the mere sake of an argument. But at night, alone, he refuted no one, denied nothing. He saw himself close up and clearly then, too clear for any argument. As clear, as close up, as the wolf’s head in the empty window. That was the trouble with daylight. (38)

For Bruno, the trouble with daylight is that during the day he is confronted by the variegated forms of exclusion he experiences from public spaces on the basis of his poverty. Moreover, navigating the social spaces of the Triangle requires certain behaviors and adopting particular attitudes, which prevent him from engaging in meaningful, critical reflection on his social positioning, for developing more meaningful ways of understanding his values and motivations a sense of the place in which he lives. It’s only in these brief moments of isolation that Bruno begins to see his predicament with anything approximating clarity.

Yet, as much as Bruno appears to lack a critical understanding of his social positioning, like the social worker, other agents of the state appear either unwilling or incapable of seeing Bruno as anything more than an abnormality deserving of punishment. In Book II, in the chapter “I have Only Myself to Blame,” Bruno is “picked up for the shooting of a drunk in a hallway off a Chicago Avenue alley” (80). While he did not commit this crime, three months earlier he did murder a Greek youth from another neighborhood who he tried to jump in the line that was forming to gang rape Steffi. At this point in the novel, Bruno is not a suspect in the Greek’s murder. After being brought into the station, Bruno is introduced to the precinct’s captain, “One-Eye Tenczara, eleven years on the plain-clothes detail, three promotions and brother-in-law to an indicted alderman” (81). The chapter is framed by the image of a small sign
that Bruno initially encounters in Tenczara’s office: “Above his head a red and yellow wall motto bore a square-faced legend:

\[
\begin{align*}
  & I \quad \text{HAVE} \quad \text{ONLY} \\
  & \text{MYSELF TO BLAME} \\
  & \text{FOR MY FALL}
\end{align*}
\]

While presented as a statement, the truth of this statement is called into question, in part, by the narrative itself. The sentence that precedes the wall motto describes it as bearing a “square-faced legend.” The double-meanings of “square” and “legend” are certainly not lost on Algren. In the most literal sense, of course, “square” refers to the geometrical shape of the wall hanging. To be square-faced, means being shaped as to be square or rectangular. However, the term “square” has a range of slang connotations. In the positive sense it can refer to something good or honest (e.g. a “square” deal), and in the negative sense “square” is often used to refer to socially conservative people. While “legend” can refer generically to inscription, it can also refer to an unverifiable or unproven story from the past. At the end of the chapter, after Bruno is released from jail after being in weeks on an open charge, he walks again beneath the El only to see the square wall motto “before his eyes, black on white as clearly as though flashed on the screen of Schwante’s Family Theatre. While Bruno seems to accept the wall motto as fact and believe that it is entirely his responsibility for the murder, Steffi’s gang rape, and her subsequent prostitution in Mama Tomek’s brothel, the function of the wall motto seems to be to call the seemingly “black and white” certainty of the statement into question.

One way the narrative calls Bruno’s guilt into question is by drawing a parallel between the illegal violence on the street and the institutionally sanctioned violence of the judicial system. While in jail, Bruno is repeatedly questioned and brutally assaulted by Tenczara’s detectives,
Adamovitch and Comisky. They want information about a drunk that they believe Bruno shot but in reality it is Benkowski who is responsible. It doesn’t take long for Bruno to realize the true nature of his powerlessness in contrast to the power of the state:

For the first time in his life the boy felt a fear of dirt. This wasn’t the flour-and-dust smell of Bicek’s Imperial Half-Price Bakery….This was a melancholy place, where a thousand young men had lain with horror of the penitentiary like the weight upon them of an incurable disease caught in a laughing moment: they had sweated here in their horror, and the smell and feel of their perspiration was part of the melancholy place now, for other young men to smell and feel as tangibly as the touch of the spoon holder on the wall or of the bucket by the green-painted bars. (86) Bruno not only experiences terror in the face of possible imprisonment, but he feels a connection to the “thousand young men” who came before him. It becomes all too apparent to Bruno how precarious life is for the working poor and urban underclasses: “It was a short step from the cake flops to the showup room; from the horse-parlors to the cells. Out of the open-door barrel houses, out of the secret brothels; out of the two-bit honky-tonks, out of the stag hotels….Not one would go home” (136). Bruno feels “as though he were in a ring with an opponent he couldn’t see” (116).

Some of Bruno’s most formidable opponents are the privileged classes’ attitudes toward the underclass. Rather than consider poverty and the underclass in relation to social and cultural forces, a person like Bruno is often interpreted in terms of seemingly inherent, individual attributes. This is the view Detective Adamovitch adopts uncritically. During one of the interrogations, while Bruno enthusiastically describes his athletic abilities and his hopes of becoming a heavy-weight contender, Adamovitch decides “in that moment, that he didn’t like
this kid. This was a low-class Polack. He himself was a high-class Polack because his name was Adamovitch not Adamowski. This sort of kid kept spoiling things for high-class Polacks by always showing off instead of just being good citizens” (127). However, the general lack of empathy he has for Bruno and the cold brutality he inflicts on Bruno, a child, threatens to undermine any claim Adamovitch might make about being high-class or in some way superior. Given the socio-political antagonisms, negative stereotyping and violence Polish Americans experienced in the U.S., it’s not entirely surprising that Adamovitch feels this way toward Bruno, that he wants to distance himself from Bruno and other Polish-Americans like him. Here Algren gestures toward the history of racism and xenophobia of American culture. Nativist attitudes and perspectives towards immigrants in the early 20th century were widely shared, including academic observers like Edward Alsworth Ross, one of the most influential American sociologists of the time:

There is a certain anthracite town of 26,000 inhabitants in which are writ large the moral and social consequences of injecting 10,000 sixteenth-century people into a twentieth-century community. By their presence the foreigners necessarily lower the general plane of intelligence, self-restraint, refinement, orderliness, and efficiency. With them, of course, comes an increase in drink and of the crimes of drink. The great excess of men among them leads to sexual immorality and the diffusion of private diseases. A primitive midwifery is practiced, and the ignorance of poor mothers fills the cemetery of tiny graves. The women go about their homes barefoot, and their rooms and clothing reek with the odors of cooking and uncleanliness. The standards of modesty are Elizabethan. The miners bathe in the kitchen before the females and children of the household, and women soon to be mothers appear in public unconcerned. The foreigners attend church
regularly, but their noisy amusements banish the quiet Sunday. The foreign men—three-eighths of whom are illiterate, pride themselves on their physical strength rather than on their skill, and are willing to take jobs requiring nothing but brawn. (228)

In Ross’s estimation, foreigners are nothing but corrosive to the fabric of American society. And in many ways Bruno fits several of these stereotypes. However, rather than reinforce stereotypes of the ignorant, diseased, immoral foreigner, the novel asks readers to consider Bruno in the context of a class analysis of poverty. When Adamovitch refers to Bruno as a “low class Polack,” low class seems to denote qualities of character and behavior; however, the connotations of social-economic status aren’t lost on the reader. By distancing himself from Bruno via these two categories of class, Adamovitch not only asserts a moral superiority similar to that asserted by the social worker, but he also attempts to elevate (at least in his own mind) his own class status and thereby legitimize his position in mainstream American society. Here the novel works to demonstrate how concepts of class are used to categorize and dismiss others, and how this dismissal can be perpetuated by members of one’s own ethnic community. The question Adamovitch doesn’t consider, but what the novel encourages readers to ask is why are “low class” kids like Bruno always “showing off”? To show off is to attempt to be recognized, and beyond the boundaries of the Triangle, Bruno is virtually invisible unless he happens to inconvenience or disrupt the approved spaces of consumption production. In terms of the larger capitalist society within which the Triangle is cordonned off, Bruno is not a productive resource. Therefore, he’s not recognized. His “citizen” status is called into question, first by Adamovitch, but also earlier in the chapter when Adamovitch questions Bruno’s previous experience with the police and whether a missing tooth of his had been knocked out by a “copper” (111). Somewhat facetiously, Bruno exclaims “I’m a citizen!”, but the assertion takes on even more weight in light
of Adamovitch’s dismissal. Furthermore, when Bruno must endure the humiliation of Tenczara’s line-up for a public audience, Bruno’s early assertion that he’s a “citizen,” echoes like a hopeless plea.

The line-up takes place bi-weekly during which time arrested men are placed in a line each and forced to answer in turn to his charges read by Tenczara. As Bruno awaits “at the end of the line, [he] saw, over the shoulders of the vagrants and gunmen preceding him, half a hundred men and women seated comfortably, as though for a double-feature” (136-37). In many ways, the line-up is theatrical: Tenczara performs the role of jaded and cynical detective, quick-witted and capable of undermining any pretense of innocence. The accused haven’t made mistakes; in Tenczara’s eyes, they are mistakes. He readily performs a witty, verbal gymnastics for the audience, who regularly laugh at his jokes and antics; at times he “turn[s] toward the audience with the deliberation of a side-show barker at a county fair.” For over twenty pages, Tenczara interrogates a range of men, including “a mechanic from Indianapolis, turned panhandler with four fingers gone, a bookkeeper whose lungs had gone bad in the Bronx, and a bearded Kentuckian, the last of his race, in tight-fitting trousers a little too short and smelling like a mouldering mission” (136). In these pages, Tenczara functions as a kind of informal sociologist, though his motivation appears to be in performing for the public audience rather than acquiring a more complicated understanding. In Tenczara’s mind, they accused are unequivocally guilty. Tenczara’s quick-witted retorts and crushing dismissal of the explanations of the accused are rendered in terse, tactile prose. The shear duration of this scene, it seems, is intended to generate empathy in readers for these “lost souls,” men who “were all in on a bum rap” (153). Bruno is the last to be interviewed, and when’s he’s called, Tenczara demands that Bruno announce what he was arrested for:
‘Suspicion of I shot at a old man.’

‘I heard you hit him.’

‘No sir. I missed.

‘Lucky for you. You’re in the clear in this town so long as you miss. We call straight murder a misdemeanor here.’ Before anyone had a chance to titter, Tenczara’s voice turned hard. ‘C’mon down closer, gorilla, these people want a good look.’ (151)

Indeed, Algren calls attention to the act of seeing the underclass and a consideration of the extent to which literary representations, and consumption of these representations, participated in dehumanizing the underclass. Despite the fact that Bruno is not responsible for murdering the old man, Tenczara wants the public to see Bruno as a murderer. The irony, of course, is that Bruno is a murderer, of a Greek youth, just not the old man. But what Tenczara wants the public to believe is that Bruno murdered out of greed. Readers know that Bruno’s motivation to murder the Greek was neither premeditated nor out of greed. It occurs after Bruno fails to prevent Fireball and Catfoot from raping Steffi in a shed below the El. In light of their threat to “put a finger on [Bruno]” for the theft of a slot machine owned by the mob, Bruno’s drive toward self-preservation causes him to yield to their threats (67). As more and more boys from the neighborhood show up to participate, the boys he’s expected to “be regular” with, Bruno is paralyzed by fear and a sense powerlessness as he is forced to witness “the one human he loved [being] turned into a loveless thing” (133). When the Greek shows up, Bruno is reeling from guilt, hearing Steffi’s whimpers from below the street; he challenges the Greek to a fight. When the Greek is taking off of coat and his arms are restrained, Bruno hits him in the face, drops him to the ground and kicks him once in the jaw, breaking the Greek’s neck. That he responded in explosive rage to a stranger who arrives eager to participate in the violence, a stranger from
outside the neighborhood that he did feel any particular obligation to “be regular” with is completely inexcusable and utterly reprehensible. This, combined with Bruno’s complicity in the gang rape of his girlfriend, render any sentimental readings of Bruno as merely a victim of historical-geographical-economic determinism impossible.

And while it is not Tenczara’s job to do so, he does not attempt to empathize or understand an individual’s transgressions. Instead, Tenczara dominates the space of the jail by forcing Bruno and the other accused to endure a brutal kind of public shaming. When Bruno is forced to move close to the audience so that they’ll “know you the next time they see you” (151), Bruno shields his eyes “out of a burning embarrassment” (151). Bruno’s embarrassment in this scene is reminiscent of the public embarrassment he experienced at being exposed as an “underfed, shoeless six-year-old.” And while Tenczara continues to publically humiliate him by referring to him as “Daffodil” and making him parade around in front of the public so that they “can see how you look when you walk,” Bruno is plagued by a feeling of perpetual confinement (151). He “turn[s] heavily, at an imagined door. As though his life were a barred bull pen. Five steps forward and five steps back, head turned to find the promised escape that was never somehow there” (151). There is no escape, this scene suggests, for Bruno from public humiliation and ostracization, from the “cageworked city.” As Bruno’s public humiliation comes to a close, the room empties leaving nothing “save the sounds of the city, coming up from below. The great trains howling from track to track all night. The taut and telegraphic murmur of the thousand city wires, drawn most cruelly against a city sky. The rush of city waters, beneath the city streets. The passionate passing of the night’s last El” (152). These passages, in which the ubiquitous sounds of the city envelope and penetrate the jail, underscore the jail’s location in the heart of the city and its role in ensuring the cordon off of society’s excess people.
Whereas the jail functions in the novel as a primary space of containment for those that transgress the boundaries of the Triangle, the brothel functions as another potent space of power and containment. Through Mama Tomek, the Barber uses the brothel as a means of controlling the informal economy of the neighborhood. As the months go by, the sounds of the city remind Bruno of the night of Steffi’s rape and her forced prostitution by the Barber; his guilt towards her intensifies; his consciousness shifts towards atonement and escape:

Had she called ‘Next!’ because she was mocking herself with the whiskey in her? It seemed now that she had been mocking only him. If only they had killed her outright down there. If only that bullet had really bounced. If only the old man had been killed. Regardless of who had held the gun, Bruno B. would have been guilty; it wouldn’t have been necessary to mention a woman then at all. Tenczara would have had him by the throat and who, in Tenczara’s mind, he would have burned for, could have made no difference. For all his guilt was for Steffi R. Whatever happened to him now was on her account. He alone had killed her. (156)

Realizing he’s merely a pawn in the Barber’s game and the apathy of Tenczara and the law, Bruno commits himself to rescuing Steffi from the brothel, for it is by saving Steffi that he’ll also save himself. And Bruno’s developing sense of conscience is crucial to understanding Algren’s view of the underclass and their relationship to the environment in which they live. While the informal economy of the Triangle shapes the values and practices that Bruno inherits, he’s not entirely determined by it. Were he to be, Bruno would be as merciless and indifferent as the Barber, Benkowski, Catfoot, and Fireball, Bruno’s primary teachers and the Triangle’s most powerful social agents. Saving Steffi is about rescuing her from the consequences of a particular place-bound form of social reproduction.
In the chapter titled, “The Hunted Also Hope,” an omniscient narrator describes the ways in which the brothel has a particularly powerful draw to poor urban women:

Girls came and went. Some worked a week and quit, to go back to six-dollar-a-week drudgery selling cheap cologne at Goldblatt’s or housekeeping in the suburbs; or to running an elevator where you were asked to smile for eight hours straight; or to selling Father Philip’s Vanilla or Father Andrew’s Cough Syrup or Father William’s Liniment from door to door. Some stayed on for months because the money was easy and all doubts were solved readily by the Board of Health. You didn’t even have to take insults here, as you did on other jobs, without being paid on the barrelhead for being insulted first; nothing said after the money was on the line was really an insult, for it cut both ways then: the customer had paid for the privilege. Here, at least, you always had change in your slipper and a decent dress to walk down Division with; you had your own racket, like everyone else. And when you had a racket you had your own rights: it was nobody’s business then, as it was the boss’s business when you didn’t get to the six-dollar job on time, where you were last night. Here you didn’t have to haggle, either, with a housewife, when you came in after your half day off and found the sink full of dishes, so that you knew you hadn’t gotten a half day off after all….It was all so much easier, so much simpler, so much more sensible. Especially if you could tell those who accused you of taking the easy way, that you’d already tried the hard way.

For the hard way didn’t work for the women of the poor. The hard way ended against a warehouse wall. (210-211)

In this light, prostitution appears more humane than the low-wage service work that ultimately ends for poor women “against a warehouse wall.” The connotation of sexual violence here, of a
figurative rape by the wage system, is juxtaposed against the agency of the prostitute who
determines the conditions of her employment. Rather than pathologize or morally indict the
prostitute, the narrative calls into question the political-economic system that precludes poor
women from other economic opportunities in the first place—a system that can make “being
accessible to any man in the whole endless city” appear a viable option (190). And while the
narrative affords the figure of the prostitute with a humanity and freedom rarely recognized by
mainstream society, it is kept in dialectical tension with images of dehumanization and
immobility. Mama Tomek, the brothel’s madam, reflects on her long career during a heroin-
induced monologue:

> You know, this railroad beat been my territory for years. I know every window, every
alley, every bust-out lamp, every carline, every newsie, every Polack cop, every cigar
store with a bookie in the back—I even notice where somebody tossed out a cigarette ‘r
bust a milk bottle against a wall ‘n the next day the wind has blew the glass into the
street. I’ve walked these corners at 4 A.M. ‘n 4 P.M., summer ‘n winter, sick ‘n well,
blind drunk ‘n stone sober, sometimes so hungry I had t’ walk slow so’s not to fold up on
the pavement ‘n get pulled in, ‘n once with a month’s rent paid in advance ‘n thirty
soldiers in a spanty-new blue bead bag under my arm. I was a proud one that day. (182)

This is the other side of the narrative that prostitution is “so much easier, so much simpler, so
much more sensible.” Mama Tomek’s intimate knowledge of the neighborhood gestures toward
her location within the informal economy of The Triangle. While on the one hand this location
provides her with a deep understanding of place essential for securing use values, it is,
nonetheless, an alienated, individualized, and antagonistic place. This is a deeply affective
image of a human being patrolling the same littered, neglected space year after year in the effort
of experiencing a modicum of happiness that “thirty soldiers” and a “spanty-new blue bead bag” will bring through which the novel seems to be asking whether the poor deserve more. Yet, the novel also explores the ways in which social reproduction happens.

Mama Tomek’s primary responsibility as the brothel’s madam is to ensure the proper order and functioning of the brothel, and this involves a certain amount of training of the prostitutes. The informal economy of the Triangle requires a labor force with particular levels of differentiation and expertise, and social reproduction is what makes this labor force possible. There are, as the narrative makes clear, political-economic and geographical forces that shape the identities and values of many of the women prior to working in the brothel, so that social reproduction, in the political-economic and cultural realms, doesn’t take place exclusively within the brothel. For some women, prostitution may be a conscious choice. However, Steffi is not a prostitute by her own choosing. After the gang rape, Catfoot and Fireball take Steffi to Mama Tomek’s who receives instructions from the Barber to recruit Steffi, and they do so by force and manipulation. Steffi fears being disowned by her mother and publically ostracized if the finds the rape is made public. Furthermore, she knows making the rape public will likely lead to Bruno’s arrest for the killing of the Greek. To protect her mother and Bruno, she doesn’t put up a fight against Mama Tomek or the Barber’s commands.

The brothel works to reinforce a sense of hopelessness in Steffi and the knowledge that “Everyone was alone, trapped in the same vast beer flat forever; making the same endless plans for escape, repeating the same light songs to pass the time and inventing the same false gossip; like convicts living in the same cell for years together. All were in on the same charge, and the charge was a bum rap for all of them. Everyone was in on a bum rap; not one would be paroled” (215). Steffi’s sense of the world as a space of ruin and neglect is compounded by her sense that
“they were all trying not to be cheated” (209). This world view is eerily reminiscent of the Barber’s who believed everyone was out to cheat him. He imagines himself in a hypothetical card game in which “he was just seeing how many cards he could control” (3). Steffi recognizes no hope for renewal, no hope for redemption or justice, rather she believes the “taverns [will] never close, morning would never come again” (223). In what is a departure from the gritty, reportage-esque of narrative realism, Algren utilizes a kind of surrealist narrative strategy to illuminate Steffi’s sense of entrapment and hopelessness:

She dreamed one night that she walked, as a child and alone, through Lincoln Park, saw flames above the trees and, running toward it, saw the small-animal house ablaze. All manner of strange small animals scurried past her toward the safety of the trees about the lagoon; they brushed past her legs, half monkey and half dog, pale catfaced things that limped as they ran, blind bird-faced rodents that wriggled like lizards as if in pain, and white-bellied, hairless things that leaped like frogs. As they passed she saw that some had tiny faces, like some tiny young man’s face, pale and unshaven, the lips half-open and the eyes ablaze.

When she wakened she held a picture in her mind of another place: a great stone penitentiary with all the exits barred and no sign of smoke or disorder without, no sound of crackling flame; but only the steady murmur of the machine shops within. Guards paced the wall steadily and regularly so that no one in the whole outside would could guess that the cells within were blazing, tier upon tier within the very stone, that the smoke was in the lungs of a thousand chained men. That the very bars they grasped were melting within the stone. (217)
Here, surrealism captures the disorientation and danger of life in spaces of urban squalor and decay. The narrative presents a scaling of places: the neighborhood, through the nightmarish image of Lincoln Park, through to the penitentiary, reminiscent of the jail and the brothel, and the larger city that contains them all. As Carla Capetti puts it, “behind the bars of this infernal pit, Steffi hallucinates, the guards and chained men are imperceptibly burning toward destruction, undetected by those outside” (179). Such is Steffi’s sense of entrapment, a sense that Bruno shares which makes the final fight scene so crucial to the narrative arc. The novel concludes where it began: in the boxing ring. However, this time it’s Bruno fighting Honey Boy Tucker, a big-ticket boxing match that winning would mean Bruno could free Steffi from the Barber’s control and that the two could escape the triangle. The Barber, however, learns that Bruno has taken the fight and has no plans of cutting him in on the action if he wins. In the final scene of the novel, Bruno wins the match, and while recovering in the locker room, Tenczara shows up, having been tipped off by the Barber about Bruno’s murder of the Greek. Sensing that there is no escape, that he’s been caught, Bruno is handcuffed without incident. Then, “looking down at the air holes punched between the toes of his worn-out tennis shoes,” with the full realization that he’ll likely get the chair, Bruno exclaims, “knew I’d never get to be twenty-one anyhow” (284).

*Never Come Morning* illuminates the spaces of those who have been eclipsed and disempowered, relegated to the margins of society, ironically, in the heart of the city, “the highest point of human achievement.” The novel interprets how social reproduction works to (re)produce identities, values, and practices that sustain communities organized around informal economies. By imagining the geographies created by political and economic structures of inequality in which many children suffer, Algren’s novel encourages readers to consider the
kinds of communities that emerge when people are “pushed to the limits of their own resilience” and question the moral framework by which we judge those in the most deprived spaces. From a “firmly emplaced perspective” that originates from Algren’s own deep and intimate knowledge of urban Chicago, *Never Come Morning* serves as a compelling example of the ways a critical regionalist text can intervene socially by reconfiguring the ways in which we understand marginalized communities and, simultaneously, encourage readers to think about their own.
Chapter 4

Public Space and ‘The ‘Right to the City’ in Mari Sandoz’s *Capital City*

The city is man’s most consistent and on the whole, his most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself.

--Robert Park, *On Social Control and Collective Behavior*

In the squares of the city by the shadow of the steeple/Near the relief office I saw my people/And some were stumbling and some were wondering if/This land was made for you and me...As I went rambling that dusty highway/I saw a sign that said private property/but on the other side it didn’t say nothing/This land was made for you and me.

--Woody Guthrie, *This Land Is Your Land*

If a man place his hands flat on the map of our country, the crotch of it at the mouth of the Missouri, his forefinger will reach up along the Mississippi towards Canada and his thumb out towards the Spanish Peaks. Between them will lie the newer lands of America, with the blood of the vanquished Indian scarce dry upon their golden grasses, the rutted trails that followed the buffalo up the great rivers still plain in the spring cornfields and the green of the summer alfalfa. Here, in the region that required far over a hundred years to settle, with all the nations of the earth contributing, I have placed my state of Kanewa, with the high white tower of its capitol encircled by a stone frieze dedicated to its citizens, the frieze of the Peoples of the World.

--Mari Sandoz, *Capital City*

The bleak final pages of Mari Sandoz’s *Capital City* (1939) depict the utter degradation of democracy and social order. The year is 1938, and voters in Kanewa, a fictitious Midwestern state, have just elected Charley Stetbettor, a Christian extremist and political hack to Governor, and at a moment the governorship is conceded, fascist vigilantes storm the main street of the capital city in Franklin and violently attack a group of striking workers. In the chaos that ensues, the strikers are severely beaten and overrun, labor activist and protagonist Hamm Rufe lies bludgeoned to death in the street, the National Guard arrives to protect Stetbettor’s taking office in the capitol building, and a “new American flag” is hung from the “wide window of the governor’s suite” (343). Thus, the novel ends with an image of a sinister future America in which political power is usurped by fascist reactionaries.
While it is the case that much American fiction written between the early 1920s and the United States’ entry into World War II has had a relationship with the subject of fascism, Sandoz’s novel is one of the few novels written during this period to confront the threat of an American fascism directly. Yet, Capital City was largely ignored by readers and critics when it was published. In part, it was overshadowed by the publication earlier that year of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath, which is understandable given how few people knew of Mari Sandoz outside of the Sand Hill region of Nebraska. But it is also likely that the novel’s sense of urgency with regard to a growing, indigenous fascism seemed less immediately threatening compared to the threat of homelessness and starvation. Only recently have critics considered Capital City an important novel of the 1930s for its depiction of authoritarian violence concomitant with an increasingly polarized society. For Scott Greenwell, Capital City raises interesting questions about the relationship between economic instability and authoritarian movements. Ultimately, for Greenwell, the novel fails to “radiate a sense of discovery,” but nonetheless it is an “interesting experiment[…] to portray aspects of fascism in Western garb” (143). More recently, Jilian Wenburg argues that the novel is not just merely descriptive of a Western kind of protofascism but that it promotes a politics of collective, cross-class alliances in the fight “for power in the community and for equal rights versus a corrupt state” (2). Similarly, Philip Castille reads the novel as an appeal to readers to renew “a sense of true citizenship in America and ‘return people to the awareness of mutual need’” (140).

Of the recent studies of Sandoz’s novel, Castille presents an insightful reading of geography in the novel. In a consideration of the spatiality of Capital City, he makes the following compelling claim that:
Sandoz renders class conflict as a spatial event and shows the slide toward social cataclysm. She lays out the instantly recognizable urban grid of public strife and urban anguish. This sharply segmented cityscape reflects the highly fragmented social relations in Franklin in which urban space becomes the highly contested terrain of political practice. (137)

In what follows, I argue that *Capital City* represents mid twentieth-century struggles to shape and control an urban public space and suggests the influence these struggles have on regional development in the Middle West. I draw on Don Mitchell and David Harvey’s recent scholarship on “the right to the city,” which presents compelling ideas about the relationship between urban public space and social justice. The “right to the city” engages a long history of debates about what public space is, who has access to it and who is excluded, and who controls the “shaping power over the processes of urbanization,” the processes that give shape to social, economic, and political life (Harvey, *Rebel Cities* 5). For both Harvey and Mitchell, the struggle for the right to the city, the right to shape, use, occupy and inhabit public space has the potential for violence. “How that potential for violence is policed, encapsulated in law, sublimated in design, or turned toward either regressive or progressive ends,” Mitchell argues, “makes all the difference in the world” (5). It is in this light that *Capital City* can be read as a powerful dramatization of how urban public space is contested on the ground and produced through violent struggle. As political allegory, the novel performs a certain kind of historical work. The forces responsible in Franklin for depleting the natural environment through resource extraction, for establishing a virtual working class apartheid, for violating human rights and stifling the democratic process in the interest of promoting and protecting private property and profit rates, are the same forces contributing to the uneven development of many capital cities in
Middle West in the 1930s. As allegorical critique, I argue that *Capital City*’s power lies in its ability to register the unseen or unexamined connection between rhetorics of American exceptionalism and fascist politics. By dramatizing a once-progressive city’s slip into fascism, the novel challenges mid-twentieth-century claims that American exceptionalism is synonymous with democracy, and thereby rejects the claims being made by other Midwestern radicals that the region is the embodiment of this exceptionalism. This rhetoric, the novel suggests, is tired-out and too easily co-opted by range of political, economic, and cultural forces.

However, before turning to the novel, I want to first frame important aspects of Sandoz’s biography that illuminate the dispositions and patterns of thinking that are reflected in her cultural work as well the broader historical and social context from which her novel emerges. A deeper understanding of the place of *Capital City* in the cultural history of the Middle West requires understanding the novel as a product of the terrors of 1930s.

I.

Born in 1896 on a farmstead on the Niobrara River in northwestern Nebraska, in an area then only recently settled, Mari Sandoz grew up in the shadow of an abusive pioneer father, extreme poverty, and natural disaster. But she also grew up immersed in the lore of the Great Plains. “Many old timers, Sandoz recalls, “stopped at our home near an ancient crossing of the Niobrara: Indians, breed descendants of the fur men and *voyagers*, old buffalo hunters, sky pilots, Texas trailers, broken-down gamblers, road agents and hideouts from the cattle wars. They told stories” (*Love Song*, ix). “Silent hours of listening behind the stove or in the wood box” allowed Sandoz to hear “all the accounts of the hunts, the well accident, the fights with the cattlemen and the sheepmen; was given hints here and there of the tragic scarcity of

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women….knew the drouths, the storms, and the wind and isolation” (*Old Jules* vii). These storytellers provided Sandoz with a framework for understanding her experiences and the region, and they provided her, also, with a sense of a space beyond the walls and boundaries of what was often a violent homestead. The stories gave Sandoz a sense of direction. At an early age, she decided that she would become a storyteller of the region, that she needed, as her biographer Helen Winter Stauffer notes, “to bring the world she grew up in, the Great Plains of North America, to the attention of the public” (*Mari Sandoz*, 6). And the world Sandoz grew up in was, in her mind, shaped by “the eternal conflict of the small man against the big” (*Old Jules* 325).

Convinced she needed a formal education to be an effective cultural worker in the region, Sandoz moved at age twenty-one from the Niobrara to Lincoln where she then “sat around in the anterooms of various deans for two weeks between conferences with advisors who insisted that I must go to high school. Finally, bushy-haired Dean [William E.] Sealock got tired of seeing me waiting and said, ‘Well, you can’t do any more that fail,’ and registered me” (qtd. in Wunder 45). Her enrollment at the University of Nebraska from 1923-1932 provided her with an opportunity to study a broad range of disciplines (when she could afford courses), including geology, anthropology, and history. During this time Sandoz studied under historian John Hicks whose championing of Populist principles influenced her understanding of history and the history of her home region. At the University, Sandoz researched and wrote numerous articles for popular journals, wrote seventy-eight short stories, and took a position at the Nebraska State Historical Society where she began the historical research that informs all of her writing (Wunder 46). While Sandoz ultimately never earned a degree, it's safe to conclude that the time spent in Lincoln significantly strengthened her conviction that “to Easterners the West was merely a
colonial region to be exploited, its wealth drained away by Eastern financiers and speculators,” a conviction that would motivate (Stauffer, *Mari* 18).

Over the span of forty years, Sandoz produced twenty-three books of non-fiction and fiction that revised popular understandings of the region of northwestern Nebraska by focusing on the oppressed and victimized, especially North America’s indigenous peoples. Her first major publication, *Old Jules* (1935), a controversial biography of her pioneer father’s attempts to create a farming community in her home region in the midst of violent range wars, was awarded the Atlantic Press Nonfiction prize and the Book-of-the-Month Club selection. With the award prizes totaling close to $10,000 dollars, Sandoz began extensive field work and archival research on what she referred to as the Great Plains series. This ultimately became a series of six books, beginning first with *Old Jules*, which collectively tell the story of her home region. Sandoz gives particular attention to Native American history and culture. Sandoz’s research for this series culminated in several important titles, including *Crazy Horse* (1942), *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953), and *The Buffalo Hunters* (1954) that are essential for contemporary scholarship on the American Midwest and Native American history. Sandoz’s contribution to research on and advocacy for Native American rights and cultures, prompted John Wunder to assert “to study Lakota history today requires reading Sandoz” (52).

Yet, despite having had such a prolific career as a writer-activist, and despite having the High Plains Heritage Center named after her at Chadron State College, few today recognize Sandoz as the regional interpreter of Nebraska that scholars such as Wunder and Douglas Wixson do. With the exception of renewed interest among a few New Western histories, Sandoz remains relatively unknown and neglected by American literary historians and scholars.  

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Sandoz’s sense of a connection between literary regionalism and social justice movements between local, regional and interregional scales is deserving of recognition in American literature’s long history of social critique. But, perhaps more importantly, as a literary expression of uneven geographical development, Sandoz’s historical fiction imagines geography as a significant force in the constitution of social relations and (inter)regional development. As such, Sandoz’s writing deserves more than a footnote in the history of the U.S. radical regionalism tradition.

What sets Sandoz’s writing apart from that of other left-wing regionalists, especially those in this study, is that these writers championed the Midwest as “the center of the reformist demagogy,” where “revolution can spring up from the windy prairie as naturally as wheat” (Le Sueur, “Proletarian Literature, 138). To a certain extent, Sandoz shared their belief that Midwestern culture was crucial to the development of a more equitable, just society. However, by the 1930s, Sandoz was less convinced that the Midwest was “the center of reformist demagogy,” and more concerned that it was becoming the center of authoritarian demagoguery. Whereas most Midwestern radical regionalists were worried about fascism in Spain and Italy, and Germany, Sandoz was worried about the fascism lurking on her front doorstep.

*Capital City* is marked by a sense of urgency that was not unwarranted. Right-wing extremism had been brewing nationally since the 1920s, and during this decade the Midwest was a hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity. By 1924, historian David Chalmers notes somewhere between “four million and seven million men and women belonged to the Klan….It was active in every state. It found support in many northern and western cities and was particularly politically powerful in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kansas, Colorado, and Oregon, as well as the South” (Chalmers). When fraud within the organization was publicly exposed and the “Grand
Dragon,” D.C. Stephensen, was convicted of raping and murdering a young woman in 1925, membership plummeted, and the Klan quickly lost power. However, it wasn’t the case that the values the Klan promoted fell out of favor with members. Rather, the Klan was no longer recognized as capable of upholding those values. These values circulated throughout the Middle West and found expression in a number of right-wing political movements that developed after the Klan’s decline.

By the 1930s, long-standing concerns about the nation, social order, religion, and “traditional” values affected how those on the right and left dealt with the economy’s crash. On the right, there was an immense proliferation of authoritarian movements. After the 1929 crash, Michael Denning argues that “four distinct kinds of authoritarian mass mobilizations followed” (126): the first were social movements that supported and disseminated European fascist ideologies, such as the “American Order of Fascisti, or Black Shirts, and the German-American Bund” (126). The second category comprised “various corporate populisms,” such as “Hearst’s newspaper empire and the Du Pont-sponsored Liberty League” (127). These groups focused on “mobilizing significant sectors of American capital against the New Deal in general and the federal labor relations machinery in particular” (127). The third category were “several regional grass-roots movements, including Huey Long’s Share Our Wealth movement, Father Coughlin’s National Union for Social Justice, Francis Townsend’s Old Age Revolving Pension organization, and William Pelley’s Silver Shirts; these groups were contradictory mass movements combining popular hostility to corporate power with a variety of right-wing appeals to race and nation” (127). And then there were “quasi-secret vigilante groups, like the Black Legion in Detroit, which were organized to combat labor unions” and were a formidable force “in industrial cities” throughout the Middle West (127). By the second-half of the decade, Philip Castille notes that
“American fascism soon brought together a number of reactionary domestic causes, among them the white ('Aryan') supremacy movement, anti-immigration xenophobia, ‘racial hygiene’ philosophies, Jim Crow racist codes, Christian millennialism, anti-Semitism, anti-Bolshevism, anti-feminism, and anti-modernism” (133). For many Americans during the 1930s, “the threat of violence by groups on the right became a real possibility” (Lobb 1).

In The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War, historian Leo Ribuffo argues that applying the term “extremism” to these authoritarian mass movements is misleading. Using the lives of three of the most notorious of the far right agitators to gain prominence during the Great Depression—William Dudley Pelley, Gerald B. Winrod, and Gerald L.K. Smith—as case studies, Ribuffo claims:

the ‘extremism’ of the far right often converged with the cultural and political mainstream. These three agitators attracted intermittent support from prominent officials and businessmen, and their political techniques overlapped with those used by ‘pragmatic’ centrists. Most important, their favorite countersubversive, racist, and anti-Semitic motifs had long circulated through American society….Their conversions to conspiratorial anti-Semitism…were not inevitable consequences of ‘authoritarian’ personalities, and the turmoil afflicting their lives was widely shared by ‘normal’ Americans. (xii)

That such “extreme” ideas, as full as they were of prejudice and hate, had such deep historical roots in America and were gaining more mainstream currency during the decade throughout the Middle West worried Sandoz tremendously. She was not alone. The topic of an American fascism occupied much popular and academic discourse. Whether there was, or would soon be,
an American fascist revolution was a real question for many Americans. Stauffer notes how Sandoz “feared the rightist groups, patterned on the fascists of Europe, who called themselves Black Shirts, Silver Shirts, or Tan Shirts. Operating in various cities in the Middle West, they marched, wore uniforms, and acted as vigilantes. Mari abhorred their narrowness, fanaticism, and bigotry, and she feared their popular attraction” (Mari Sandoz: Story Catcher of the Plains 128). William Pelley’s Silver Shirts, while headquartered in North Carolina, they were “well-represented in the mid-west, with contingents in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Nebraska” (Hoppes qtd. in Castille 135).

In addition to the Pelley’s Silver Shirts, it is quite likely that Sandoz was genuinely concerned about the increasing presence of organizations such as The Black in the region. While it formed in Ohio as violent splinter group of the KKK, The Black Legion quickly accumulated members and spread across the region. Peter Amann, author of “Vigilante Fascism,” notes that “by the mid-1930s, at a time when the Ku Klux Klan had fallen on lean days, the Black Legion, [had] 60,000 to 100,000 armed and disciplined men clustered in the cities of four contiguous Midwestern states, had become the most formidable nativist organization around” (491). In 1936 several members were arraigned in Detroit for the murder of WPA worker Charles Poole, and The Black Legion became known to the United States.  

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32 The Legion received national attention during the murder trial and concomitant exposure of numerous high-ranking city officials’ active memberships. In 1936, Columbia Pictures hastily produced and released The Legion of Terror, a feature-length film dramatizing a city terrorized by a hooded, KKK-like organization. It was inspired by Charley Poole’s murder and the exposure of the Black Legion that occurred during the investigation, but it made no direct reference by name to the Black Legion. The following year, however, Warner Bros. released The Black Legion starring a then-relatively-unknown Humphrey Bogart. This film is a much more overt exposé of the Legion, but it shared with the previous film the purpose of warning Americans about the strength and presence of authoritarian organizations in the United States. Though no recorded ticket sales for The Legion of Terror and with total Box Office sales for The Black Legion at $235,000, it’s not likely either films reached a significant audience. That the top two selling films of 1937 were Walt Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, which grossed
During the investigation that followed, it was revealed that a Wayne County prosecutor, Duncan McCrea, a Jackson State Prison guard, Ray Ernest, and Bellaire, Ohio’s health-commissioner, Dr. William Jacob along with numerous city officials throughout the region were members of the Legion. Suspected Legion commander-in-chief, Virgil Harry Effinger, claimed to reporters in 1936 that the Black Legion had 6,000,000 members who “worked solely for the furtherance of 100% Americanism” (“Mumbo Jumbo 13). While this number is likely a gross over exaggeration, the fact remains that the Legion was formidable and widespread in the region in the 1930s.

To my knowledge there is no record of a Black Legion contingent in Nebraska, but it is without question that sizeable contingents were well-established throughout Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. Amann contends that an area of roughly 300 square miles, from Bucyrus, Ohio to Bay City, Michigan, “every sizable city had major units,” with a conservative estimate of at least 24,000 members in this area alone (506). Official consensus seems to be that the murder of Charles Poole, which culminated in eleven Legion members given life sentences and 46 others given prison sentences in 1935, led to the disintegration of the Legion. As the Detroit News put it, “Hooey may look like adventure and romance in the moonlight, but it always looks like hooey when you bring it out in the daylight” (Krajicek). However “hooey” the Legion may have seemed to the press, Sandoz would have had grave concerns about the tens of thousands of people in the region sympathetic to The Black Legion’s claims that “the native-born white people of America are menaced on every hand from above and below” and the organization’s insistence on “regarding] as enemies to ourselves and our country all aliens, Negroes, Jews and cults and creeds believing in racial equality or owing allegiance to any foreign potentates. These

$2,000,000, and Saratoga, starring Clark Gable and Jean Harlow, which grossed $1,144,000 suggests that in 1937 American moviegoers were primarily looking to the movies for escape rather than social commentary.
we will fight without fear or favor as long as one foe of American liberty is left alive"
(“Murder”). In preparation for Capital City Sandoz thoroughly researched the region’s capital
cities, reading daily newspapers from each of the capital cities, and she discovered a deeply
disturbing prevalence of authoritarian frames of mind. As Greenwell notes, “the similarity in
thought and content in these papers amazed her. In fact she claimed that if she had not labeled
the clippings she would have been unable to tell them apart” (141). And in a letter to her New
York publisher in 1939, “Sandoz described the widespread admiration for Hitler among her
fellow Nebraskans and warned, ‘You people in the East are probably not aware of the real
danger of a growing fascist set-up in the middle west’” (Castille 133). Capital City, then, was
Sandoz’s attempt to alert a larger national audience to what was developing in the region.

II.

Capital City is set in 1938 in the city of Franklin, the fictional capital of the state of
Kanewa. Derived from a combination of Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, Kanewa represents
almost the exact geographic middle of the United States and is broadly representative of the
trans-Mississippi region. The plot of the novel charts a ten-week period beginning on Labor Day
through the November election for Governor and senatorial positions. In Kanewa, the election
period amplifies tension between Franklin and Grandapolis, a tension that are traced way back to
Franklin’s skullduggery in “wrang[ing] the capitol from Grandapolis” (144). As Wenburg puts
it, throughout the state “fascist sentiments proliferate and government officials accept bribes,
threaten challengers, and, in some cases, torture and kill to achieve their goals” (7). In Franklin,
an ailing Governor Jim Day prepares to resign and the lieutenant governor is under indictment
for fraud, opening the way for variously corrupt candidates to campaign for the positions. The
Republican candidate, Johnson Ryon, is a former one-term governor who has an overtly authoritarian track record. As Governor “he had the militia out most of the time, against strikers at Grandapolis and at Sheffield, all over the state against the farmers holding up foreclosures” (314). Furthermore, Ryon’s son is a recognized member of the Gold Shirts, an authoritarian mass movement inspired by William Pelley’s Silver Shirts. On the Democratic ticket is Dunn Powers. The independent candidate, Doctor Charley Stetbettor, is a medical quack and political fraud. A former Klan supporter, Charley “Stet,” is known for “his harangues on America for Americas, no Indians included” (15). An outspoken anti-Semite, anti-Catholic, and anti-Communist, Stet’s campaign is focused on denouncing the “devilish plans of the International Jew bankers and Jew Reds” (152).

The narrative point of view in the novel is largely figured through the character Hamm Rufe. Born Rufer Hammond, heir to a family fortune in Franklin, he left Franklin in his early twenties after his anti-war activity resulted in his being ostracized by his family and community. He was “forever a slacker and yellow coward to the Hammonds and all of the capital city” (119). He spent the next twenty years agitating for the interests of labor. During this time, he was nearly killed during a strike in Boston after a soldier “brought a rifle down two-handed, like a woodchopper’s axe, across his face and his wrist” (116). After nearly two decades, he returns to Franklin as Hamm Rufe, “shabby, travel-stained, his face so scarred that no one would have recognized him” where he works as a “part-time bookkeeper and publicity man for the Franklin Consumer’s Co-operative” and writes articles for progressive magazines on “Kanewa’s farm uprising and her food riots” (29, 45).

As the election draws nearer, capital city become increasingly polarized and politically repressive; tension mounts between labor and business owners and police as anti-picketing laws
are violently enforced; fascist groups like the Gold Shirts and Christian Crusaders become more arrogant and open in terrorizing “red” agitators and anyone not “100% American;” the “newspapers raised the cry of subversive activities on the campus and the university authorities hired a Pinkerton detective;” and the “best people of Franklin” spoke openly and excitedly about how “Mussolini would know how to handle such rabble, or Hitler. Yes, particularly Hitler, they told each other” (166, 56-57). As the capitalists maneuver to consolidate political and economic power in Franklin, the only hope for preserving a truly democratic order lies with Carl Halzer, a farmer who served “one term in the legislature, working for the emergency farm mortgage moratorium” (36). On the ticket for the U.S. Senate, Halzer attempts to fight the corruption of the state by appealing to farmers’ and laborers’ mutual interest in protecting themselves from oppression and exploitation. Franklin, however, is so completely controlled by the ruling elite, that Halzer believes the best he can hope for in the city is winning a “healthy protest vote” among the “twenty-five hundred or so who got along pretty well, but with no security of the future” and “the five thousand families [who] were just managing, the bread winner subject to layoff any time, with no security of bed or breakfast” (138).

Beyond Franklin, the Farmer’s Association was sweeping through the region attempting to win the confidence of farmers with the ruse of protecting their interests in Franklin and Washington. To his dismay, Halzer learns that not only is the Farmer’s Association backed by the Associated Manufacturers of America, which represents some of the most powerful business owners in the capital city and in the region, but that the organization boasts a million members whose membership dues, unbeknownst to them, are being used to protect the interests of industrial capitalists and eastern investment firms rather than the interests of farmers. After his travels in the state to “talk for a thinking farm vote and look into the growth and backing of the
Midwest Farmers’ Association,” Halzer reports to Rufe how the activity in capital city is affecting the region: “People told of the fine orchards and shade trees of the early settlers where only weeds stood dusty and grey now” (263). Halzer’s troubled report accords with Rufe’s recent experience traveling across the nation, “from one strife region to another,” to record the plight of the working class, “the growing unemployment that brought wage cuts, strikes, organized strikebreaking, and violence (118). Like Halzer, Rufe witnessed the effects of capitalism not only on the bodies and lives of workers, but also on the landscape:

There were the mutilations, like the once lovely countryside of Indiana and Illinois now cut into gingham crossbars by roads; the woods gone, the lakes and ponds drained, event the streams laid out by compass through knoll and hill to carry water quickly away; to dry out the uplands, flood the lower river regions, and do violence to all the beauty of nature’s curving lines. (118)

As the novel works towards its dark and violent conclusion, disaster after disaster reveals a constellation of corrupt and tyrannical forces radiating out from the heart of the Midwestern capital city like a scourge on the regional and national landscape. Capital City is both symptom and disease of the economy and culture of capitalist property relations.

The city of Franklin is the allegorical embodiment of both the socially and culturally destructive forces of an evolving capitalist nation. By the start of the election in the novel, Franklin has long been a perversion of what it once was. Founded by George Rufer in the mid nineteenth-century, a Philadelphian with Quaker roots, and great-grandfather to Hamm Rufe, Franklin was founded as an ameliorative to the “organized graft” responsible for the growth of towns and cities in the region:
Looking ahead to a world soon short of fertile lands, young George saw the grey alkali sinks as the proper place for a city—wagon-accessible to a rich farming region, with clay deposits for brick, possibly soda and potash too, and plenty of cheap land for growing. So he unloaded his wagon, stepped off a claim, drove his stakes into the hardpan with his axe, and called the place Franklin. He considered Paine, but remembered old Ben’s words on property’s place in society. Like other new communities, the early Franklinites were all young, but unlike the river towns, settled by hideouts, adventurers, and the jobless, here, around George Rufer, gathered a nest of political malcontents and troublemakers who had come west not only for a better living but for a better place to live. (46)

This passage is suggestive of much of Sandoz’s work on pioneering history in the region, and it evokes the familiar frontier myth of promise, mobility and democracy. By tracing the city of Franklin’s roots back to a plot of undeveloped land, the novel emphasizes the extent to which the city is human construction, Rufer’s attempt, Robert Park would argue, “to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire” (qtd. in Harvey, 5). Rufer’s desire in staking out a space of unsettled land on which to build a city is to build a community grounded in a progressive idealism. Named after Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States who regarded by many as “the quintessential American,” Franklin has long been an icon of the practical values of self-discipline, sustained work, egalitarianism, philanthropy, self-governance, and anti-authoritarianism (Larson 782). In Capital City, Franklin sustains these practices and values for sometime; collectively Rufer and the other “political malcontents and trouble makers” build a space to reinforce their social and political ends. They “started a university, and established a free, fighting Republican paper;” Rufer took to the streets of the city to defend
“Higgins, the head of the university, when the man turned single-taxer; he backed the Populists and Bryan, and with his daughter Hallie, who organized the Fabians at the university, led the uproarious, hopeful torchlight parades of ninety-six” (46). Hamm Rufe follows in this tradition, taking to the streets as young as eight years old to distribute handbills “demanding that Debs be permitted to speak at the auditorium, and later speaking publicly for peace in context of the World War I (47). In the early days of the city, Franklin “was a bastion of populist support” (Castille 134). Its public spaces, (i.e. streets, squares, parks and buildings such as the capitol), were used for progressive political mobilization, but “almost from the start he was damned by the leaders of both parties and gradually by some of those who had come with such idealism to the new Franklin” (46). Over time, economic and political powers inside and outside of the city succeeded in tempering what was left of Franklin’s radicalism, the last vestige of which was reduced to the university. Eventually, Rufer’s “old paper and even his own daughter [had] join[ed] in the witch hunt that drove some of the finest professors from the university” (47).

By 1938 in the novel, a statue of Benjamin Franklin serves as a forgotten monument to early Franklin’s progressive ideas and practices. Before he died, George Rufer had observed the changing social and political tenor of Franklin as two main railroads struggled for control over the powers of the state, and in a futile attempt to preserve a certain memory and identity of Franklin, he and established an endowment for “a thousand dollars annually for [Franklin’s] upkeep, provided that a large statue he would order were erected and maintained in a position ‘permanently available to public,’” and the “rest of the money put aside for when the new capitol was built (48). The twelve-inch statue of Franklin was approved by the legislature, and it featured a plaque with the following quotation from one of Franklin’s most well known writings: “Private property…is a creature of society and is subject to the calls of that society whenever its
necessities shall require it, even to its last farthing…” (48). Here the novel emphasizes the role of monumentality in the construction of urban identity. As a monument, the statue of Franklin expresses those values and practices long associated with the figure of Benjamin Franklin. Its meaning relies, in part, on a particular collective memory of Benjamin Franklin that is mediated by the quotation valorizing public property over private property. Drawing on popularized, if not mythologized, representations of Benjamin Franklin, the statue serves as an object of memory, a monument to Franklin’s particular values and practices and to an image of a future America Franklin participated in creating. As Robert Dorman notes, the statue takes on double meanings “given Franklin’s own longtime status as an icon of generations of would-be ‘Horatio Alger heroes,’ drilled in the sayings of Poor Richard” (239). Placed as it is before the entrance to the capitol building, an institution for the exercise of power, the Franklin statue functions as a reminder of the value of public ownership over destructive privatization, and as a monument to these ideals, it is a powerful element in a constitutive local narrative of the city of Franklin, a narrative Rufer clearly attempts to connect to a larger narrative of a national identity.

As a seemingly permanent marker of history and memory, the Franklin monument would seem “vital to the perpetuation of some social order” (Harvey, Justice 309). Perhaps this is why it created such an uproar among the city’s elite, culminating in “group protests from business men, and from the D.A.R.’s, with a violent denunciation by the minster of Trinity Church of the inscription as an incitement against man’s inherent property rights” (48). After a perfunctory ceremony in which “the statue was put up at the main entrance on the south side of the capitol and unveiled with drums and oratory and no mention of the quotation,” the statue is ultimately placed behind the new building with spruce trees planted to block the plaque and “a wide span of unbroken lawn between the words and the main business avenue of the capital city” (48). The
extent to which the city legislature went to removing the statue from the public purview is suggestive of the power of monuments, as material embodiments of history and memory, and the role monuments play in constituting the meaning and identity of a place. The power dynamic in Franklin has shifted and the decision to relocate the statue and Franklin’s subversive quotation is an overt means of disavowing the statue and the collective memory and identity it symbolizes. Writing about the role monuments play in the struggle among political elites for “symbolic capital,” Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson argue “the choices that political actors make about which existing [monumental] sites are and are not ‘usable’—and the inclusiveness of the debate—reveal a great deal about changing official of national identity and the nation-building process” (525). Removing the statue of such a “public” figure and essentially erasing it from public view participates in changing the meaning of the place. Placed as it was in front of the entrance of the capitol building, the statue suggested the power of the state building was in the interest of public property and social welfare—it signified the state house belonging to the people. The statue’s relocation can be read, therefore, as a political action signifying Franklin as a site of control in the interest of private property and connects it to an increasingly restrictive and reactionary national narrative.

With “its frieze of the Peoples of the World supporting the stone glove,” and “the hands of Negroes and Japanese and Jews bearing an equal share,” the capitol building represent the politics that Franklin was founded upon and functions as a powerful symbol of pluralism and progressivism (278). However, as Dorman correctly points out, the capitol is “not given publicity by the powers that be” in the novel (242). It is only recognized as such by the few progressively-minded characters in the novel, like Hamm Rufe for whom sight of the capitol
building takes on sort of mythic, almost religious quality. As Rufe survey’s the skyline at sunset from a nearby squatter’s camp, he observes the following:

Out of the suburbs somewhere a long beam of light reached in to pick the white, globed dome of the capitol from the darkness. It was followed by another, and another, until the dome floated like some cold, low-hanging planet. Gradually the light crept downward, over the sculptured frieze of the People of the World and lower, until the whole tower stood out tall and white and alone against the deep blue sky of evening. (6)

This passage is suggestive of the power of the institution and its place in the city, the illuminated sculptured frieze evocative of the idealism the building embodies. The apparent natural illumination of the building reveals an edifice, an institution, invested with seemingly divine meaning. The almost heavenly basking of the capitol building in radiant light seems to echo John of Patmos’ vision of the holy city of New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. Consider the following passages: “And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it” (The Holy Bible, Rev. 21.23, 21.24). The surrealism of the passage undermines attempts to interpret the capitol as divine or sacred. It becomes more uncertain than holy, more dreamlike than real, more alien than familiar. This happens, in part, when the cathedral-like dome begins to float like “some cold, low-hanging planet.” Furthermore, it appears isolated, a public building that lacks a public and in this sense is not ideal place of social cohesion or moral community, like New Jerusalem is purported to be by John. Moreover, the light that illuminates the capital building radiates not from the heavens but rather from the suburbs, and here the novel makes a subtle, though significant, connection to another historical-geographical phenomenon.
Suburban development in the United States dates back to the late nineteenth-century as an alternative, escape even, from urban living. The invention of the automobile fast-tracked the United States, according to Kenneth T. Jackson, to becoming a suburban nation. In the 1920s, John Stilgoe argues, “suburbs, and particularly the suburbs of the wealthy and the middle class, use[d] and abuse[d] power wielded by American cities” (2). While this process slowed during the Great Depression, at the time of Capital City’s publication, the process was beginning to ramp back up, especially as New Deal programs made it easier (at least for whites) to obtain and refinance mortgages, encouraging what some have labeled as white flight from urban centers across America. By the late 1930s, many urban intellectuals “began condemning the perceived conservatism, pettiness, and ‘tackiness’ of the suburbs” (Stilgoe 5). By 1940, a year after Capital City is published, mass suburbanization was getting underway and drastically altering the cultural and political landscape of America. David Harvey notes:

The suburbanization of the United States was not merely a matter of new infrastructures….It entailed a radical transformation in lifestyles and produced a whole new way of life in which new products from housing to refrigerators...as well as two cars in the driveway and an enormous increase in the consumption of oil….It also altered the political landscape as subsidized home-ownership for the middle classes changed the focus of community action towards the defense of property values and individualized identities, turning the suburban vote towards conservative republicanism. (“Right to the City” 5)

If, as Harvey argues, the suburb is characterized by a conservatism grounded, in part, in the promotion and protection of private property values and individualized identities, then this seemingly trivial reference to the suburbs in the passage from the novel takes on particular

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meaning. In this light, the passage is suggestive of the extent to which as urban center Franklin interacts with other geographic scales and is shaped by the social and political activity taking place in other locations. But it also reflects Sandoz’s concerns with America’s increasing “fixation on the sanctity of individually owned property;” a fixation that Sandoz believed “led to the emergence of very undemocratic European configurations of power that dominated modern society” (Dorman 239).

In three consecutive passages, beginning with the capitol building passage discussed above, Sandoz moves readers through a series of juxtapositions to this critique of “entrenched property interests” and parasitic property relations. From the image of the capitol building naturally illuminated “white and alone against the deep blue sky of evening,” the next passage juxtaposes the surrealism of the capital building with a stark, realist image of an artificially illuminated business section: “neon signs came on, a flashing of red and yellow on top of the Buffalo Hotel, steady green over the Franklin National Bank, with Hammond’s, the finest store of the Middle West, lengthened far above the other buildings by its vertical stripes of cold, steady blue neon from street to roof” (6). And from this image, the novel returns to squatter’s camp at the edge of town where Hamm Rufe’s friend, Coot, exclaims “Nothing but a damn, bloodsucking old parasite. Don’t produce nothing, just living off the capital and the university—and through them got a hand in every Goddamn pocket in the state. All taking and no giving” (6). The image of an organism living off another at the expense of the other reflects Sandoz’s attitudes and fears in 1938. Her biographer, Helen Stauffer, notes these fears and Sandoz’s disillusionment the city of Lincoln and the “deficiencies in state government”:

She was distressed about the plight of workers and farmers. She remembered the milk riots organized by Iowa farmers, and she had been in Lincoln in 1933 when the desperate farmers
had marched silently, over four thousand of them, on the state capitol to demand assistance. Most had not been given relief; many had lost their farms. There had been thousands of foreclosures in the Middle West. Now, in 1938, after so many farms had been lost, the Nebraska state legislature declared a moratorium on farm mortgages. (126)

These experiences of seeing Lincoln so dependent upon city, state and federal government contributed to her conclusion in the 1930s that the “Midwestern capital city [i]s a parasite” and “parasites were natural-born fascist” (Stauffer 126; Capital City 257). For Sandoz, repressive forces of capitalist power and conservative rule framed the Midwestern urban process and experience. She took quite seriously what was happening in the capital city because of a strong belief that “a capital city influenced the thought and culture of its region, and she felt certain attitudes and fears developing in such a city exploited that area of influence” (Stauffer 126-7). In Capital City, the theme of manifest fascism in the economy and culture of capitalism is perhaps most explicitly set forth through the city’s violent repression of organized labor.

The conflict between labor and state-backed private interests occurs early in the novel. On the morning of Labor Day, laborers representing multiple industries assembled on the steps of the Labor Temple: “representatives of the local unions, the printers, the railroaders, and striking truckers, the plain workingmen and the WPAers, with a few farmers and a sprinkling of women” (34). The national flag and three blocks of the “capital city’s overalled workers” marched in “silent and orderly files” down the middle of Philadelphia Avenue to publicly demonstrate solidarity with the striking truckers (34). “Only the strike-gaunted truckers carried placards;” which read “ANTI-PICKETING LAW IS POISON TO LABOR” and “MILLIONS FOR THUGS, NOTHING FOR TRUCKERS, SAY BOSSES” (35). The parade of workers remains uneventful until it “reached the deeper business section” of Franklin (35). At this point, Hamm
Rufe who is marching in the parade, notices “waiting cars of police and armed deputies,” and without provocation, they violently attack the parade:

With roaring engines they cut in from the alley ahead of the parade, men with clubs and guns jumping from the running boards upon the surprised, paralyzed marchers, who tried to shield their women, to fall back and keep out of trouble. But those from behind were hurrying up, the yelling crowd along the curbs pushing in to see, and the paraders were trapped, the clubs of the police chopping like axes, crunching flesh and bone, the deputies jeering, swearing, their guns ready in their hands. The big flag-bearer went down, a woman too, her voice rising to a high shriek. (35)

The violence would have continued had not Carl Halzer pushed defiantly to the front of the penned-in marchers and, despite the “guns of the advancing deputies,” and claimed the marchers right to parade: “‘Come on!’ he motioned to the men and women behind him as he spit upon a hand. ‘Come on! This is a legal Labor Day parade and, by God, we’re going to parade!’” (36).

When the sergeant and deputies realized Halzer, a former state legislator, was leading the parade, they hesitated long enough for the marchers to regain their courage and follow Halzer past the police “up around the capitol and its statue of the brooding Franklin and down through town again,” to conclude at the Labor Temple (37).

This passage evokes a number of the novel’s most important ideas about public space. While the violence of the police repression and the courageous defiance of authority might initially seem overly sentimentalized, it underscores the extent to which public space matters—both to marchers who willing and knowingly risked their lives to parade through the city streets and the to police and deputies who, by their very position as police officers, justified repressive violence. For the marchers, parading through the capital city is crucial to making their presences and their
needs known. Franklin’s Philadelphia Avenue is for the parading workers and strikers a vital a
space of representation. As Mitchell maintains, “public spaces are decisive, for it is here that the
desires and needs of individuals and groups can be seen, and therefore recognized, resisted,
or…wiped out” (33). Representation, in other words, requires space, and in city that is becoming
increasingly defined by private property, “public space (as a space of representation) takes on
exceptional importance” (Mitchell 34). Without it, marginalized groups have limited means by
which to be recognized and their demand heard. In this light, we can understand Halzer’s
insistence on rallying the frightened marchers in the face of armed deputies and continuing the
parade. For it is in Franklin’s public spaces, the streets and squares, that the “strike-gaunted
truckers carried placards. Crudely lettered on flattened pasteboard boxing, they tried to state
their case” (34).
Sandoz carefully emphasizes the nonviolent and non-confrontational action of the marchers in
the parade. They were “silent and orderly,” and when confronted by the police, the marchers
responded with flight rather than fight. By juxtaposing the pacifism of the laborers with the
brutality of the police, the novel calls into question the legitimacy of state power, especially
presence of Gold Shirts are revealed in the police ranks. Moreover, the police violence
illuminates the contradictions of maintaining order in public space. Halzer and another striker,
Lew Lewis, are ultimately arrested on the steps of the Labor Temple (which is strategically
located in the novel directly across the street from the chamber of commerce) and charged by the
police with “disturbing the peace and parading without a permit,” a charge that Franklin’s
wealthiest business owners and Gold Shirts got revised to “incitement to violence and
threatening life and property” (37, 68).
How are we, though, to understand the outrage by Franklin’s elite? The truckers had been on strike all summer and had plenty of skirmishes with “police who had used billies and blackjacks on their picket lines” (16). The governor’s illness, however, prevented him from intervening on the behalf of Hallie Hammond, whose business was directly affected by the strike, and the other members of the ruling class who disparaged the “damned Reds and radicals” (57).

The significance of the parade for the Franklin’s elite is that the unauthorized parade is that it occurred during Franklin’s coronation, an annual celebration based on Lincoln’s real Ak-sar-ben festival. Like the Ak-sar-ben festival, Franklin’s coronation is designed by the city’s elite and organized through the Chamber of Commerce to “encourage civic spending and increase the glamour quotient of the Midwest” (Svoboda vii). Franklin’s coronation involves a state fair with blue ribbon contests for produce and livestock, a racetrack, and an ostentatious ceremony celebrating “Franklin’s finest,” in which a king and queen are crowned from the city and duchesses from areas outside the city. The weeklong festival draws visitors from hundreds of miles around. Therefore, the strikers’ march straight through the heart of the city not only attracted a considerable amount of outside attention by the sheer volume of marchers who participated. And with the focal point being “strike-gaunted” truckers carrying humble placards, there was the real potential to generate public sympathy if not support. Therefore, in parading down the center of Franklin’s crowded main street, the strikers turned the city streets into spaces of representation, an act that threatened to disrupt “civic spending” during the coronation and jeopardize the extent to which Franklin is attractive to future capital.

The “strikers’ march” was as much a parade as it was picket line, and the charges Halzer and Lew faced were common for labor agitators during the decade. Picketing had long been interpreted by the Supreme Court as a form of violence. On the one hand, it appeared to
undermine civil discourse and debate. On the other hand, as a struggle against employers, picketing was harmful to private property (Mitchell 55). In the early 1920s, as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, William Howard Taft worked to support city ordinances throughout the country that “forbade public gatherings for political and labor purposes” (Mitchell 64). Ultimately, Taft decided that “picketing ‘automatically indicated a militant purpose inconsistent with peaceable persuasion’” and “wrote for a unanimous Court that it was the duty of the court system to protect the order of public spaces outside the factory and the private property rights of factory owners” (Mitchell 65). The first set of charges, “disturbing the peace and parading without a permit” gesture towards the notion of picketing as being inherently violent. But the charge of “parading without a permit” gestures towards the frequent anti-picketing ordinances employers used in their many conflicts with labor in the 1930s. Anti-picketing ordinances allowed local governments to skirt the 1935 Wagner Act—a law that gave workers the right to strike. If local governments felt that an instance of public assembly might immediately promote violence, the assembly by law could be banned. In addition, Mitchell notes how the Supreme Court “left the door wide open for banning meetings if local governments or police could determine that they would tend toward proscribed speech” (69). Issuing a parade permit to the strikers would essentially have been the equivalent of issuing a picketing permit. But for Halzer, parading through the city’s street is a fundamental right that requires no city ordained permit to validate.

The distinction between public and private space is blurred in the novel, in part by dramatizing the contradictory violence inherent in regulating public space. The police rationalized the use of violence on an otherwise peaceful dissent to prevent a perceived threat to the order of public space. Violence was used to prevent violence. Clearly police intervention
was intended to break up the assembly and return a certain kind of order (that which promoted and preserved the interests of Franklin’s ruling class), and the jailing of Halzer and Lewis is an exercise of exclusion. Their exclusion from the public thus works to define a particular “public.” Their arrest and jailing signifies their lack of belonging. By filtering out dissenters, Franklin’s elite works to ensure a “public” in their own image, or at least in their own interests, and thereby (re)claim a certain shaping power over the ways in which Franklin is made and remade.

The exclusion and separation of Halzer and Lewis from the public, while temporary, parallels the larger-scale exclusion and separation of the “undesirable” and potentially “unruly” publics in Franklin. Particular ideals about urban identity and belonging, promoted as they are by the ruling class, are reflected in the geography, the spatial forms of the city. Occupying the exact center of the city is, of course, the capitol building with the business district organized around its base. On the city’s highest, and only, ridge is Boulder Heights, the city’s elite country club and the wealthy neighborhood around it named Blue Ridge “where the best people lived” (112). Below the ridge in Lower Franklin is the “poor section, where whole families lived in one room, the window looking down upon the outdoor privies unscreened….the city mission…the steps full of grey, sad-faced men…and long rows of negro and reliefer shacks” all the way to the Polish bottoms (16). There exists a kind of social and racial apartheid in Franklin in which each section appears to function independently—the Ridge as a kind of gated community and the Lower Ridge marked by “contiguous spatial zones of domination and deprivation” (Castille 138). While those living in the fragmented sections of Lower Franklin are primarily concerned with daily survival, like the “lone men and women, who looked to the city dumps and the garbage cans as more generous and reliable than the county relief agency,” the ruling elite
focuses on protecting property interests in part by claiming their right to the city and determining who has the right to inhabit the city (138).

Sandoz’s most significant portrayal of the importance of public space in progressive society is in the novel’s depiction of Herb’s Addition, a squatters’ camp located at the “gateway of the noble city of Franklin” (112). In the early days of Franklin, one of the founders, Eli Jiles, “left plans and money for the building and upkeep of a shelterhouse, with heat, water, and toilet facilities, and a penny coffee and doughnut corner. Within this forty-acre park outside the city limits no one should ever be questioned or disturbed except for criminal offense” (112). By the start of the Depression, the camp started filling up with Franklin’s growing homeless population. By 1938, the time of the election, there were over thirty shacks, “cooperatively built and owned,” surrounding the shelterhouse (112). Jiles commissioned this park as an alternative to Stoor’s Park, commissioned roughly around the same time, and on the opposite side of the city, which is “far enough out to eliminate the baby-buggy trade and the messier and more destructive element” (110). Stoor’s Park was deliberately exclusionary, intended for the middle class Franklinites, gifted to the city for its role in helping Jacob Stoor “get the garbage dumps in the bottoms between Jiles’s land legalized” (110). From vantage of Stoor’s Park “Only the capitol tower rose high and clean through the smoke and haze that clung like dusty cobwebs to the city on the Little Grand” (110). That Stoor’s Park renders Lower Franklin and Herb’s Addition out of view, yet allows for full view of the capitol, symbolizes the erasure of Franklin’s “messier and more destructive element” from the history of the city and this “elements’” right to participate and appropriate the city. Herb’s Addition is quite literally a spatial form that adds this “element” back into Franklin. According to Mitchell, members of society who “are not covered by any property right...must find a way to inhabit the city despite the exclusivity of property—either
that, or they must find ways, as with squatting, and with the collective movements of the landless, to undermine the power of property and its state sanction, to otherwise appropriate and inhabit the city” (20). As a space for Franklin’s homeless to live, Herb’s Addition becomes a both a space of representation and a space of resistance to the urban forces that seek to exclude this unwanted element. As casualties of the economy and culture of capitalism, Herb’s Addition prevents the unemployed, the blacklisted, and the homeless from being rendered invisible in the way that Stoor’s Park renders them invisible from the symbolic space of the park and the symbolic space occupied by the capitol building.

The very public presence of the squatter’s camp challenges dominant notions of urban identity and belonging, and it is, at least for some time, seemingly immune from the more repressive economic and political powers of Franklin. However, despite Jiles’s precautions to ensure the park’s protection from Franklin’s elite, Hamm’s residence in the camp along with Stefani’s frequent visitations eventually makes Herb’s Addition a target of the Gold Shirts. Days before the November election Gold Shirts set fire to the camp, which destroys most of the shacks, including Hamm’s, and kills one bed-ridden elderly resident. Franklin’s homeless are, once again, homeless. With the last genuinely public space of resistance virtually destroyed, the corporate-owned conservative press, the Gold Shirts, and representatives from the Farmer’s Association ramp up their propaganda campaigns to exploit the growing fear of Communists and corrupt politicians and win votes for the Republican candidate.

Backed by several of Franklin’s elite, Charley Stetbettor’s campaign gains significant momentum in the final days before the election as voters grow increasingly suspicious of the major party candidates: “Voters who had seen homes they owned go could well believe they’d lose the leased ones if Powers got elected. Unwilling to vote for Militia Ryon, as they called
him, they went independent, and as the far precincts came in the Charley Stet began to climb fast” (333). Stetbettor is quick to exploit this suspicion. In what he calls the “America for Americans Parade,” Stetbettor is accompanied by his astrologer and “several jalopies full of yelling young boys and young men with Christian Crusader buttons on their labels” to the city’s auditorium for his last public addresses before the election. There he lambasts the Democratic candidate Dunn Powers for being “a turncoat Republican, a Red in league with Russia and their communist labor agitators” (324). Then he works to convince the packed auditorium that “What Red Powers plans is to put a Stalin primer into the innocent white hand of every boy and girl of our blessed state, to revaluate your property and tax it so high you’ll be glad to give it, kit and caboodle, to the Reds!” (324-25).

As a mouthpiece for a pervasive bigoted “Americanism,” Stetbettor is a caricature of American authoritarian personalities. And while his ideas are considered distasteful, repulsive, and ultimately dangerous by the novel’s liberal and radical characters, they gain traction in the region because they appealed to voters who were growing increasingly fearful and concerned about ownership in the uncertain economic climate of the depression years. As more and more farms foreclosed, “voters who had seen homes they owned go could well believe they’d lose the leased ones if Powers was elected. Unwilling to vote for Militia Ryon, as they called him, they went independent, and as the far precincts came in Charley Stet began to climb fast” (333). Stetbettor’s rhetoric reinforced their sense that a vote for him was their best bet to preserve and protect their private property. The novel presents readers with a way of understanding how a fascist ideology can gain mass appeal. As economic conflict intensifies, more repressive forms of control are justified when people are convinced their private property will be protected and material prosperity is restored. Stet is an opportunist, and receives financial backing from the
Farmer’s Association and other wealthy contributors who “wished to see the country run by a good military dictatorship” (280). When the National Guard arrive in the midst of the violence to protect private business property rather than protect the lives of strikers, the alliance between Stetbettor and the capitalist class is made clear. As these political and economic powers concentrate, the city In this light, Capital City dramatizes how ruling class alliances are forged in urban centers to prevent, contain, or neutralize disruptions of capital accumulation. According to Harvey, a ruling class achieves social power in a capitalist society when “politicians….play the game of coalition politics in such a way as to build a ruling class that sees itself as the symbol of community and appropriates the necessary means (traditional and symbolic as well as legal, financial, and technical) to legitimize its authority and power. It usually speaks ‘in the public interest’ and finds ways to command sufficient authority or mass support (by way of concessions, cooptation…and repression) so as to still the opposition that is bound to arise to its activities” (Urban 152-3). Capital City suggests that violence is the logical conclusion when this particular kind of game is played in an atmosphere of intensifying economic insecurity. Capital City signals the death-knell for myth of the frontier as a space for the exercise of freedom and unlimited opportunity. If George Rufer’s Franklin embodied this myth, being as it was, once a touchstone for progressive democracy and conduit for regional community, by the end of the novel it has become instead a “parasite,” a place for the concentration of fascist capitalist economic powers. These powers receive their most vivid expression in the trampling of working class rights to organize and protest. The novel’s depiction of the Midwest as hub of right-wing extremism is antithetical to the more popular assertions made by proletarian regionalists such as Conroy and Le Sueur who maintain that the Midwest is the “center of the reformist demagogy” (“Proletarian 138) and that the people of the Midwest have been in “closer contact with the
American experience” (138). What is this, then, but a claim of exceptionalism? And whereas Le Sueur, for example, espouses this kind of exceptionalism as rhetorical strategy to help facilitate social, cultural, and political change, Capital City suggests the notion of exceptionalism be rejected entirely. If the frontier myth embodied the idea of exceptionalism of the new (new beginnings, new life, new modes of social organization), then Sandoz’s novel suggests a new rhetoric is needed if any renewal of democracy is to occur in the region. American exceptionalism rhetoric, as the novel suggests, is too easily co-opted by the Charlie Stetbettor’s, and too easily manipulated by capitalists to achieve and legitimize ruling class alliances in the interest of securing and protecting property rights. Sandoz’s contribution is in dramatizing the city as a process of construction through the exercise of collective power. The novel’s dystopic ending suggests what the outcome of this process can be when the answer to the urban question is grounded in profit motives and the rights of private property over human rights and broader forms of democracy. Capital City is, in many ways, a product of the social injustices it critiques, and its historical perspective on struggle not only illuminates for readers the harsh realities in which Sandoz and her people lived, but it is suggestive of the ways in a regional literature participates in presenting a political ideal: in this instance, the right to the city, which is imperative for the urban poor and dispossessed to reclaim their right to geographies they are increasingly excluded from.
Conclusion

Taken together, this body of proletarian regionalism demonstrates how regional literature can be used as a strategy to interpret larger-than-local forces and incorporate readers into broader geographies of affect. In Chapter 1, I argued that threaded through Meridel Le Sueur’s writing is a theory of region as a rhetorical and literary production. Implicit in her work is the notion that region takes shape, that it becomes recognizable through the stories we tell about it. Therefore, regional production is a collaborative process in which ideals and affiliations, identities and solidarities are cultivated, and the stories we tell matter about particular places matter.

In Chapter 2 I argued that *The Disinherited* problematizes cultural geographers’ readings of labor migration as disruptive to working class communities. Labor mobility in the novel suggests how the very forced mobility of labor to follow paths of capital creates the conditions by which workers can establish broad-based material connections that contribute to the development of radical political consciousness. As a regional novel that synthesizes autobiographical reflection, workers’ speech and dialect, midland humor and realism, it works to connect readers to a history of a people and a region that otherwise might be lost.

In Chapter 3, I argue that *Never Come Morning* redefines marginalized spaces of poverty and identities of delinquent and deviant often associated with the underclass by interpreting these identities in the context of a geography of informal economic sectors. Theories of social reproduction help frame an interpretation of delinquency as a process of social incorporation into a geographically constituted and circumscribed economy. By guiding readers through the back alleyways of these places, Algren emphasizes “that multitudes live among us who share the horrors but not the marvels of our split-level Bedlam” (*Chicago 90*). In exposing readers to these horrors, *Never Come Morning* complicates and challenges readers’ perceptions of
impoverished places and the urban underclass, while also gesturing toward the links between an urban ethnic slum in Chicago to broader economic, political, and cultural landscapes.

In Chapter 4, I examine Mari Sandoz’s *Capital City* as a regional text that investigates how fascism generates mass appeal. The novel juxtaposes a corrupted populist rhetoric informed by a fascist ideology with a progressive populism informed by ideologies of pluralism, egalitarianism and democracy. The city plays a central role in the narrative as a social space in which these political rhetorics clash in the struggle for popular acceptance and legitimization. Moreover, Sandoz’s novel examines the extent to which fascism functions as the vehicle for the capitalist class to protect its own interests in times of economic crises. Sandoz’s contribution is in dramatizing the city and the ways of life and social relations it informs as a process of collective power. Cities, the novel suggests are spaces of our own creation, and when we shape cities in particular ways, we also shape ourselves. While theories of the right to the city help frame this reading, Sandoz presents a particularly progressive view of the urban process unique among her radical contemporaries.

As a body of critical literature, proletarian regionalism encourages readers to make connections between historical and contemporary struggles. The effects of uneven development, for instance, the tightening restrictions on labor by repressive local and state governments, the popular appeal of social conservatism, right-wing libertarianism and Tea-Party extremism are particularly palpable in the region today. This body of work provides a model for what Douglas Reichert Powell might call "region making as a practice of cultural politics" (8). As Powell argues, “for literary production, region can be a rhetorical figure used to engage local conflicts and crises on terms that link them to a broad, structural critique of American culture by reclaiming a too-often politically uncontested category, the geographical margins, as a network
of sites of significant and dynamic cultural and political activity” (178). This dissertation participates in the work that Powell and others are doing to position regionalism within projects of social justice. In this light, this period of radical Midwestern regionalism is suggestive of how regional writing can be a vital representational strategy for constituting broader terrains of sympathy and solidarity among socially responsible readers, and, as “purposeful objects,” regional writing can be understood a form of social activism. On the other hand, proletarian regionalism encourages readers to make connections between represented places and their own lives and evolving geographies. Proletarian regionalism creates a sense of working and underclass class experience where written history of these experiences is often lacking; it links readers to the local and to the distant, to the past and to the present, to memory and to hope; hope of the kind expressed by the writers of this study that those deeply affective geographies of work and social reproduction will be remembered even after the places and the people who lived there are gone; hope that readers of these stories will see this literature as relevant to the present and discover points of connection between these stories that we find repeated in so many lives and so many places; and hope that beyond the specifics of these narratives we understand progressive social and cultural change as genuine possibilities.
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