Introduction

TV, the Heartland Myth, and the Value of Cultural Populism

In 1939, Westinghouse sponsored the production of a film promoting the marvels of modern technology on display at the New York World's Fair “World of Tomorrow” Pavilion. The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair allowed movie-going audiences from across the United States to “travel” to the fair and to explore the Pavilion’s wonders alongside its fictional featured family, the Middletons from central Indiana. Though the Middletons are thrilled by a series of electrical wonders housed in the fair’s “Playground of Science”—including the “Electro the Westinghouse Moto Man” robot who smokes cigarettes and responds to human commands and the electric dishwasher admired by Grandma and Mother—television is the technology that uniformly captivates each member of the family’s multiple generations. Television holds great promise in its newness—it’s ability to transcend and bind great reaches of space with sound and picture—and yet its adoption is simultaneously made non-threatening, consistent as it is with already-familiar media and modes of communicating. When Jim Treadway, an electrical engineer from “back home” introduces the Middleton’s youngest son, Bud, to the Pavilion’s TV studio, for example, the youth’s first response is that the camera reminds him of Riverdale’s portrait photographer’s studio. “Ah, looks like the shop of old ‘Watch the birdie’ Schultz. Remember him, Jim? Six deluxe portraits for a buck.” Once Jim corrects him, pointing out that this camera enables television broadcasts, Bud immediately takes to the new medium, addressing fairgoers in a closed-circuit telecast with the chummy, “Hiya folks! This is Clark Gable Middleton speaking, as you can see if you’ve got your television sets turned on!” Bud’s amazement at TV’s technical capability is thus accompanied by familiarizing references to pre-televisual media,
each of which is seamlessly incorporated into his understanding and use of TV.

Strategically, Westinghouse used *The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair* to encourage audiences across the United States to apprehend the Pavilion’s wonders through the eyes of midwesterners and their presumed “common sense” Heartland values. Midwesternness was the frame through which television was introduced, through which its uses were imagined, and through which its ideal audience was represented. Regional appeals were invoked to ally television and its uses with national, consensual ideals and values. Specifically, midwesterners represent the “all-American” cultural values of populism, here allied with the political ideology of New Deal-era liberalism. The Middletons embody these values through a commitment to family, a belief in free enterprise and progress within tradition, and an aesthetic sensibility that values regionalist expression and representational art. Within the larger narrative of *The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair*, for example, Bud’s eager embrace of a productive future through TV is mirrored by elder sister Babs’s romantic redirection to a “proper” domestic
life with Jim. As an art major at an eastern university, Babs has grown away from her Indiana roots in directions that concern her family and seem out of step with the film’s broader imagination of national ideals of the period. Grandma comments to Middleton patriarch, Tom, that Babs’s conversations and pronouncements are “over my head. I gave up when she told me pictures on calendars weren’t art.”

Babs’s embrace of aesthetic abstraction over easily understood, familiar “pictures of people and objects” is made more worrisome by the fact that she is enamored with her art teacher, Nicholas Makaroff, a vaguely Russian, self-proclaimed genius whose passionate appreciation of abstract expressionism is paralleled only by his virulent anti-Americanism. Although Babs is initially smitten by Makaroff’s book-smart intellectualism, political sloganeering, and wide-ranging travels (he knows “the world like we know Main Street!” she exclaims), she is gradually won over by the Westinghouse engineer’s home-grown, pragmatic, can-do-ism. When Makaroff denounces all of the Middletons as “provincial,” Babs embraces Jim, who claims that “nothing is impossible under the American system of private enterprise,” newly symbolized by television.

If The Middleton Family at the New York World’s Fair at first appears to be a distant example of corporate propaganda—a clumsily obvious, if endearing appeal to “Middletons” throughout the country to welcome the pending technological transition through screens of nostalgic familiarity—it should also be considered a prominent early example of the common and recurring tensions that accompanied television’s introduction and standardization and the historic assumptions regarding its purpose and identity that are still actively engaged and struggled over today. Though television has been generally theorized as a space-binding medium, uniquely capable of addressing a national audience from a unified, centralized point of transmission (and, by extension, point-of-view), from its inception to the present, TV has been a rather more contentious entity—a site of ongoing struggle over the expression and importance of imagined place-bound ideals within this overarching national venue. As television enters the twenty-first century firm in its position as the central medium of information and entertainment in everyday American life,1 the Midwest imagined as the United States’s culturally and ideologically populist “Heartland” remains a remarkably consistent and provocative reference point in national media.
Indeed, the broadcast era is marked by a transition from popular representations of the Midwest as home to a radical populist political tradition to a “Heartland” characterized by centrist—and, increasingly, post-1960s, neoconservative—traditional cultural values and “mass,” “low” market dispositions. National networking and the emergence and solidification of national markets reimagined U.S. populism (from its rise in the late 1800s through Farmers’ Cooperative organizations or movements such as Abolitionism) as cultural ethos at “home” in the Heartland. It is important to emphasize here, as media theorist David Morley has noted, that while “it is sometimes hard to resist the idea that the very idea of home is itself reactionary and should simply be ceded to the political Right,” the Heartland myth is not only representative of neoconservative political trends in U.S. culture. In fact, the productivity and richness of the myth is rooted also in its availability for recuperation and appropriation as a mainstream consensus site of shared cultural values and national ideals. This is why examining key moments in which the myth has been significantly taken up and revalued in broader popular discourse becomes particularly important.

Most recently, representations of the Midwest as Heartland have been energized following a series of traumas, from the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City to the contentious 2000 presidential election, 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the presidential campaign and election of 2004. Indeed, *USA Today*’s November 6, 2000 publication of the now-canonical “red state, blue state” map—an image immediately, surprisingly, and unproblematically taken up by television news shows—serves as a vivid contemporary example wherein television programming and broader public debates regarding place-identity, nationally representative ideals, and social power have been troubled over (and also, I will argue, significantly, simultaneously untroubled in their rapid adoption as the presumptive socio-political “common sense”). However, such regional mythologies are also integral to non-traumatic, everyday understandings of television and broader U.S. culture. With regard to the development of new entertainment series, for example, network executives have recently spoken of “not wanting shows that are aimed at people within 10 miles of the Atlantic and the Pacific,” and of imagining their core audience as “the 37-year-old woman from Topeka, Kansas.” While the context in which such proclamations were made—as well as resulting development, market-
ing, and programming decisions based on those proclamations—was specific to a post-9/11 assumption that television audiences were seeking less “edgy” and “urban” fare allied with presumptively more conservative, rural “red state” values, the Middletons encourage us to consider: Rather than representing a new way of thinking about region, nation, and the politics of identity, the red and blue maps and their accompanying industrial and popular discourses should instead be thought of as part of a much longer trajectory of historic investments in and reiterations of this perceived cultural “divide” and its presumptively opposed audiences, tastes, and values.

Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity examines the ways that presumed midwestern ideals and the Midwest as imagined, symbolic Heartland have been central to television’s promotion and development and to the broader critical and public discourse regarding the medium’s value and cultural worth. It interrogates the paradoxical ways that the Heartland historically has been a central site of desire and fantasy in American popular culture as seen on TV and in dialogue with other everyday media discourse. Energized particularly in times of cultural transition or perceived cultural threat or tension, the Heartland myth provides a short-hand cultural common sense framework for “all-American” identification, redeeming goodness, face-to-face community, sanctity, and emplaced ideals to which a desirous and nostalgic public discourse repeatedly returns. Positively embraced as the locus of solid dependability, cultural populism, and producerist, “plain folks” independence, the Midwest as Heartland, in this iteration, symbolizes the ideal nation (in other words, “We the People” are, ideally, midwesterners). Conversely, the Midwest Heartland also functions as an object of derision—condemned for its perceived naiveté and lack of mobility as a site of hopelessly rooted, outdated American past life and values, entrenched political and social conservatism, and bastion of the “mass,” undifferentiated, un-hip people and perspectives—and in this iteration, the Midwest becomes the “other” against which the ideal nation is defined by relief (“We the People” are not midwestern, in principle). In short, the Midwest as Heartland, with its attendant ascribed values, is a key prism through and against which “common sense” ideals regarding citizenship, national identity, and cultural worth have been variously debated and understood in critical moments in television and broader U.S. social history.
Introduction

Geography as Capital: Rethinking National TV’s Regionalism

Heartland TV writes regionalism back into national network television history by examining its role as: a network infrastructure and market development strategy; a network promotional, branding appeal; a key consideration in broadcast regulatory policy; an aesthetic style and mode of address evidenced in programs; and a critical element in the imagination and judgment of television’s audience. Television’s role in constructing and reimagining the Heartland is thus a historical, technological, economic, cultural, and political phenomenon. At each of these sites, and at the core of this myth, is the idea that geography—both real and symbolic—is capital. Indeed, the foundational concept that energizes the Heartland myth’s historic revisiting and sets an apparent limit to its actual revision is the persistent definition of the Midwest as home of the populist, rural, pastoral American “middle.” This “middle” is both structural and imagined. It is structural as a capital relation expressed through strategic market expansion and development and definitions of consumer demography. Pierre Bourdieu speaks of geography as capital in this sense, describing a region’s “distribution in socially ranked geographical space.” Geography is also symbolic capital, expressed through aesthetic distinctions and presumptions regarding audience disposition or “tastes.” As Jan Radway notes, a disposition operates “as a ‘predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination’ to order the world . . . in a familiarly structured way. Dispositions, then, are exhibited partly as subsequent patterns of cultural consumption, appreciation, and appropriation.” The invocation and broader social value of the Heartland as capital is variable, however. While the core mythology that has defined the region within popular culture has remained remarkably stable since its inception, the broader social power and cultural worth of that myth has consistently shifted in relation to different historical contexts and political imperatives.

Television’s regional imaginaries thus engage and inform national identities in different, critical historical moments. Particularly in times of social transition or cultural upheaval, these values are revisited to be energized as an ideal or disdained within broader popular discourse as best suits or functions in relation to broader national hegemonic “common sense.” The subsequent chapters thus examine the relative value of the Heartland to prevailing understandings or constructions of the na-
tional in different, critical moments in postwar U.S. history. These examples significantly complicate and revise several of the most familiar narratives of U.S. television history—narratives that tend to efface regional concerns from national networking, programming, and audience address. For example, although many survey histories of network development often imply that television followed a smoothly standardized path, paved by radio and leading toward immediate network connection and universal service from coast-to-coast, television’s development was notably staggered and uneven. Struggles over how television networking should expand across the nation, what type of service TV might provide, and to whom infrastructural and economic concerns were to be addressed were radically informed by existing technological realities and debates over electrification. Broadcast executives thus balanced public rhetorical appeals to “universal” service and “national” networking with internal strategic plans that encouraged network expansion only into markets with enough population density to rationalize the investment, thus reinforcing the uneven access to rural consumers already mapped by transportation, telephone, and power lines.

Considering national network development in relation to these legacies reveals the literal and figurative power with which government regulators and broadcast industry executives, among others, imagined the medium and its audiences in relation to existing regional mythologies widely circulating within the broader U.S. culture of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In this respect, the Midwest has been a particularly problematic region in network history. It is simultaneously understood to be the most reliable, “mass,” “all-American” market—as an aggregate class of consumers with presumptively popular, commercial tastes—and to be a risky investment, considering its lower population density and weaker, more rural market strength compared to coastal, more thoroughly urban market areas.

Even a cursory review of contemporary television trade industry publications and popular press features about the Midwest make clear that market identity inflects broader cultural and political conceptualizations—and vice-versa—each of which reinforces this ambivalent Heartland myth:

If you want to follow the money, get on a plane. Forty-five of the nation’s 50 most affluent ZIP codes hug the East and West coasts.
Fly-Over Land has just three, all on the North Shore of Chicago. . . .
This elite group . . . watch far less prime-time TV and read more news
magazines. . . .

Or, in describing IKEA’s choice of store placement, targeting “people
who had traveled abroad, who considered themselves risk takers who
liked fine food and wine, who were early-adopters of technologies.”

The company then chose sites for new stores based on the distribution
of such values. The results looked like the red and blue maps . . . [ac-
cording to] Kent Nordin, until recently IKEA’s sales and marketing
manager for North America, . . . “There’s more Buicks driven in the
middle than on the coasts.” The company went to the coasts.

Economic conceptualizations of the region as being both “mass,” populist,
consumer-class home and at a geographic remove from market cur-
rents do not determine the broader cultural and political myths of the
region but, instead, together with policy, programming, and larger pop-
ular discourses, help to form a “unity” of regional representations that
“are mutually reinforcing” and whose “fractured and selective status al-
 lows them to be continually renewed and secured,” positioning the
Midwest as locus of American “populist” tastes and values.

Though excellent histories and analyses of local television have ex-
amined specificities of regional identity, this project focuses exclusively
on images and broader industrial and public discourse that presume to
speak from a “national” perspective in address to an audience imagined
to be broadly national. Since television policy and programming em-
manate from specific locales and, considering that all television viewing
takes place at particular sites by variegated groups or individual view-
ers, this notion of a “national” perspective and a broadly “national”
audience is already mythological. However, the investment in the myth
of national community, made knowable only as conjoined via mass me-
dia, remains conceptually, ideologically critical—girding expectations
for television’s broader socio-cultural and political importance within
U.S. culture, as well as informing daily engagement with the medium.

Whereas, from the 1940s through the mid-1970s, the “Big Three”
television networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) gained market and cultural
dominance, becoming iconographic of a general postwar encourage-
ment of national integration in industry (through governmental policy
and regulation), it has been wisely argued that American television networks have lost their primacy in the shift from the network era to the late 1990s “neo-network” period. Proliferating after the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the “neo-network” era describes the contemporary TV industry’s attempt to maximize profit from a smaller viewing audience by reaching narrower and narrower demographics through “niche” network branding. As John Caldwell points out, narrowcasting reconfigures the audience in ways that appeal to cultural diversification. In the current multi-media era, one appeal to diversification is through regionalism. The Heartland—imagined as a midwestern “home” for viewers, regardless of their actual, physical location—has recently been re-energized as just such a strategic appeal. Within the U.S. context, then, I consider the ways in which “globalization seems also to have led to a strengthening of ‘local’ allegiances and identities within nation-states.”

Although broadcast network singularity as the key, shared site of “mass-mediated theater and performance of nation, where national identity . . . is produced, secured, and maintained through crafting homogeneity and difference” has, arguably, shifted ground in its primacy and function, I maintain that it remains ideologically central, particularly in the intersection between television and broader popular discourses that engage, contest, and/or affirm the representations, debates, and struggles therein. Attention to network TV is also important when considering the specificity of the U.S. media context. U.S. commercial television is uniquely parochial, remaining more “traditional” in its scope and use than in most advanced western contexts in ways that, arguably, actively discourage thinking differently about television and its daily use now than at its introduction. For example, the relative isolationism of domestic U.S. television has, arguably, encouraged the system’s ongoing negotiation of local-region-nation dilemmas in ways that resist or at least qualify many contemporary critical conceptions of media, spatial transcendence, and de-territorialization.

Overall, Heartland TV argues for commercial television’s continued significance and primacy as a critically important site of analysis because it remains the primary communications medium within everyday life for the majority of the U.S. population. In this respect—its continued centrality, “mass” accessibility, and “democratic” level of distribution and access across the nation—television remains unlike any other communications medium in its capacity to serve as a site of shared,
national culture. While changes in business practices and the competitive media environment have undeniably altered the nature of television’s cultural significance from the zenith of the three-network era—a period in which, on any given evening, one-quarter of the national viewing audience was often tuned in to the same program at the same time—the continued engagement with TV by the U.S. public (regardless of race, class, gender, generation, geographic, and educational lines) points to its continued significance as a shared site of cultural production and the apparent, lingering, felt need for television in these terms. *Heartland TV* thus examines network appeals to the continued investment in television’s centrality for the imagination of national community, simultaneous with industrial strategies for further “niche-ing” the audience through overt appeals to Heartland programming, aesthetics, and address. I focus on prime time, commercial, network programming because of its popularity as the most watched, discussed, and debated site of television culture, shared by a more broadly diversified audience than any other “daypart” in the television schedule.

Historically, formal, textual analysis of television programming and promotion has focused on the genre or aesthetic that is considered critically and artistically distinctive within a given period in the medium’s development (for example the “golden age” anthology drama or suburban sitcom of the 1950s, the politically engaged documentary series of the 1960s, the socially relevant sitcom of the 1970s, the auteur drama of the 1980s, etc.). While the importance of these program forms cannot be underestimated, *Heartland TV* extends this field of scholarship to also analyze programs that have generally been written out of scholarly histories of TV because of their “mass” audience and “low” appeal—programs whose aesthetic characteristics and presumed audience seemed to run counter to, but coexisted with, historically hailed and critically valued iconic genres. Additionally, *Heartland TV* revisits these iconic genres in order to interrogate the ways that their regional invocations, appeals, and, at times, counterintuitive evocations of midwesternness significantly informed critical apprehensions of their social value and cultural worth. In this respect, *Heartland TV* uses formal analysis of program aesthetics and address—in dialogue with institutional and popular discourses about them—both to reconsider “totally typical” popular program forms and to reread “quality” television genres and series in terms of their historic dependence upon regional mythology to stake and shore up these genre’s positions within the historical canon.
Indeed, while critically revered for its ability to “transport” audience members to new locales featuring diverse cultural expertise from across the nation, television simultaneously allows its viewers to settle in with familiar, “vernacular” cultural expressions associated with emplaced, regional traditions. Midwesternness-as-seen-on-TV has often been perceived, in this sense, to be a potential threat to “national purpose.” Televised regional appeals, it has been feared, might “create a permeable space between regions and forces otherwise kept conceptually distinct” failing “to maintain the fences cordonning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high.”18 The chapters that follow analyze and exemplify regional aesthetics in programming through reference to scholarly work from television studies and art history that interrogates theories of value, particularly as articulated by Erika Doss, Jan Radway, Lynn Spigel, and John Caldwell.19 Heartland TV thus traces television’s role in broader postwar transformations and revaluation of the regional within the nation, and in the linking of regionalist aesthetics to political ideology. Several chapters here focus on programs and branding appeals that were strategically used to attract a broad, “populist” audience through the explicit promotion of Heartland ideals. Television programming that appealed to imagined Heartland ideals and/or presumed to speak to a Heartland audience was (and often continues to be) read through critical apprehensions developed for understanding and reassessing regionalist art practice. When praised, regionalist art and television are hailed for their accessibility and populist appeals; when disdained, both are considered culturally suspect by making “connections between culture and the market” and threatening to “obliterate the distinction between those who were cultured and those who were not.”20

Examining this last point in detail, Heartland TV considers regionalism in regard to the conceptualization of television’s audience, and interrogates the critical valuation of the imagined Heartland audience as crucially bound up with broader discourses regarding taste, market differentiation, and the politics of social value. Of particular interest here is the rise of public discourse identifying the Heartland as an ideological “middle”-ground within postwar culture simultaneous to growing criticisms of television’s “middlebrow” cultural status. Throughout Heartland TV, I interrogate the persistent association of midwesternness with “mass,” undifferentiated taste and midwestern audiences with a “natural” affinity for middlebrow and “low” TV programming. The fear of
national culture “down-classed” by television programming extends to critical perceptions of the medium’s purpose and the identity and value of the audience it serves. As Laurie Ouellette’s critical history of public broadcasting in the United States details, from its inception television has struggled to strike a balance between mass-audience entertainment appeals to “the people” and program service that is expressly pedagogical, situated “above popular culture.” As exemplified above, this imagined idea of the “indiscriminate mass audience” naturally gravitating toward populist offerings is discursively linked to a specifically midwestern audience. The Heartland audience is presumed to appreciate the popular rather than the educational, the “lowest common denominator” rather than minoritarian, “high,” “class,” “elite,” cultural programming, the anti-aesthetic versus the auteurist, the average versus the exceptional. There is a doubled sensibility here: While the midwestern audience is imagined to be “low” in terms of taste and cultural sensibilities, its “averageness” is also periodically invoked in ideal terms—as reliably majoritarian, unswayed by fads, and, therefore, allied with stability, traditional values, and the smooth functioning of representative democracy (reflected in an oft-repeated TV industry argument that what is popular with the majority audience succeeds in the ratings, thus positioning TV as analogous to a voting booth).

But, how, explicitly, is a region “imagined”? What does it “look” like? How has regional mythology significantly influenced broadcast policy, network television’s promotion and development, prime time program aesthetics and address, and public debates over the medium’s cultural value (debates that are, largely, about the audience’s presumed market value and cultural worth)? And, what is at stake in thinking about television history in these ways?

**The Heartland Myth as Selective Tradition**

Methodologically, *Heartland TV* is indebted to cultural studies’ conceptualization of popular culture as a key site in the imagination, struggle over, reiteration, and social production of prevailing cultural “common sense.” The chapters that follow are informed, particularly, by work from British and American Cultural Studies that theorizes media’s relation to and importance in the imagination of place and national iden-
tity, and the role of the popular in struggles over social meaning and value in daily life.

While the chapters proceed chronologically in terms of the key text or problematic through which each is focused, *Heartland TV* does not propose a teleological progression or development of the Heartland myth over time. Instead, I am interested in the consistency across time of particularly charged elements of the Heartland myth and the critical ways in which those elements assume “relative weight” as explanatory narratives regarding citizenship ideals and values within “the forces in balance at any historical moment.” Sociologist Herman Gray has argued that U.S. popular media are characterized by a “continuing press towards an imaginary middle.” *Heartland TV* argues that, in such representation, this “middle” is often imagined to be located in a Midwest whose Heartlander values appear “to popular experience as trans-historical—the bedrock, universal wisdom of the ages . . . the terrain of what is ‘taken for granted’ in social and political thought,” when, in fact, this myth is “thoroughly formed as a ‘product of history’” within which “different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain on which different politics must firm up.”

Though historically responsive and adaptive to social influence and change, the core mythologies through which the Heartland Midwest is imagined have remained remarkably stable since their emergence and solidification at the beginning of the broadcast era. Thomas Frank has recently remarked that this modern reimagining of the Midwest from its nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century associations with radicalism to its contemporary image as traditional “home” “has to stand as one of the great reversals of American history.” *Heartland TV* argues that this reversal was critical to the successful foundation of national market culture and integral to forging consensus ideology of the “nation” in post-1920s America. The Heartland myth, in these respects, exemplifies “selective tradition,” as theorized by Raymond Williams. Selective tradition describes

an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification. From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. . . . This selection is presented and usually
successfully passed off as “the tradition,” “the significant past.” . . . It is a version of the past which is intended to connect with and ratify the present. . . . It is a very powerful process, . . . It is also at the same time, a vulnerable process, since it has in practice to discard whole areas of significance, or reinterpret or dilute them, or convert them into forms which support or at least do not contradict the really important elements of the current hegemony.26

“Hegemony,” as Williams reminds readers, is not simply the “dominant” within culture but is instead also descriptive of a process by which “otherwise disparate meanings, values, and practices” are organized into coherent clusters of meaning and articulated, interconnected values. Selective tradition, in this sense, describes a set of relations or associations that function within a broader discursive field within and against which cultural common sense is forged.27

The chapters that follow thus reconstruct a dialogue between television industry policy, regulatory statements, television programming, and popular press sources, in key, critical, historical conjunctures in prime time television and broader U.S. social history. These are moments of conjuncture in which the symbolic function of the Heartland Midwest has been explicitly and strategically engaged in the process of revaluing regionalism in relation to “national” identity—moments when the region’s imagined, culturally based identity is politicized in contrast to, or as representative of, national values. Across these sites, the imagination of the Midwest as Heartland emerges as a discursive field within which “certain ways of talking about” the Midwest and regional identity are “ruled in” while selective tradition “‘rules out,’ limits and restricts other ways of talking, . . . in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it.”28 Across each of these different sites, a “characteristic way of thinking” appears, encouraging a particular common sense framework through which midwestern identity and its presumed value are both communicated and by which a range of understandings are circumscribed.29 These discursive networks and sites of conjuncture invoke past understandings of the region and its significance while engaging contemporary debates over national identity and regional representation that have continued relevance in the present.

The regional borders of the Midwest solidified by the 1920s concurrent with the rise of broadcast media and mass-market culture. The regional parameters have, from this period on, been understood to
include a twelve-state region bordered by Ohio on the East across to
the Dakotas at the region’s Northwest, all the way down in a straight
line south to Oklahoma at its southern edge. As a perceptual or sym-

bolic region, however, the Heartland is both a more limited and a more
expansive regional idea. As analyzed in the following chapters, the
“Heartland” myth—while understood to be thoroughly midwestern
and located within the parameters of this region—is more limited in
that it excludes certain spaces, people, and practices within its borders.
Popular appeals to the Heartland are also more expansive when they in-
volve imagined Heartland “sensibilities” transcendent of geographic lo-
cation. Geographer James R. Shortridge’s The Middle West: Its Meaning
in American Culture argues that the concept of pastoral life and culture
is the trope through which the symbolic limits and expansiveness of the
Midwest are conjoined and imagined as a unified mythology. Rural,
pastoral populism is, in this respect, the selective tradition through
which cultural common sense regarding the region is filtered, and by
which exceptions to such thinking are “ruled out” or excised from pop-
ular discourse.

An early entry in the now burgeoning field of cultural geography,
Shortridge’s work remains the only single-authored, book-length study
to theorize the evolution within U.S. history of the Midwest as cultural
symbol, established across a body of academic and popular discourses
from the nation’s founder’s period to the contemporary era. Shortridge
isolates the emergence of the “Midwest” as the key place-holder for the
pastoral within U.S. culture, carefully assessing how the valuation of
that myth has shifted in different historical moments. He identifies the
first use of the term “Middle West” to date from 1827 in reference to a
cartographic ordering of U.S. space, from north to south, wherein “Ten-
nessee was middle-western in contrast, not with Missouri . . . but with
the Northwest (e.g., Ohio and Indiana) and the Southwest (e.g., Ala-
abama and Mississippi).” By the mid-1800s, the region’s association
with agriculture was solidified and aligned with values of vigor and
morality via a producerist work ethic. Hence, President Lincoln’s 1862
pronouncement that “the great interior region . . . is the great body of
the republic.” By the end of the 1800s, the concept of the Middle West
shifted cartographically to the plains frontier, centered upon the “com-
paratively settled and stable ‘middle’ states of Kansas and Nebraska.”
In this period, the central cultural traits associated with the Midwest be-
came standardized in popular representations of the region as rural,
pastoral, and home to national values of self-reliance, independence, kindness, pragmatism, industry, and humility. In the early 1900s, the term “Midwest” begins to be used frequently and the area described as “midwestern” grows, indicative of the widely admired aspects of pastoralism within the national culture.

According to Shortridge’s account, the 1920s represent a key moment in shifting the valuation of the Midwest within American ideology. I argue that this shift is particularly significant because it is coincident with the rise of broadcasting and the growth of mass-market culture. Even though from the 1920s on, the Midwest was no longer a predominantly rural society—having become more urban than rural and more industrial than agricultural—popular discourses about the Midwest continued to define the region through reference to pastoralism. Thus, central to Heartland TV’s analysis of the circulation and significance of midwestern mythology is Shortridge’s suggestion that the “failure . . . to incorporate the new” realities of midwestern life and culture “into the established view of the Middle West” as pastoral, “is an example of what may be a general need for Americans to regionalize—that is, compartmentalize—national myths in order to avoid a confrontation with the contradictions inherent in these myths.”

While Shortridge’s analysis of the Midwest as pastoral is a critical starting-point to any analysis of the Midwest as regional mythology, I extend this analysis to interrogate the broader cultural politics and apparent social value of this mythology, specifically as it is articulated to struggles over cultural capital through race, gender, sex, and class identity at critical intersections of U.S. social and prime time TV history.

As noted by Gilbert B. Rodman, articulation describes “the process by which otherwise unrelated cultural phenomena—practices, beliefs, texts, social groups, etc.—come to be linked together in a meaningful . . . and seemingly natural way.” The following chapters argue that, while pastoral populism is key to understanding the Midwest in the cultural imagination of the United States, this foundational mythology has its longevity—in the face of changing historic, demographic, economic, and cultural realities—due to the articulation of the Midwest to “practices, beliefs, texts, and social groups” that are imagined as, fundamentally, “square.” Discursive constructions of the social capital and political worth of the Heartland, conceived as midwestern, are activated through the articulation of imagined “square” sensibilities to the pastoral myth. “Squareness” is the link between the presumed rural geo-
graphic remove of the Heartland and the Midwest’s imagined cultural distance from progressive social currents and conversance. 37

Hip to Be Square? “Possessive Investments” at Home in the Heartland

Heartland TV unpacks and examines the ways in which the Heartland Midwest has been imagined to be the common sense locus of the square, populist American dream—unquestioned home of square people, culture, and values. While hipsters represent all that is bright, new, and modern in culture, they are also simultaneously criticized as inauthentic and conformist in their slavish attention to consumer trends—icons of misplaced energy and non-productive labor.38 Thus, the squareness of the Midwest is idealized in different historical moments, as the site of “authentic” culture—a region marked by stability and producerist energy. The ideal square is iconic of American populism, endearingly amateurish, ordinary, non-threatening, unswayed by fads and materialism, devout, hard-working, simple, and at the center of U.S. culture both figuratively and geographically.

At root, this aspect of the Heartland myth plugs into the long-standing debate over cultural populism and cultural elitism wherein “square” is associated with the “common,” “ordinary” person pitted against the “elitist” snob. While the “red and blue” maps encourage us to think of this as a contemporary route to understanding a “divided nation,” populated by squares in the middle and steeled against hipster elites from either coast, this conception of populist v. elite, square v. hip has been central to the imagination of the Heartland from the inception of the regional myth. However, the square is also a figure available for disdain and rejection as an out-of-touch, isolationist, plain figure threatening to pull down the rest of the nation with “low” tastes and comprehension, conservative narrow-mindedness, and naive lack of sophistication. This is the square perceived as dangerously backward, on the fringe of U.S. culture, an embarrassment to the nation’s image and progress. Significantly, while historically “hip” has been associated with progressivism, rebelliousness, outsidersness, bohemian expression, youth, urbanity, African American culture, gay culture, and queered perspective,39 the counter-posed “square” is traditionally understood to be mainstream, majoritarian, conservative, rural, old-fashioned, and rooted in past life
and culture. Further, the square is characterized by a “straight” heteronormativity (embodied, particularly, by the patriarchal, nuclear family ideal) and, crucially, imagined as “white.”

Regarding the construction of “whiteness” and the resultant resources, power, and opportunity allied with investment in whiteness within U.S. culture, George Lipsitz states, “whiteness never works in isolation; it functions as part of a broader dynamic grid created through intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality.” I argue that geography must be added to this matrix, and that the persistent association of “midwesternness” as “white” is critical to the region’s revaluation—particularly in moments of social upheaval and trauma—as “home” of “authentic” cultural populism and traditional U.S. values. In such moments, the Midwest is recuperated as a “white,” heteronormative, familial space, in “a strategic deployment of power” that invests the region with identifications that have functioned historically to “universalize [the region] into Americanness.” Heartland TV thus argues that, while the Heartland is often disdained in popular discourse for its perceived “square” lack of cultural capital, its ongoing social and political relevance is secured via the articulation of “squariness” to the imagination of the region as almost exclusively patriarchal, “straight,” and white. Through this highly selective and partial imagination of the Midwest as affiliated—in raced, gendered, and sexed terms—with dominant cultural identifications, the Heartland remains powerful, in spite of its square “vulnerability” in other respects. This imagination of the Heartland as an essentially “straight,” white space places it at the center of a “culture that still holds real power.” Imagined in this way, the Heartland Midwest underscores the nation’s historic and ongoing, systemic racism while also functioning as the site upon which to transfer or “locate” the culture’s possessive investment in whiteness. The Heartland thus offers a myth through which the nation reifies racism as the status quo, and by which national discourse disavows racism, proclaiming enlightened ideals that stand in direct contrast to those imagined to inhere in the region.

Consequently, Heartland TV interrogates the ways in which the Heartland is energized as a primary site “where whiteness rushes to reconstitute itself and rebuild its defenses.” Arguably, this reconstitution is all the more politically powerful for the fact that it is not couched in overtly raced terms, but, rather through a spatial imaginary that posits the Heartland Midwest as shared, national “home” wherein the pre-
sumptive “invisibility” of race implies “universal” value. Geographic identity thus becomes “visible” through the iconography of race, gender, sexuality, and landscape. While “whiteness” is not monolithic or homogeneous, it is imagined and mobilized as such in articulation to place as a social category. As Ian Haney López notes, “consider the ease with which we assign racial identities knowing only that someone is from Santa Monica or South Central, Greenwich Village or Harlem.” And, moreover, that “this link between space and race functions as a matter of what others believe of our identity and how we think of ourselves” and imagine—or limit the imagination of—other possibilities. 44

Heartland TV thus raises questions and provides theoretical analyses regarding how “whiteness” and heteronormativity are routinely mobilized as belonging in the Midwest, particularly in ways that have actively rewritten the physical and imagined borders of the region through the elision of urbaniy, people of color, and non-agrarian industry. At stake, here, are broader questions regarding how the Midwest functions as a site of transference and disavowal for the broader nation, with regard to race, sexuality, and citizenship ideals. Thus, popular imaginations of the Midwest as Heartland are public engagements and struggles over questions of citizenship and value. As Lauren Berlant has stated, “Americans experience themselves as national through public accounts of what is important about them.”45 Citizenship, writes Berlant, is “always in process. It is continually being produced out of a political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who will count as ‘the people’ and how social membership will be measured and valued.”46 Moments of historical transition “make more, not less central the work of media in redefining citizenship and framing what can legitimately be read as national pedagogy.”47 The common sense myth of the Midwest as pastoral Heartland thus has broader political resonance as regards who “counts” within the framework of both regional and national understandings.

Methodology and Chapter Summaries

While Heartland TV cannot reconstitute the specific ways in which individual viewers and groups interpreted discourses about the Heartland analyzed here, by marshalling television industry policy and governmental regulatory statements, television program address and aesthetics, and popular press sources, and reading them as an intertextual network
of meanings, a “common sense” way of imagining the Heartland and of struggling over postwar ideals regarding regional and national identity emerges. It then becomes possible to trace, contextually, shifts, reiterations, and reinterpretations of this common sense to explore specifically how, in key historical moments and in strategic programming and promotional appeals in those moments, television has been a central site for imagining and struggling over ideals of national identity through regionalism.

In considering questions of symbolic representation and cultural value, Heartland TV revisits U.S. television history through cultural studies approaches to television studies, cultural geography, critical theory of space and place, critical race theory, feminist theory, art history, and related histories and theories of cultural value. Heartland TV thus enters into dialogue with and extends critical histories of television that consider popular television in relation to domestic communication policy and acknowledge that networking as a practice, and programming as a textual field, are historically engaged in dialogue and tension with larger social forces. Important here as well are contemporary and historical theories regarding the nation, space, place, and communications technology, particularly as related to the unevenness of technological development in the United States and to understandings of citizenship based, in part, on such access and connection.

The core historical evidence marshaled here to reconstruct discursive networks of the Heartland consists of popularly, publicly available materials. Popular press, archival documents, and government documents and speeches that are often not easily accessible are here compiled together for ease of reference and study. Analysis of program texts is here also focused on programs that are widely available for review, study, or classroom use. I have attempted to reconstruct the larger social context of broadcasting and Heartland mythology in history through reference to television industry trade periodicals, government documents, newspapers, and popular press periodicals, as well as network television programming and promotional appeals. I have focused on mass-market periodicals because of their presumed address to an imagined, unified, national audience having wide demographic appeal. These media venues thus share television’s “national” appeal and audience concerns, but, poised as competing media within the consumer market, also serve as venues for criticism and debate regarding television’s role in everyday American life. The limits and significance of the presumed, shared, “na-
tional” audience addressed by popular press sources and television programming is interrogated in the following chapters. Overall, however, it is clear that the audience appealed to across these venues is largely and presumptively white and middle class. Of particular interest in Heartland TV, then, is the articulation of “white middle class” to an imagined midwestern family mythology as it shifts historically in relation to the Heartland as imagined home to such an “ideal.”

Heartland TV also offers a reading of the ways in which television industry policy, regulatory statements, network development, and promotional plans and programming have strategically engaged regional mythology to define and meet “public interest” standards, to attract a broad, “populist” audience, and to appeal to audiences through the promotion of Heartland ideals. Across these sites, the Heartland has been imagined and invoked as both representative of television’s “universal” promise and popular possibilities, and as a challenge or field of resistance to TV’s technological, aesthetic, and commercial potential. As historical evidence and support in considering these issues, I have turned to archival collections of the NBC network and network executives from NBC, ABC, and CBS, as well as to the collections of members of the Federal Communications Commission and television producers and journalists. Also included in both popular references and in archival documents are examples of public responses regarding television. Such documents are included not to offer a generalized understanding of popular reception of Heartlander appeals, but, rather, to suggest the relative intensity with which issues regarding place and nation on TV were felt and engaged at different historical moments by the larger public.

I had several criteria when considering whether a site—particularly a program text or set of programs—constituted a critical “conjuncture.” Stuart Hall defines a conjuncture as a historically specific moment within which a critical network of discourses forms across political, institutional, and popular sites, engaged in working through a broader social dilemma. Each of the chapters that follow examines a particularly energized moment in postwar U.S. history within which the Heartland myth was explicitly interrogated in relation to “national” ideals and values. While the myth of the Heartland is an ongoing one, the sites studied here are unique as catalysts that clearly provoked or were meaningfully central to a broader national debate regarding midwesternness, national “purpose,” and cultural value during key moments in
television and broader U.S. social history. Each of these sites—in policy, strategic use of promotions and programming, and critical apprehensions of TV's audience and purpose—represented a central matrix for working through the cultural and political worth of populist, midwestern values for the nation. Each explicitly emphasize, express, and engage the “Heartland” as a “keyword” that energized struggles over the text (whether it be policy, program, network branding appeal, star persona, presumed audience, or, generally, a combination of each of the above). These texts and the debates into which they entered are each significant interrogations of the broader construction and public refashioning of a “populist” American “mass” “middle” in relation to an imagined coastal “elite.” At each of these featured sites, more than at any other on TV in that postwar historical moment, the Heartland and its imagination in terms of national value and American identity was centrally at stake. And, as indicated above, each of the critical sites here also significantly interrogates and revises “given,” “common sense” understandings of TV history through cultural geography.

This explains why, for example, Good Times (CBS, 1974–1979), set in Chicago, is not the key text from the 1970s here. As chapters 3 and 4 outline, Chicago and its African American populations were effectively excised from popular discourse regarding the Heartland in this period. I have also not discussed the Garry Marshall-produced programs Happy Days (1974–1984) or Laverne and Shirley (1976–1983)—both hugely popular for ABC during the 1970s and both set in a nostalgically imagined 1950s Milwaukee (though in its last three seasons Laverne and Shirley had moved to Los Angeles). These series are addressed in Daniel Marcus’ Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics and in Janet Staiger’s Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era. Marcus’ theorization of nostalgia and political conservatism and Staiger’s analysis of the critical judgment (read: disdain) visited upon these programs resonate with Heartland TV’s focus on the cultural imagination of a “populist” American “middle,” but the programs themselves were not discussed as “Heartland” texts or as indicative of a broader shift or interrogation of the myth. However, during much of this same period, MTM Productions of the 1970s were discussed in these terms via analyses of their settings, star personae, and “work family” cultures. Heartland TV also does not examine the long-running pastoral family drama, Little House on the Prairie (NBC, 1974–1982) in order that I might focus instead on MTM
Productions’ comedies in terms of “quality,” race, urbanity, and the “middle-ethic” ideal. However, forthcoming work by Anna Thompson-Hajdik on the relationship between Little House on the Prairie and Walnut Grove, Minnesota does address this series and also dovetails with my chapter 4 discussion of Heartland tourism via MTM icons as they have functioned in the promotion of Minneapolis and Chicago. Finally, in my readings of both the programs themselves and the popular press responses to them, I interpret The Beverly Hillbillies (CBS, 1962–1971), The Andy Griffith Show (CBS, 1960–1968) and Mayberry, RFD (CBS, 1968–1971) to be understood as more southern than midwestern. Though Green Acres’ (CBS, 1965–1971) fantastic pastoral universe suggests, potentially, an uncanny, science-fiction Heartland, in this study I choose to focus for that period on the unmatched popularity of The Lawrence Welk Show, which was always identified as midwestern in popular and critical discourse and by the judgments of its audience.  

While there are overlaps and contemporary connections made in each of the following chapters, the studies featured in Heartland TV proceed chronologically, from the origination of broadcasting to the contemporary, “neo-network” era. The first three chapters focus on key debates and texts during the period from the 1920s through the 1960s. This era is characterized by a systematic revaluing of the region toward the nation and national ideals in relation to cultural expression, markets, and political ideology. In this period, the Heartland myth is significantly revised and stabilized, moving from its place as idealized “center” of representative U.S. identity to its conceptualization as a potentially resistant site characterized by isolationist conservatism mired in the past. Chapters 4 through the epilogue focus on the period from 1970 to the present, which can be characterized by a revaluing of the “niche” within the nation and, therefore, of the populist possibilities represented by the Heartland in relation to cultural production, markets, and political ideology. This chronological approach is intended to underscore the tenacity of the Heartland myth—its powerful “residue” in times of progress and change—as well as to throw into relief powerful challenges to or reimaginings of this mythology, emphasizing why such moments are perceived as exceptional and, even, intensely threatening. Each chapter thus charts the shifting articulation of the pastoral-populist myth, regional aesthetics, and the relative value of “squareness” as capital to prevailing cultural ideals at key sites of conjuncture between television and broader socio-political discourse.
One of the key interventions that Heartland TV makes is to read broadcast policy through cultural geography in order to examine how regional mythologies were actually written into regulatory definitions and standards regarding public interest and audience differentiation. Because the policies closely analyzed in chapter 1 remained fundamentally unchanged from their inception in the 1930s until 1996’s revision of the Telecommunications Act, the structural impact of these policies becomes “visible” as it then informs strategies of network promotion, identification, and conceptualization of audience address through the network era (through chapter 4 here in particular). Thus, Heartland TV opens with a chapter that focuses on the revaluing of post-1930s U.S. culture from regionalism to nationalism through networking, and concludes with the epilogue’s analysis of the transition to a “neo-network” era which is currently revaluing regional appeals as network branding strategies. However, each chapter significantly interrogates the ways in which regulatory expectations (for service in the “public interest”), as well as market imperatives, contribute to “regional” modes of network programming, promotion, and audience appeal.

Chapter 1, “‘Essential, Desirable, and Possible Markets’: Broadcasting Midwestern Tastes and Values” charts historic struggles between the expressed, rhetorical ideals of “universal,” national networking and the rather more uneven realities of local service. This chapter focuses on institutional/network and regulatory/policy expectations for regional expression, understandings of national service obligations, and the imagined limits of each, from the pre-broadcast era through the 1940s. Specifically, chapter 1 interrogates the role of Heartland mythology in structuring network development rationales, broadcast law, and regulatory policy. It traces, in particular, the ways in which “service in the public interest” was codified as a geographically differentiated standard. This chapter thus offers a critical rhetorical analysis of network development rationales and strategic plans, communications law, and regulatory statements in relation to or as informed by changing cultural mythologies of region and nation. To analyze the development of network infrastructure and promotion, I focus on archival accounts of NBC’s plans for the physical expansion of television networking in ways that might balance economy of scale with the expressed promise of genuinely national service (at least rhetorically). The chapter examines regulatory statements and guiding principles of the period, including analysis of The Blue Book (1946), which codified the Federal Communicatio-
tions Commission’s assertion that American tastes and values were differentiated according to geographic region or “zone.” Subsequent chapters offer evidence that the principles of geographic differentiation established in *The Blue Book*—as a standard for public service, program types, and presumed audience reflecting different tastes and necessitating different market appeals—set the precedent for ongoing debates regarding regionalism and TV as a market and cultural forum to this day. Indeed, such debates have, arguably, been energized in the context of multiple-platform TV delivery and new media outlets.

The interrogation in chapter 1 of the role of Heartland mythology in structuring network development rationales, broadcast law, and regulatory policy leads to an analysis of early network programming and promotions that strategically appealed to Heartland values and “populist” audiences through regional, “pre-televisual” expressive forms from American arts, folk culture, and everyday life. Chapter 2, “Square Dancing and Champagne Music: Regional Aesthetics and Middle America,” focuses on the specific examples of *Jubilee, U.S.A.* (ABC, 1955–1961) and *The Lawrence Welk Show* (ABC, 1955–1971) to examine the paradox that, while most histories of American network television propose that the medium rose to prominence due to promotional rhetoric and “Golden Age” programming that promised unprecedented enlightenment through the transmission of urban, “high” cultural ideals, the network promotions and programs of the 1950s and beyond also overtly appealed to “populist” and expressly rural traditions. In promoting itself as America’s new, uniquely national medium, network executives and program producers presented both the “high” urban ideals particularly associated with the American East (especially New York City) and populist, vernacular traditions and values that were historically associated with the broader American Heartland. Popular critics and scholars have tended to embrace television in its “high” appeals and generic forms while puzzling over the popularity of “populist” programs. This puzzlement played itself out in contemporary debates over the medium’s purpose and cultural worth, as examined here through a close reading of these programs’ aesthetics and content and through an analysis of related critical valuations of their audiences’ tastes and presumed politics.

The dual “mass” audience popularity and vehement critical disdain of “populist” programs through the 1960s underscores the paradoxical nature of television and points to a relatively effaced aspect of prime time history. Though television industry rhetoric, programming, and
space-age broadcast technologies positioned 1960s America as the leading symbol of a reinvigorated New York- and Washington, D.C.-centered cosmopolitan, worldly culture, there simultaneously remained vigorous, competing tensions and ambivalence in postwar American life that held fast to residual ideals of pre-war, place-bound tradition and “knowable” community, and that challenged the very desirability of a national identity shared in common. However, while prestige network documentary series such as CBS Reports defined 1960s America according to New Frontier ideals of progress and mobility, such programs also reinforced and perpetuated rather fantastic elements of the Heartland myth as, particularly, African Americans, the working-class, urban centers, and political activism were increasingly written out of these programs’ representations of the U.S. Midwest. This excision of racial diversity and sexual “difference” is the focus of chapters 4 and 5, respectively. Chapter 3, however, extends Michael Curtin’s groundbreaking work on the “international” look of 1960s documentary to focus on the domestic documentary’s portrayal of the Midwest Heartland as a particular kind of “resistant” and residual site within the New Frontier.

Chapter 3, “‘Strictly Conventional and Moral’: CBS Reports in Webster Groves,” also connects documentary programming with the governmental and popular press rhetoric that increasingly defined the region as home to what, by the 1970s, would be defined as an emerging “Silent Majority,” in ways that significantly revalued “traditional” Heartland mythologies to appear threateningly out-of-touch, retrogressive, and divisive in the face of national progress in civil rights and the Cold War. This chapter focuses solely on two key sites through which TV viewers “talked back” to regulators and documentary producers and journalists in the 1960s. In particular, responses to Newton Minow’s “Vast Wasteland” speech and to CBS Reports journalists and producers pertaining to two documentaries about Webster Groves, Missouri indicate the unresolved and, frequently, quite raw tensions regarding television and capital relations in the 1960s. “Talking back” to the television set by midwestern viewers, in particular here, reveals a desire to be identified with and to claim the “elite” values promoted and embodied by reformers such as Minow and CBS News’ Fred Friendly. However, there is also here a felt threat that “outsider” perspectives of the local might be detrimental to the region’s image when viewed by the nation-at-large.
Popular representations of the Midwest as home to residual, traditional values and past life and culture, as seen in chapters 2 and 3, establish the field within which MTM Productions’ 1970s comedy series were interpreted, critically, as counterintuitive portrayals of the Midwest as “newly” urbane consumer spaces, home to hip (if understated) sexuality and bourgeois feminism. Chapter 4, “‘You’re Gonna Make It After All!’ The Urbane Midwest in MTM Productions’ ‘Quality’ Comedies,” writes geography back into the narrative of MTM Productions’ historic position as a “quality” production company—a significant element of the creators’ pitch and an inherent marker of the programs’ distinctiveness within the 1970s TV landscape, but also an element that has been absent from existing analyses of the series. This chapter thus interrogates MTM Productions’ The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS, 1970–1977), The Bob Newhart Show (CBS, 1972–1978), and WKRP in Cincinnati (CBS, 1978–1982) specifically as regards the programs’ imagination of the American Middle West in a fundamentally new, perceptually counterintuitive way—a progressive portrayal that was distinctive in post-1960s representations of the U.S. Heartland. Simultaneous with Nixon’s proclamations of a “Silent Majority” downtrodden by the coastal media elite and coincident with Spiro Agnew’s condemnation of media producers as out-of-step with Heartland values, MTM Productions pointed to newly urbane understandings of regional identity and political identification while simultaneously positioning the Midwest as the lone U.S. region to have “survived the 1960s” with “untroubled” stability. These programs served as sites for battles over taste through place, positing that the Middle West was a region where urban life, feminism, progressive politics, and national conversance were, indeed, imaginable, if in circumscribed ways (particularly with regard to race). Such battles took place in and around these programs at the intersection of the relation between celebrity personae, popular entertainment, and civic activism and ideals.

Chapter 5 extends the analysis of counterintuitive representations of the Midwest in “There Is No ‘Dayton Chic’: Queering the Midwest in Roseanne, Ellen, and The Ellen Show.” This chapter examines key episodes of the situation comedies Roseanne (ABC, 1988–1997), Ellen (ABC, 1994–1997), and The Ellen Show (CBS, 2001–2002) to assess each program’s construction and use of the Midwest and midwestern-ness as abject in relation to the series’ comparatively mobile, cosmopolitan, place-transcendent portrayal of lesbian identity. This chapter
examines the ways in which potentially progressive portrayals of lesbianism required the contrast of Heartland culture and perspective for definition, implying that queerness and midwesternness are fundamentally irreconcilable cultural, political, and market identifications. The effectiveness of these episodes—the judgment of whether or not they are funny and whether they represent significant, “quality” incursions within the prime time status-quo—thus depends on the degree of success with which anxieties about the “difference” of lesbianism are transferred to the national viewing audience’s presumed, consensual understanding of the U.S. Heartland as, necessarily, “straight” and at a remove from cultural and market trends. *Roseanne, Ellen,* and *The Ellen Show* each emerged during the completion of the transition from the traditional broadcast era to increasingly niche appeals within which market conceptions of the region—as a “down-classed,” “flyover” zone compared to “elite,” “niche”-markets—were invigorated and powerfully articulated to political allegiances. (This association of geography with market identity as taste culture and political point-of-view is later revisited in the epilogue, which discusses network branding in a “neo-network” era). While the Midwest and the midwesterner are clearly the butt of the joke in these programs (based on shared assumptions in the program narratives and between the programs and their presumed audience—an audience that is, itself, largely midwestern) the humor is double-edged. Its effectiveness relies upon a powerful imagination of the American Heartland as a pre-modern, hermetically sealed land of squares, hopelessly un-hip and out-of-the loop. Yet, the Midwest is also a place whose “less complicated,” un-faddish, community- versus individual-focused nature marks it as a site of desire for and placement within a “knowable” universe.

Longing and affection for the Heartland as “knowable,” stable, traditional community are at the center of the revivification of the myth in periods of national and political trauma, and used as a key rhetorical appeal to cultivate broadly national audiences in a “neo-network” era. Together, chapter 6 and the epilogue consider the Heartland myth’s renewed prominence, from the mid-1990s to the present, as a region and people explicitly allied with populist pragmatism, “plain folks” tastes and desires, and as the home of innocence and spirituality in the contemporary, mass-mediated world. Chapter 6, “Fertility Among the Ruins: Reconstituting the Traumatized Heartland” examines news specials focused on the anniversaries of the April, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P.
Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Significant in relation to coverage of the World Trade Center bombings in 1993 and the catastrophic events of September 11, 2001, anniversary coverage in Oklahoma City inscribes the metropolitan capital as the epitome of a timeless, pastoral Heartland. Commemorative accounts contextualize the shock of the event in terms of its rupture of the illusion of an idealized American middle landscape—the Heartland imagined as rural American safe-space, untouched by the contemporary, worldly strife “expected” to be visited upon the country’s primary coastal urban centers. Also, however, these programs allow for the memorialization and recovery in Oklahoma City to be imagined through frontier ideology, characterized by a producerist ethic, pioneering spirit, and the values of self-sufficiency embodied in the idealization of the reconstructed family circle.

The epilogue, “Red State, Blue State, Purple Heartland,” examines current network branding practices and industrial appeals to an imagined “red state” audience, as seen in TV industry rhetoric and promotion, in network programming, and in popular television criticism—each of which powerfully articulates “realism” and “authenticity” to the Heartland. I focus particularly on network and program branding strategies in the early 2000s from three key sites: the rise and fall of PAX television—which staked its identity on Heartland programs with overtly spiritual content; CBS’s public and trade industry embrace of its role as the “last true broadcast” network, appealing to “flyover” America; and reality television’s now ritual linking of “real people” to the Heartland as presumptively “innocent,” uncalculating, and untainted by coastal “fads.” At each of these sites, the Heartland stands in as shorthand for “authenticity” and, increasingly, as the home of an “underrepresented” majoritarian population rhetorically synchronous with political appeals to a red state populace “outside the Beltway” and between the coasts.

Unlike other regions of the country that have been singled out analytically for their perceived exceptionalism, the Heartland is typically represented as an unexceptional locus of consensus. While several scholars, for example, have closely studied the myth of the imagination of the American South, those mythologies have, at their core, a traumatic “visibly” “raced” history and history of regional exceptionalism in relation to the nation-at-large. Central to the myth of the Heartland, by contrast, is the overdetermined “invisibility” of racial tensions and the presumption that the region is emblematic of national ideals more often than not. That is, while the South—particularly in the earliest years of
television through the civil rights era—was not imagined, on television, as nationally representative, the Heartland often was. Indeed, arguably, the tensions regarding the social value and cultural worth of the region have been so provocative because of this “middle-ground” quality. Whereas the South, East, and West have each always held onto distinctive mythologies resistant to being claimed as “all-American,” the Midwest, historically, is recuperated and reiterated as “America’s hometown.”

Heartland TV issues a call to actually see such “ordinary,” “obvious,” “common sense” regional representation as integral to national discourse. What is at stake here is not a privileging or revaluing of dominant cultural practices, but, rather, a call to make visible their active construction and function in the re-iteration of “national interest” as it is energized and revised through regional appeals. It is a challenge to consider how, historically, we consistently resist the possibility to think differently with regard to regional mythology and the politics of place. This book asks readers to consider that common TV industry and popular press terms such as “flyover” have real social power. This term, for example, encourages a lack of awareness of the diverse, underrepresented populations and real social and economic needs that exist in the Midwest. It also encourages the notion that, within national media discourse, the Midwest can continue to function as a ritually reinvigorated place-holder for ideologically powerful, politically resonant investments that often run contrary to actual regional affiliations and needs. As reports of the Center for Rural Strategies have recently noted, the diverse populations of the Midwest (particularly Native Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans, and Asian/Pacific Islanders) are woefully underrepresented in popular and political discourse. Additionally, though “only 1.78 percent of rural residents earn their primary living from the farm” nonetheless, “a recent national survey by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation showed an overwhelming perception across the country that agriculture is the dominant industry of rural America” with the Midwest being the home to the majority of the nation’s rural population. Such misperception is significant particularly in a neo-network and new media era which threatens to reinscribe historically uneven access to technology and corresponding limits to the representational imagination.

From 2000 to the present, “divided nation” rhetoric has been invigorated and expanded in popular discourse. The frequency, ease, and gen-
generally unquestioned adoption of this rhetoric largely inspires the work of this book—particularly, as these “simple” assumptions about cultural and political difference have been explicitly significant to network expansion, industry policy, promotion, and program practices, and presumptions about television’s audience as a market entity with variable economic, social, and political capital. As James Shortridge has observed, regional mythologies are powerful because “we seem to need to believe that places exist with certain characteristics and, so needing, we will such places into existence.” The text that follows examines the tenacity of this will and the variable cultural needs that the Heartland myth addresses as a mythology “so persistent and so appealing, even among people who ‘know’ differently.” While *Heartland TV* examines historic tensions regarding place-identity and national values specific to the United States, the struggles it points to and the questions it raises enter into dialogue with contemporary discussions of community, nation, and media in a broadly international context. Though the case-studies featured in the following chapters are by no means all-inclusive of the nationally televised programs that imagine the Heartland, it is hoped that the included analyses will encourage further study and might suggest new questions about and approaches to television history and the regional imagination.