

RUST BELT AESTHETICS

TOWARD RUST BELT AESTHETICS: EXPLORING THE CULTURAL PROJECTS
OF THE DEINDUSTRIALIZED U.S. MIDWEST

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Abstract

This thesis establishes the concept of Rust Belt aesthetics, a term for the artistic and cultural narratives that define, analyze, critique, or otherwise describe the deindustrialized U.S. Midwest, a region commonly referred to as the Rust Belt. This thesis explores how aesthetic projects re-present the experience of deindustrialization. The locus of this analysis is the region, and the thesis argues that the region operates as a discursive device that can mediate between and through other spatial “levels,” like the local or the global. Rust Belt aesthetics emerge from a moment of regional, national, and global transformations, and these aesthetics can construct the region to various political ends. The thesis analyzes aesthetics projects like advertisements, literature, and visual art in order to provide insight into the shifting economic, cultural, and social forces at play in the region and beyond. The goal of my analysis is not to arrive at a static definition of Rust Belt aesthetics. Instead, I hope to understand how aesthetic projects from and about the region communicate specific narratives about the Rust Belt, often through the lens of critical regionalism and the everyday life of the working class.

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Declaration of Academic Achievement

I developed this research project in conversation with my supervisor, Mary O'Connor. Nonetheless, this thesis represents original research that I conducted. I performed the scholarly synthesis, archival selection, and analysis. The thesis was prepared with editorial advice from Prof. O'Connor, as well as other members of my committee. Any errors herein remain my own. Versions of these chapters have been presented at academic conferences.

Foreword: Antiquing in the Rust Belt: Thoughts on a Beginning

Years ago, I lived in Ypsilanti, a small city in Michigan between Detroit and Ann Arbor. The people of Ypsilanti would never consider themselves a suburb of either city, and their independent tone was a hallmark of the community: a little rusted like Detroit; a little yuppie like Ann Arbor; not quite either. During World War II, the city had been home to the Willow Run manufacturing plant, where Ford established a site to manufacture war machinery, including the B-24 heavy bomber. The manufacturing plant was a mammoth 67-acres, and at its peak, it employed more than 42,000 workers (Peterson xiii-1). After the war's end, the plant was first purchased by the short-lived automobile manufacturer Kaiser Motive. Then, in 1953, it was purchased by General Motors. Production dwindled to almost nothing over the next decades, and, soon after GM's 2009 bankruptcy, the plant was completely shut down (Peterson). Such a narrative retells the dramatic rise and fall of manufacturing centres, and many cities across Michigan and the Rust Belt have similar stories to tell.

I had moved to Michigan from Pittsburgh—a city with its own deindustrial narrative to tell—and I eventually found an apartment in Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town. The neighbourhood was named for the train depot that no longer operated, train service having been discontinued years earlier. The neighbourhood, though, kept up a charming, even hip, appearance. In the small business district, the façades of the three-story row buildings were each painted in bright colours, and the shops and restaurants appealed to a unique clientele. There was a vegan-friendly café; an edgy tattoo parlour; a

coffee shop and motorcycle repair shop housed together; an Oprah-famous restaurant; and a food cooperative. There was also a small, over-priced antique store.

I had never gone into the antique store before, but, one day in late autumn, I was wandering around the neighbourhood without much direction and decided to go in. It smelled like lemon furniture polish, as if someone had worked hard to rub out the smell of musty cabinets. Almost immediately, I was drawn to a small copper tray. It was tarnished, but I thought it would be perfect as a serving platter for my two cats—a ridiculous luxury I recognize now, for them and for me. I picked it up, eyeing the only other customer in the store. It was heavier than I expected, and I set it down on the counter. The store proprietor sat behind the register atop a high wooden stool.

“I’ll take this,” I said. “But I’m still looking around.”

The proprietor had curly, black hair that fell to just below her ears. She sat with perfect posture, and she wore bright, fresh clothing that stood out from the dark mahoganies of the antique furniture that surrounded her. She picked up the tray as I walked away from her to continue browsing. At first, it seemed she had decided against saying anything to me. Then, when I turned my back to get a better look at a hanging mirror that was leaned against the wall, she called, “I hope you aren’t just buying it for scrap.”

In economically depressed Southeast Michigan, it had become commonplace to hear about stripping copper from places to sell for quick cash. Known as “copper pirates,” people would strip copper from the pipes of old homes and abandoned buildings. Then, there were reports that copper had been stolen from church rooftops and

even cemeteries (Derringer). In the documentary film *Detropia*, a moving film that documents Detroit's contemporary culture, there is a moment when Crystal Starr, an urban explorer and Detroit blogger, explores an abandoned building. While inside, she sees that a hole has been ripped into one of the interior walls. "It's amazing where you see they just ripped the wall out because there's copper piping right there," she says. Standing there looking into the antique mirror, the thought of scrapping the copper tray hadn't occurred to me.

"No," I said. "It's for my cats."

This did not make the proprietor any happier.

As I continued to browse, I stumbled upon an old book written about Pennsylvania (Bailey). It was a schoolbook, one in a series on all fifty states, and, with the memory of Pittsburgh's shuttered mills still fresh in my mind, I was immediately drawn to it. It felt like there was a secret between me and the book, both outsiders in Michigan. I flipped through the pages; the musty smell of the old, rarely opened book overtook the scent of lemon Pledge, and I flipped through the pages, fuelling my homesickness.

The book was published in 1950, and it celebrated an image of Pennsylvania long since dismissed as passé at best and embarrassing at worst. Eschewing the images we might expect from a 21st-century book on such a topic—images like the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania, the picturesque shores of Lake Erie, the national historic sites like Independence Hall or Valley Forge, or the modernist city skylines of both Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—the book opts for an alternative cover. Men in hard hats populate the

cover page, milling about against the backdrop of smokestacks. Smoke billows from the smokestacks, encircling the labourers and the place they occupy. The background is a pale yellowish pink, mimicking the polluted clouds that hung over the industrial sites of the state. In historical context, the image connotes hard work, success, rationality, stability, and predictability—in short, modernity. Fifty years later, however, the image resonated quite differently with me: the pinkish hue and billowing smoke suggestive only of environmental degradation; the smokestacks only rusted husks erased from the landscape; and the labourers were memories, almost ghostlike.

Reading the text, it'd be hard not to see the imprint of ideology in this schoolbook. Of the state's early history, the text discusses the unused lands, left barren by the "Indians." It paints white settlers as benevolent. The book details the ingenuity of immigrants, their willingness to assimilate, and the strength of the state's industrialization. Above all, the text promotes the unquestioned greatness of the nation in general, and Pennsylvania in particular. *It isn't nicknamed the Keystone State for nothing*, the book seems to imply. The book is nothing more than a story told about the state; it is a narrative that tells where the region has come from, and where the region should go.

When I brought it to the register, the proprietor asked, "Only one?" I told her yes, and she rang me up, a bit frustrated that she hadn't the foresight to sell the fifty books as one complete set. And, to be sure, she was still a bit miffed that my cats would be eating Fancy Feast off of an overly ornate copper tray. I was happy with my treasures, both different sorts of pieces of the Rust Belt.

As I walked home, though, I realized the various narratives I carried with me in these everyday items, narratives about the Rust Belt region where I had spent my entire life. Narratives about the working class, industrialization, and Manifest Destiny all fit neatly between the pages of this history book. Furthermore, even the ostentatious gift I was bringing home to my cats encapsulated other narratives about poverty and deindustrialization—the copper stripping certainly a desperate response to the plight of unemployment. Everywhere, then, I started to see other narratives about the region that I was all too willing to accept, like the trendy block appealing to my middle class taste or the inevitability of Detroit’s downfall, or, even more hopefully, the (seeming) inevitability of Detroit’s – and indeed the region’s – renaissance, after just one more development. Any day now.

This accident of everyday life—this meandering into an over-priced antique shop—led me down my current path of inquiry. Through this inquiry, I’ve come to call the narratives about the region “Rust Belt aesthetics.” Much like the Pennsylvania history book, the aesthetic projects that follow are narratives about what the Rust Belt was, what it is, and what it can become.

Introduction: Toward Rust Belt Aesthetics

1. Defining Rust Belt Aesthetics

Rust Belt aesthetics is the term I've given to artistic and cultural narratives that define, analyze, critique, or otherwise describe the deindustrialized U.S. Midwest, a region commonly referred to as the Rust Belt. This thesis explores how aesthetic projects re-present the experience of deindustrialization. As will become apparent throughout, Rust Belt aesthetics necessarily engages with questions of spatial politics. Therefore, the locus of my analysis is the region, but a regional focus is not necessarily myopic or parochial. On the contrary, the region operates as a discursive device that can mediate between and through other spatial "levels," like the local or the global. Through a specific focus on the Rust Belt region, I explicate Rust Belt aesthetics in order to better understand how aesthetic projects can construct the region to various (political) ends. I contend that Rust Belt aesthetics emerge from a moment of regional, national, and global transformation. Therefore, the aesthetic projects I explore provide insight into the shifting economic, cultural, and social forces at play in the region and beyond.

The goal of my analysis is not to arrive at a static definition of Rust Belt aesthetics. Instead, I hope to understand how aesthetic projects from and about the region communicate specific narratives about the Rust Belt, often through the lens of critical regionalism and the everyday life of the working class. The narratives I discuss vary along a continuum, from describing bleak circumstances of urban ruin and devastation to celebrating a citywide renaissance. At the one extreme, we might say that Rust Belt aesthetics depict ways for the working class to employ the material of the everyday to

critically reimagine their place in the Rust Belt; on the other, we could say that Rust Belt aesthetics can employ, objectify, and depoliticize the everyday lives of the working class in order to recreate the region as a place of capitalist accumulation. It may come as no surprise that the most interesting and productive narratives resist either extreme and exist somewhere closer to the middle. These disparate and multi-vocal components of Rust Belt aesthetics can perhaps best be understood in terms of Gramsci's "terrain of the conjunctural."

Antonio Gramsci develops the idea of the conjuncture as a historical rupture. He argues that a sustained crisis for hegemony "means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves...and...the political forces...struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure...are making every effort to cure them...These incessant and persistent efforts form the terrain of the 'conjunctural,' and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize" (201). Gramsci is writing while in prison between 1929 and 1935, when these shifts may have seemed more drastic and immediate as Europe faced the rise of fascism. However, the conditions of the deindustrialized U.S. Midwest can be understood in similar terms, as the "incurable structural contradictions" of industrial capitalism revealed themselves clearly through the very destructive realities of deindustrialization. In this thesis, I focus on the aesthetic projects that emerge out of the "terrain of the 'conjunctural.'" I will demonstrate how Rust Belt aesthetics emerge from the sustained crisis of deindustrialization to both reassert hegemony's control and institute a new, oppositional organization. That is to say, Rust Belt aesthetics do not

adhere to one single ideology but rather demonstrate the conflicting realities that deindustrialization has imposed on the region.

In order to explicate Rust Belt aesthetics, I will first provide a brief outline of the geography of the Rust Belt region. I will draw on the photography collection *Portraits in Steel* to provide an example of Rust Belt aesthetics to help ground our conversation. Having established an example, I will then proceed to a brief historical overview of the region, establishing it as a palimpsestic place. Then, I will describe the interdisciplinary methodology employed in this thesis, drawing on scholars working in the broadly defined field of cultural studies, including disciplines like aesthetic theory, cultural geography, working class studies, and everyday life theory. After establishing this methodology, I will outline how the remainder of the thesis will proceed. Throughout, I will return to Gramsci's "terrain of the conjunctural" as something of an organizing theoretical lens through which to consider Rust Belt aesthetics.

2. Where are we going?: A Geographic Overview of the Rust Belt

Gramsci's "terrain of the conjunctural" operates as a spatial metaphor, emphasizing the spatial and geographic elements—the "terrain"—of ideological tensions between hegemonic and revolutionary forces. Indeed, Rust Belt aesthetics are very much tied to geography, emerging from the deindustrialized U.S. Midwest, colloquially referred to as the Rust Belt region. Though the region's boundaries are somewhat malleable, it is largely understood as co-terminus with the U.S. Great Lakes region (see Figure 1). The region includes major urban centres, small cities, and rural areas. Its eastern boundary is typically understood as the Buffalo and Pittsburgh areas; St. Louis

acts as its southernmost designation, and Milwaukee its westernmost. The Great Lakes and the Canadian border are the region's northern limit.¹ Though included within the geographic borders, Chicago is less often considered a Rust Belt city, attributable to its more diverse economy and position as the cultural and economic centre of the Midwest. Excluding Chicago demonstrates how regional identities function ideologically and not purely geographically, a point to which we will return. In addition, Chicago's exclusion gives Detroit the infamous title as the region's largest city, and, indeed, its most internationally recognizable. This region forms the geographic base for my conceptualization of Rust Belt aesthetics.

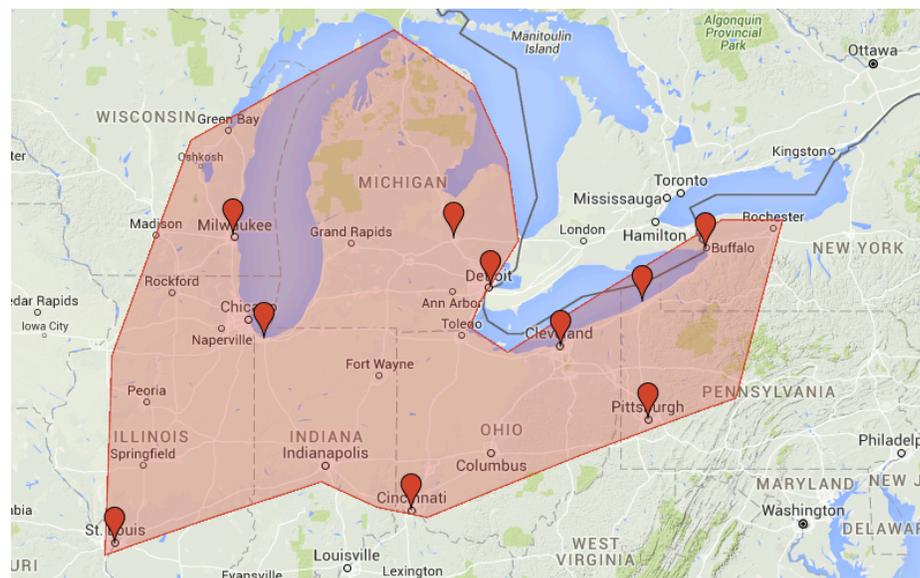


Figure 1. The U.S. Rust Belt with principle cities. Map created by author using Google Maps.

1. Canadian cities like Windsor, Hamilton, and Oshawa could be considered part of this regional identity in many ways. I follow Steven High, who distinguishes between the U.S. and Canadian contexts in his text *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt*. With different labour histories, different national responses to deindustrialization, and different cultural manifestations, these regions have proven to be a productive comparative study in High's work.

3. *Setting the Stage: A Guiding Example from Portraits in Steel*

In order to explicate Rust Belt aesthetics, it may be helpful to establish an example to guide our discussion. *Portraits in Steel* is a collaborative project between photographer Milton Rogovin and historian Michael Frisch. In the 1970s, Rogovin photographed steel mill workers in the Buffalo, NY area. He photographed the workers both on the job and at home, often with their families. Though not as robust as earlier in the twentieth century, Buffalo's steel mills were still major sources of employment in the region in the 1970s. Therefore, this project predates the massive unemployment and plant closings that followed shortly after in the early 1980s. Following the initial wave of deindustrialization, Rogovin and Frisch teamed up to return to the labourers whom Rogovin had photographed earlier. Rogovin photographed the workers only at their homes for this edition, since steel production had all but ceased in Buffalo and none of the subjects were employed in the steel mills. In addition to Rogovin's photographs, Frisch conducted oral histories with the photographs' subjects. *Portraits in Steel* provides both the photographs and a select group of oral histories.

By something of an accident, then, Rogovin's initial photographs—meant to present the work and domestic life of steel mill employees, thus analyzing (and perhaps challenging) the common separation between labour and leisure—enabled a documentary look at the changing economic and social landscape of the Rust Belt. In many ways, the photographs and interviews provide glimpses onto Gramsci's "terrain of the 'conjunctural'" just as it is beginning to surface in the Rust Belt. For example, in the interview with Mark and Lynn Cieslica, a married couple from Lackawanna just south of

Buffalo, Lynn comments on the general conditions after Mark lost his job in the steel mill. She says that “it wasn’t just losing the job in the steel industry, but your entire life, maybe your whole city. The place that you grew up in was going to be gone” (167). Lynn articulates the anxiety that Gramsci’s “terrain of the ‘conjunctural’” indicates. The failure of the steel mill revealed an “incurable structural contradiction” between the needs of labourers and the economic interests of the factory owners. In particular, it demonstrated that the Lackawanna community could no longer rely on steel mills to power their local economy. This anxiety extends beyond the immediate aftermath of unemployment—as serious as that is—and to broader considerations about an individual’s daily life and the sustainability of entire communities.

The Cieslica photographs and interview provide an interesting focal point as we move through the introduction. There are three photographs in the series (see Figures 2, 3, 4). The first two were taken in 1978 or 1979, and the final one was taken in the mid 1980s. The first photograph depicts Mark and another man sitting at a table in what appears to be the lunchroom at the steel mill. The men are dressed in heavy coats that protected them from the fire and heat of their jobs. They both wear tight white stocking caps, and Mark has a pair of goggles resting on his brow. On the table, there is a lunch pail, a brown paper lunch bag, a thermos, a paper cup, and a large metal thermos. Scrawled on the cinder block walls are the words “Monkey House.”



Figure 2. “Untitled,” Working People series, Shenango Ingot Molds, 1976-1987. Photograph by Milton Rogovin (1909-2011). Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona Archive. For more information, www.MiltonRogovin.com.

The next two photographs are of the family at home, one from the late 1970s and the other from the 1980s. The earlier photograph shows Mark at home with Lynn and their two young daughters. No longer wearing the hat, Mark’s long curly hair is now obvious. The family sits on the sofa, with the eldest daughter on Mark’s lap and the younger on Lynn’s. They all smile, though Mark’s smile is somewhat understated. There

are photographs of the girls on the wall, and the home is decorated modestly. The later photograph was taken at Christmastime, and the family stands in front of their Christmas tree and cardboard decorative hearth. The daughters are now young teenagers and, though they are standing, the order from the earlier photograph is repeated, so the eldest daughter is next to Mark and the youngest next to Lynn. Though Lynn and the daughters smile in this final photograph, it is difficult to make out Mark's smile, if it is there at all.

This collection is an example of Rust Belt aesthetics because it re-presents everyday life and creates a narrative about the experiences and the place of deindustrialization. In the photographs, this is apparent in the movement from work to home, where Rogovin connects these two distinct spheres. In doing so, he opens a continuum between the two that enables a more expansive vision of Mark and Lynn's world, and, in turn, the broader space of the Buffalo region. This also comes through in the interview. In the end, Lynn tells how she and Mark try to avoid looking at the site where the Shenango Steel Mill used to be, the mill where Mark worked. Sometimes, she says, the children will say "from the back seat, 'Mommy, wasn't that Shenango?' And you look at each other and it's like, 'Yeah! That's where Daddy *used* to work[.]' [...Y]ou don't want to look that way...it's in the past and leave it there" (177). Here, Lynn overlaps place and time, describing the site of the mill—a geographic place—with a historic marker—"in the past." The legacy and struggles of the working class become engraved into the region's landscape, even after the mill had been torn down. Rust Belt aesthetics can be attentive to these legacies that are written onto the terrain, giving voice and depth to places and people that are often silenced or erased.



Figure 3. "Untitled," Working People series, Shenango Ingot Molds, 1976-1987. Photograph by Milton Rogovin (1909-2011). Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona Archive. For more information, www.MiltonRogovin.com.



Figure 4. “Untitled,” Working People series, Shenango Ingot Molds, 1976-1987. Photograph by Milton Rogovin (1909-2011). Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona Archive. For more information, www.MiltonRogovin.com.

Lynn and Mark’s narrative about the effects of deindustrialization begins with Mark’s unexpected unemployment from Shenango Steel Mill. At Shenango, Mark worked as a “post-mill operator.” In that position, he was responsible for “cut[ting] the

bottoms and the tops of the molds down to size, so when they would pour the steel into them at the steel plants...it wouldn't run out" (149). In the oral history, Mark recalls how he had grown accustomed to being laid off at the end of each year. Explaining it to Frisch, Mark says that he believed "the company just didn't want to get stuck with a lot of things at the end of the year" (160). Around October or November of each year, Mark would inevitably be laid off while Shenango sold off its accumulated stock. Then, by January or February, Mark and the other employees would return to full-time work. Although not an ideal arrangement, Mark had come to see it as "an extended vacation" (160). However, when he was laid off in October 1979, he was never called back. As Mark described it, the company seemed unwilling to close the plant down officially because it would have owed the workers severance pay. Eventually, through lengthy legal battles, the workers did receive their severance pay, but not until 1983. However, the payment "didn't help all the feelings...and all the problems it brought around between the guys and the company" (161). Despite searching for other work, Mark, like many former steelworkers, remained chronically unemployed.

4. From the Northwest Territory to the Rust Belt: A Brief History of the Region

While versions of Mark's story were repeated over and over throughout the region during the 1970s and 1980s, the history of the Rust Belt begins much earlier. The historical narrative of the Rust Belt region, like most regions, is a complex palimpsest, with the space taking on various meanings and legacies. In addition to the more recent narratives of industrialization and deindustrialization, the region has an incredible legacy of indigenous histories, competing colonial powers, and pre-Civil War tensions.

In the late 18th century, the new United States Congress of the Confederation officially called the region “Territory Northwest of the Ohio River,” or simply the Northwest Territory (Beatty-Medina and Rinehart xiii). It comprised most of what is now referred to as the Rust Belt: western New York and Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and southern Michigan. The region was a critical site at the intersection of multiple cultures and empires. New France, British America, and the United States competed as imperial powers in the region against each other and the interests of a diverse group of Native American communities: Ottawas, Ojibwas, Hurons, Senecas, Lenapes, Shawnees and others. Scholars have argued that in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Northwest Territory “formed a space between cultures and peoples that mediated everything from daily interactions to formalized diplomatic relations” (xiv). These daily interactions between multi-ethnic groups resulted in part from the forced displacement wrought by European expansion.

The displacement of indigenous peoples both into and out of the Northwest Territories greatly impacted the region. In Michael McConnell’s *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio Valley and Its Peoples, 1724-1774*, he demonstrates how indigenous communities from the Delaware nation were forced westward as European settlers colonized the North American east coast, establishing cities like Philadelphia. Simultaneously, the Iroquois also grew increasingly oriented to the south and west, an orientation that resulted from a series of wars with New France over the flow of pelts from the west. McConnell goes on to argue that these indigenous communities migrated to the Northwest Territory. The multi-ethnic migration into the region resulted in “a

growing collective identity with the upper Ohio Valley, at once rooted in the localized dynamics of Indian societies, the natives' locales, and the challenges they ultimately faced from ambitious outsiders" (20). In other words, these diverse indigenous communities created an identity rooted largely in their geographic proximity and the cultural, social, and historical forces that affected and were affected by that proximity. What's more, the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, signed in 1768 between the British and representatives of the Iroquois Confederacy, redrew the original boundary line between the colonies and indigenous lands, including the lands of the Ohio River Valley. The newly drawn borderline is effectively coterminous with the unofficial borderline of the present-day Rust Belt (McConnell 249). The cultural and social cohesion among multiple indigenous groups became reflected in the geographic border.

In demarcating and legislating the new Northwest Territory, the United States federal government was faced with the question of slavery. Writing in the late 18th century under the Articles of Confederation, the Northwest Ordinance included one of the earliest examples of the federal government directly restricting slavery. Known as Article VI, it read in part that "there shall be neither slavery nor voluntary servitude in the said territory...provided always, that any person escaping into the [Northwest Territory]...may be lawfully reclaimed" (qtd in Finkelman). At its formation, then, the Northwest Territory was legally ambiguous to the "peculiar institution" of slavery. While technically outlawed, enslaved people could not find freedom in the region—a legal condition codified further in the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, which permitted slave owners to reclaim escaped slaves even in free states and territories. As historian Paul Finkelman

puts it, “the ideals of liberty came into conflict with the selfish happiness of the ruling race” (360). The affects of this ordinance were dramatized in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. The Ohio River, which originates in Pittsburgh and forms the southern border of the state of Ohio, operated as a natural, political, and cultural barrier between the slave-holding states of the American South and the free North. In *Beloved*, Sethe crosses the river and resides in Cincinnati, a port city along the Ohio, ultimately killing her daughter when threatened with a return to slavery. The Ohio River became known to enslaved Africans as the River Jordan, gesturing to the biblical relationship between that river and the Promised Land. Importantly, though, the Ohio River also served as a channel for funnelling people to the slave markets of the deep south. As much as it stood for freedom, it also carried with it the possibility of enslavement (Griffler 16). Despite the rhetoric of “slave state” and “free state,” the reality of life for African Americans in the North was equally brutal as in the southern, slave-holding states. Racism was virulent in the North and, following the end of the Civil War, the flow of emancipated Blacks to Northern cities exacerbated racial tensions.

These historical legacies intertwine in place, recreating and rewriting the region in various ways. At the moment that the Old Northwest Territory comes to be incorporated into the nation, many different ethnic, racial, and class groups occupy the space. Many times, the diverse groups live side by side peacefully; other times, there are moments of tension and even violence. For our present purposes, this rich legacy demonstrates a few key points. First, the geographic space begins to be seen as a coherent region, even if diverse. In the early days of the new United States, the geographic space of the

“Northwest Territory” was established, and it started taking on a cultural and social identity as different groups migrated into the territory. The establishment of a place-based identity by displaced indigenous peoples and the social, political, and cultural distinction made between free territories and slave territories both demonstrate the increasing emphasis on this region as coherent, geographically as well as culturally. Second, the ethnic, racial, and class identities of the region were very much implicated in the question of American national identity. Consider for example the issue of slavery in the Northwest Territory: it was effectively a question about the future course of the nation as a whole. Of course, the question of slavery in newly acquired territories was a common concern during the United States’ imperial expansion. However, because the question was considered a regional concern, it demonstrates in this case the imagined coherence of the region *and* its integral relationship to questions of national identity and belonging. This serves as a major theme throughout the thesis. In the 21st century, Rust Belt aesthetics are often concerned with claims on American national identity, and we might connect such concerns to this palimpsestic reading of the region and its legacy as the Old Northwest Territory.

The metaphor of the palimpsest is a useful one in analyzing the historical legacies of the region and how those legacies permeate still today. Through the palimpsest metaphor, it is possible to read the regional relationship to questions of class, race, ethnicity, and national identity across time and through space. In Chapter 3, I take up a sustained analysis of the palimpsest and its manifestation in Rust Belt literature and photography. As I argue there, the palimpsest reconnects issues—like indigenous land

claims and working class struggles—that are mostly severed in popular imagination. In other words, the after effects of industrialization become reconnected to these historical legacies.

In the 19th century, the Northwest Territory was more formally included into the United States through statehood,² and the region emerged as a centre for industry and manufacturing. By 1860, the industrial geographic capacity of North America had expanded from its “beginnings in Atlantic coast states to cover an area marked by Minneapolis and St. Louis in the west, Toronto and Montreal in the north, and Louisville and Cincinnati in the south” (Winder 72). Because of this political, economic, and social change, the region became known as the Manufacturing Belt. This geographic expanse, roughly co-terminus with the North American Great Lakes region, depended upon manufacturing networks to provide raw material and to distribute finished goods. Multiple explanations for the region’s economic and social development exist.³ For example, economic geographer Gordon Winder argues that 19th century “manufacturers

2. The Northwest Territory was eventually separated into five Midwestern states: Ohio (1803); Indiana (1816); Illinois (1818); Michigan (1837); and Wisconsin (1848) (“Northwest Territory”).

3. For example, in David R. Meyer’s “Midwestern Industrialization and the American Manufacturing Belt in the Nineteenth Century,” he argues that “[t]he Midwest industrialized significantly during the 1860s, far outpacing the eastern sections. Its share of the nation's manufacturing increased dramatically between 1860 and 1920, with almost half of this increase occurring in the 1860s. Within the belt the greatest increase in relative importance of the Midwest also was in the 1860s” (923). For alternate interpretations about the industrialization of the Midwest, see also Meyer, “Emergence of the American manufacturing belt: an interpretation”; Paul Krugman, “History and Industry Location: The Case of the Manufacturing Belt”; and Philip Scranton, “Multiple Industrializations: Urban Manufacturing Development in the American Midwest, 1880-1925.”

built and participated in extensive disintegrated networks...the North American Manufacturing Belt is best conceived as a manifestation of these early linkages” (89). In other words, Winder identifies how multiple manufacturing companies worked to create a single product, a development that would become the backbone of the Manufacturing Belt. Winder gives the example of a Troy, NY company that manufactured stoves: the company required wooden molds to be constructed by another manufacturer, and the iron was obtained from another firm. In other words, the firm required an extensive network of suppliers and dealers in order to produce and sell goods. Winder traces a number of these networks, indicating the multi-pronged paths that raw materials, interim products, and finished goods travelled. These networks helped to establish a sense of connectivity, both geographically and socially. In addition, the networks between manufacturers helped to establish the Midwest as a key location of the American manufacturing sector.

Because of this early industrial development, cities like Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit were established as important manufacturing sites by the beginning of the 20th century. Changes in urban population throughout the 20th century tell part of the story, as northern industrial centres grew dramatically from a surge of southern Blacks, white Appalachians, and international immigrants, primarily from southern and eastern Europe (see Figure 5 and Figure 6). For example, in 1900 Detroit’s population was 285,704; by 1920, it had tripled to 993,678. In Buffalo, the 1900 population was 352,387, and by 1920 it had increased dramatically to 506,775 (U.S. Census). These population increases, fueled by the promise of steady employment, continued until mid-century, when most of the cities in the Industrial Midwest hit their

peak populations (See Figure 5 and Figure 6). In 1950, for example, Detroit's population peaked at 1.8 million, and Buffalo's population peaked at 580,132 (U.S. Census). At that time, 225,000 people were employed in manufacturing in or near Buffalo, accounting for about half of the city's entire population (Rogovin and Frisch 5). Such a trend was indicative of the region at large.

The increase in diverse populations brought significant racial and ethnic tension to many northern, industrial cities. Race and ethnic riots occurred throughout the region, demonstrating the limits of the American Dream to certain ethnic and racial groups. Perhaps no city in the region was as volatile as Detroit, though. As a cornerstone of the American Dream, home ownership was often heavily policed by neighbourhood organizations, restrictive covenants, and, when all else failed, violence. Ossian Sweet was a Detroit resident who had migrated to the city from the South, and his story was the stuff of a quintessential American Dream tale: the son of a former slave, he worked his way through school to become a prominent physician in a major American city—one of the few rags-to-riches narratives that circulate in the U.S. primarily as myths. Sweet was African American, and he fought discrimination throughout his life. In the early 1920s, Sweet purchased a home in a white neighbourhood in Detroit. His neighbours were extremely angry that he had crossed the racial boundary, and a mob formed outside his home threatening him and his family. Inside the home, Sweet had assembled a small group of family and friends to help calm his nerves and, if necessary, protect his home. As the mob intensified and rocks were thrown at the home, shots were fired from inside the house into the crowd, killing one white man and injuring another. Sweet and his

friends and family were eventually acquitted of murder (Boyle). Sweet's story highlights the racist underpinnings of the American Dream, where homeownership is afforded only to certain populations. Sweet could not be allowed his achievement, because such an achievement was understood as the purview of an "American," properly understood as middle class *and* white. In this example, we see how the American Dream acts as a predetermined definition of an American identity, and not the goal of hard work and achievement. Even during the economic boom of the war years, these racial tensions

persisted.

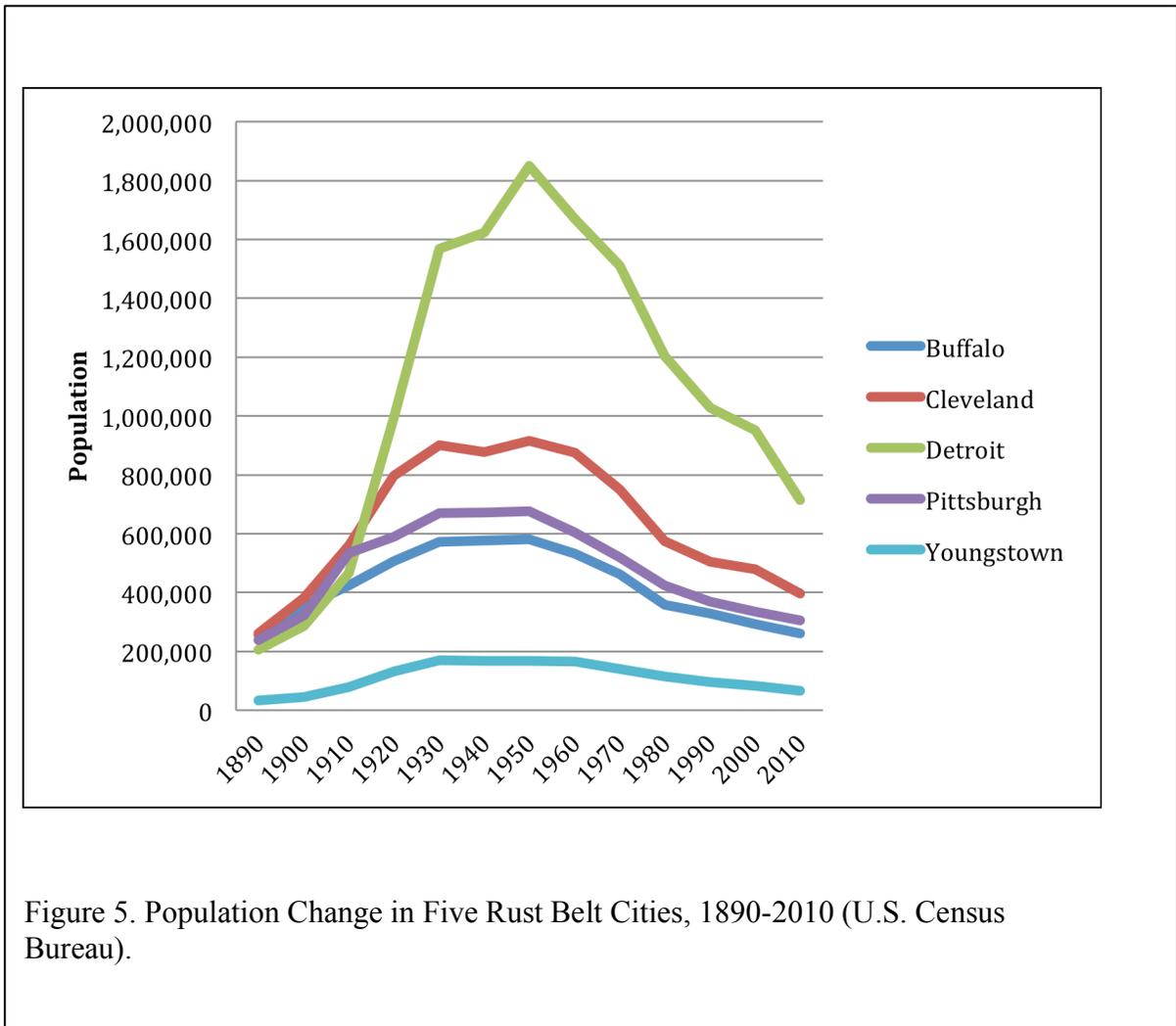


Figure 5. Population Change in Five Rust Belt Cities, 1890-2010 (U.S. Census Bureau).

	Buffalo	Cleveland	Detroit	Pittsburgh	Youngstown
1890	255,664	261,353	205,876	238,617	33,220
% change	-	-	-	-	-
1900	352,387	381,768	285,704	321,616	44,885
% change	38%	46%	39%	35%	35%
1910	423,715	560,663	465,766	533,905	79,066
% change	17%	32%	39%	40%	43%
1920	506,775	796,841	993,078	588,343	132,358
% change	16%	30%	53%	9%	40%
1930	573,076	900,429	1,568,662	669,817	170,002
% change	12%	12%	37%	12%	22%
1940	575,901	878,336	1,623,452	671,659	167,720
% change	0.5%	-3%	3%	0.3%	-1%
1950	580,132	914,808	1,849,568	676,806	168,330
% change	1%	4%	12%	1%	0%
1960	532,759	876,050	1,670,144	604,332	166,689
% change	-9%	-4%	-11%	-12%	-1%
1970	462,768	750,903	1,511,482	520,117	140,909
% change	-15%	-17%	-10%	-16%	-18%
1980	357,870	573,822	1,203,339	423,938	115,511
% change	-29%	-31%	-26%	-23%	-22%
1990	328,123	505,616	1,027,974	369,879	95,732
% change	-9%	-13%	-17%	-15%	-21%
2000	292,648	478,403	951,270	334,563	82,026
% change	-12%	-6%	-8%	-11%	-17%
2010	261,310	396,815	713,777	305,704	66,982
% change	-12%	-21%	-33%	-9%	-22%

Figure 6. Population change in five Rust Belt cities, 1890-2010 (U.S. Census Bureau).

Racial tensions could be felt even as economic fortunes seemed to turn-around in the 1940s. After the Depression years when wages were stagnant and employment more difficult to find, Rust Belt cities saw an economic boom in the 1940s. Again, Detroit is

both representative and exemplary in this regard. Between 1940 and 1947, employment in Detroit's manufacturing sector increased by 40 percent, the most of any Manufacturing Belt city. The demand for wartime manufacturing led to a significant decline in the city's unemployment, from 135,000 in 1940 to only 4,000 three years later (Sugrue *Origins* 19). Indeed, Detroit was such a critical site for America's wartime production that it was nicknamed "the arsenal of democracy" (19). At the time, the perception was that the city and the region was in the midst of a broad economic boom.

However, the economic boom of the post-war years masked the shift in social and economic forces of the Industrial Midwest, and indeed the nation. Thomas Sugrue's seminal *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* traces the roots of Midwestern deindustrialization to the period of American history most often characterized by economic growth. During the 1950s, industrial employers actually began cutting factory jobs. It is during this period that many manufacturers began relocating to the southern U.S. or into international markets. In addition to these economic concerns, the social fabric of the region was changing as African Americans continued migrating to northern industrial cities. Arriving in large numbers in the post war years, African Americans found the promise of northern opportunity to be largely a dream. Met with virulent racism, Black migrants were often hit hardest by the economic uncertainties of the post-war Industrial Belt. In the turbulent 1960s, these racial and class tensions were exacerbated, largely by the growing economic inequality and racial segregation of Rust Belt cities (Sugrue 1-14). The 1967 riot in Detroit serves as perhaps the most well known example of how this tension erupted. Following the arrest of eighty-five people in an

illegal afterhours saloon in the city's Black neighbourhood, people rioted throughout the city. After five days of violence, forty-three people were killed, thirty by police personnel (Sugrue 259-60). The racial tensions that existed earlier in the 1920s as evidenced by Ossian Sweet's case were heightened during this late 1960s summer.

Not unlike the legacy of indigenous displacement, the 20th century racial unrest can be largely understood as resistance to claims on American national identity. As the “arsenal of democracy,” Detroit came to be imagined as quintessentially American—the city of hard-workers dedicated to an American victory against fascism. Therefore, claims on a “Detroit” identity were simultaneously claims on what it means to be American. In the 1960s racial tempest that existed across America, Black Detroiters staked a claim on American national identity through a claim on urban space. This threatened the presumed normativity of a white middle class as the model for American-ness. Deindustrialization would once again challenge this presumed connection between the white worker and American national identity.

Racial tensions and economic turmoil were not unique to Detroit. All across the Rust Belt, cities faced tensions wrought by what Sugrue identifies as “two of the most important, interrelated, and unresolved problems in American history: that capitalism generates economic inequality and that African Americans have disproportionately borne the impact of that inequality” (*Origins* 5). By the 1970s, plant closures, layoffs, and job loss were becoming commonplace across the region. In Buffalo, for example, the region lost a third of its manufacturing positions between the late 1970s and early 1980s (Rogovin and Frisch 6). In 1982, the city's unemployment rate peaked at 12.5 percent (6).

A similar struggle occurred in Pittsburgh. There, between 1950 and 1990, the city lost over 200,000 jobs, or two-thirds of its manufacturing sector employment (Deitrick 56). As job opportunities diminished, so did the cities' populations. By 1970, Buffalo had fallen to 462,768 from its 1950 peak of 580,132, and Detroit, which had peaked at 1.8 million, had decreased by 300,000 residents. In the second half of the twentieth century, every major city in the Industrial Midwest experienced population loss, many at a precipitous rate (see Figures 5 and 6).

These circumstances repeated themselves across the country, but they were particularly felt in the former steel and auto towns across the rusting Industrial Belt. According to Steven High, “[t]he number of Americans employed by the steel industry dropped 40 per cent from 1979 to 1984, and 300,000 autoworkers lost their jobs between 1978 and 1982” (*Industrial Sunset* 6). Across the region, entire industries vanished: no more Pittsburgh steel; no more Akron tires (High *Industrial Sunset* 6). In 1982, twelve million Americans were unemployed, driving official unemployment rates in Michigan to 17.2 percent and in Ohio to 14.2 percent (High *Industrial Sunset* 29). Nationwide, one study concluded that “somewhere between 32 and 38 million jobs were lost during the 1970s as a direct result of private disinvestment in American business” (Bluestone and Harrison 9). The harsh realities facing the American worker in this period were staggering. Where industrial networks had once linked the region, now the uncertainty of deindustrialization bound it together: the Manufacturing Belt had rusted.

In the 1980s, the regional moniker “Industrial Belt” shifted to the derisive “Rust Belt.” In Steven High’s 2003 *Industrial Sunset*, he presents the development of the “Rust

Belt” name, writing “the American media began referring to the [economically] devastated Great Lakes states as the Rust Bowl...The Dust Bowl had symbolized dust storm and abandoned farms...The emerging Rust Bowl became associated with...abandoned factories” (29). This regional name soon became supplanted by Rust Belt to draw a contrast with the emerging Sun Belt region in the southern United States, a region with more optimistic prospects and a relatively booming economy in agriculture, aerospace, and energy. At the time of its development, such a name was derogatory. Despite the fact that, as Bluestone and Harrison demonstrate, the problems of plant closures and unemployment were not isolated to the Industrial Belt,⁴ the region became something of a national scapegoat. As High puts it, through the construction of this regional identity, “the problem [of deindustrialization] became imaginatively contained, tied to one place” (High 192). The Rust Belt became rhetorically quarantined from the rest of the United States in an attempt to isolate the problem of deindustrialization, even if only in the national consciousness.

Lynn and Mark Cieslica certainly felt this isolation, made all the more evident by their earlier memories of solidarity and camaraderie. At one point, Mark retells a story about how the “office up front” accused him of intentionally breaking a machine while at work in the mill. The accusation led to him being fired. Then, he says that “[h]alf an hour [after being fired] the whole plant walked out. They had a wildcat because they fired me”

4. Bluestone and Harrison argue that “contrary to popular belief, the deindustrialization process has not been limited to the ‘Frostbelt.’ Almost *half* the jobs lost to plant closings (and relocations) during the 1970s occurred in the Sunbelt states of the South and the West” (9-10).

(155). Later, Lynn references this moment as an example of how the mill families “were like one big family” (166). In addition to the oral history, the initial photograph in the series also indicates a sense of solidarity. Mark sits at the lunchroom table with a co-worker. The two are dressed similarly, down to their white stocking caps. They even offer the camera a similar half-smile. These similarities, however, aren’t conveyed as uniform or standardized. Instead, caught on break, the photograph depicts a moment of relative ease, and the two workers—with easy, subtle smiles and their arms resting on the table— seem to relish in this momentary reprieve from their work.

However, this solidarity evaporated with deindustrialization. Mark comments that “[t]he majority of people are for themselves and that’s it, they don’t want to get involved, you know, when it comes to helping somebody else. Forget it. They usually don’t stick together anymore, the way they used to” (174). Lynn shares a similar sentiment, which is worth quoting at length, as her comment helps demonstrate not only the shifting social and economic terrain of the region, but also how the region was positioned vis-à-vis the nation. She says:

The country does not provide for the people and even for those who want to make an effort to better themselves, the doors keep closing in your face. Industry has just turned around completely, and being a middle-class family we aren’t seeing a lot of what we are reading in the paper—like the computer industry, okay, that might be great for part of the population, but we are not actually living it and touching on it. We are what most people describe as the American people. We are

the hub of America. But yet we aren't actually touching on all these major changes, they aren't touching our lives (173).

Lynn relates a sentiment about being left behind in terms of national progress. While she recognizes the emerging boom of Silicon Valley, she likewise understands that it only pushes her place—and, likewise, the Rust Belt—further afield. What's more, she asserts that “[w]e are the hub of America.” Her meaning here isn't made explicit, but it seems likely that the “we” she refers to is the working class—that is, the blue-collar workers of the Rust Belt. Despite feeling separate from the national imaginary, Lynn holds onto a conception of identity that still understands the Rust Belt as the crucible of American identity.

Part of that claim on the national identity is Lynn's assertion of her and her family as middle-class. After she asserts this class position, Frisch explains an understanding of class divisions different from how Lynn construes them, identifying the working class with blue-collar jobs and the middle class with white-collar jobs. He asks her about why she maintains that her family is middle class despite these definitions he's provided her. Lynn explains that she sees the middle class differently, as a class of people who “have a home, we have food on our table, we've been able to do a few things, [like] vacations...you know, just the basics. That, to me, is middle class. You're here, you're in America” (175). Despite describing a number of instances where money was extremely tight, Lynn identifies herself and her family with the middle class. She claims this important ideological marker because it describes a contributing member of the

community *and* gives her access to a specifically *American* identity. In other words, Lynn understands that in order to be “properly” American one must be middle class.

By the late 1990s, this narrative of national quarantine was being challenged, supported largely by the very same sentiment voiced by Lynn, that the Rust Belt was the hub of the United States. In the 1990s and 2000s, a number of businesses and organizations emerged proudly embracing the Rust Belt identity and re-inventing it. In Youngstown, OH, there emerged the Rust Belt Brewery; in Buffalo, NY, Rust Belt Books; in Ferndale, MI (a working-class suburb of Detroit), the Rust Belt Market. Part boosterism, part local pride, these businesses attempted to capitalize on the image of the Rust Belt and, in fact, they began to reimagine what the Rust Belt was.

In popular culture, too, images of the Rust Belt became more and more common. For example, YouTube served as one avenue to explore the resurgent interest in the Rust Belt. The video series *Pittsburgh Dad* depicts one man speaking in a thick Pittsburgh accent, comically addressing family life, local politics, and sports. At the time of writing, the channel has over 90,000 total subscribers and more than 26 million total views. The star of the series, Curt Wootton, now appears on local television channels, and he has even become embroiled in something of a local scandal when he was caught on tape ridiculing the local NHL team, the Pittsburgh Penguins (Crawley). Another YouTube video earned the creators a spot on their local Cleveland news broadcast. The video “Cleveland Tourism Video,” with over 7 million views, riffs off of local tourist boosterism to comically expose persisting systemic problems (Bishopvids). To an upbeat jingle, the voice sings, “See the poor people all wait for buses... See our river that catches

on fire.” While “Cleveland Tourism” and *Pittsburgh Dad* hardly re-imagine Cleveland or Pittsburgh in terms of the Rust Belt renaissance paradigm, they both do engage in a nostalgic turn. In the case of “Cleveland Tourism,” it also critiques systemic problems, revealing them to a broader audience, with one possible outcome being recourse for corrective action.

Cleveland is also featured in the TV Land sitcom *Hot in Cleveland*, running from 2010-2015. A story of west coast, high-class women who unexpectedly find themselves living in Cleveland, the sitcom’s running joke depends upon the perceived chasm between the L.A. and the Cleveland lifestyles. In the pilot episode, for example, the women are flying from L.A. to Paris when an emergency forces their plane to land in Cleveland. Now stranded in Cleveland, they visit a bar where the men are “adorably heterosexual” and, despite the women’s age, usually a hindrance to sexual advances in L.A., they are seen as “hot in Cleveland,” hence the title. In the series, Cleveland emerges not in a specific way but instead as the stereotypical antithesis to L.A., for better or worse. The city, and the region where it is located, is not only knowable, but already known.

Popular print and online journalism has also featured tales from the Rust Belt more and more frequently. From Detroit to Buffalo, Pittsburgh to Cleveland, the Rust Belt has emerged as a critical site of cultural production, often positioned against the urbane scenes of New York and the Pacific Northwest.⁵ Most common are the stories

5. A number of articles in popular sources highlight this tendency. See Andres Duany’s “The Pink Zone: Why Detroit is the New Brooklyn” in *Fortune* (2014); Jim Russell’s “Is Pittsburgh the New Portland?” in *Salon* (2013); or, also from *Salon*, Richard

about the Rust Belt resurgence: specific matrices are used to argue that the Rust Belt is the next hot spot in American culture, the go-to place for young entrepreneurs and artists alike.⁶ Take for example Susan Milligan’s 2014 article in *US News* titled “An Urban Revival in the Rust Belt.” In that article, Milligan presents the cities of Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh as indicative of larger, regional shifts. She argues that “[a]ll three cities have followed a similar path: They've developed their waterfronts, appealing to young people, and they've also fostered new areas of industry,” primarily in the medical fields. The civic boosterism of this and stories like it often mask the continued systemic problems like poverty and racism. Notably, The Century Foundation, a progressive think tank, released a report in 2015 listing the urban areas with the highest concentration of minorities in poverty. Both Cleveland and Buffalo—two of the three

Manning’s “Milwaukee is the New Portland” (2014). Though different in the particulars, each of these articles uses “Portland” and “Brooklyn” as knowable sites and as metonyms for in-migration of (largely) young, white, middle-class artists and creative labourers, an identity that ignores and erases the histories of race and class inequality in places like Brooklyn. In doing so, the metaphor between the Rust Belt and these other cities further works to obscure the presence of inequality in places like Pittsburgh and Detroit, at least in popular consciousness. In a 2015 article in the online *Gothamist*, Jordan G. Teicher took issue with these comparisons, writing that “[t]hough Buffalo isn’t quite the Williamsburg of Western New York, the Hipster Rust Belt City, or some other Timesian moniker, it does mirror Brooklyn in one important way: Both are rife with inequality.” This acknowledgment, usually obscured or ignored, paints these comparisons in a different way and draws attention to the process of gentrification, displacement, and inequality.

6. Given these stories’ frequency in the popular media, I am supplying only a partial list here to demonstrate the abundance of such arguments. A search on any search engine will reveal just how abundant, and surprisingly homogenous, these reports are. For further examples, see Will Doig’s “Rust Belt chic: Declining Midwest cities make a comeback”; Jordan Weissman’s “The Revenge of the Rust Belt: How the Midwest Got Its Groove Back”; or Joel Kotkin and Richey Piiparinen’s “The Rust Belt Roars Back from the Dead.” Each of these articles presents a similar argument about a resurgent Rust Belt economy based around such indicators as a renewed focus on the arts, increased tech jobs, and affordable real estate.

cities Milligan cites as examples of Rust Belt renaissance—are in the top ten cities with the highest concentration of Black poverty; eight of the ten are cities in the U.S. Rust Belt (Jargowsky).⁷ Many contemporary reports emphasize urban renewal and renaissance in the Rust Belt, yet in doing so these reports ignore and erase the persistent issues that continue in the region.

This sort of boosterism is also evident in the documentary *Red, White and Blueprints*. In this film, the filmmakers focus exclusively on the Rust Belt resurgence narrative. They travel across the region highlighting young, mostly white entrepreneurs and social activists who have developed a variety of businesses and projects that are billed as the saving grace of the region. In Pittsburgh, for example, Nat Koloc, a young entrepreneur, argues that the Rust Belt is a good region “for that young person who is looking to find a place to get...hands on experience building impact and building themselves, developing themselves.” Entrepreneurial activity is as much about developing oneself for the next opportunity as it is about generating useful projects and products. The Rust Belt operates in Koloc’s view almost as a testing ground for personal development.

We can juxtapose this with a much different scene in another documentary film, *Detropia*. In one particular scene, the film focuses on a union meeting of Detroit Manufacturing Complex of American Axle, the last American Axle factory located in the United States. The union president presents the company offer to the members: a

7. According to the report, the following Rust Belt cities have the highest concentration of Black people living in poverty: Syracuse, NY; Detroit, MI; Toledo, OH; Buffalo, NY; Cleveland, OH; Gary, IN; and Milwaukee, WI. Outside the Rust Belt region, Fresno, CA and Louisville, KY were also included in the report (Jargowsky).

significant pay cut for all positions to ensure that the company does not relocate. The workers are insulted, disgusted, and angry. They make a motion to not even open the floor for a vote, instead sending the offer back to the company as unacceptable. As the meeting closes, a caption on the screen tells the viewer that American Axle ceased production in 2013, moving all manufacturing to its Mexico facility.

Put side by side, these scenes underscore that the presumed Rust Belt resurgence is predicated on an individual ability to be creative or inventive. In many ways, it is the logical extension of the American Dream into the neoliberal era. If the unions were the driving force behind the mid-20th century version of the American Dream—an image of a good-paying manufacturing job and the suburban home that the union wages made possible—the entrepreneur has become the driving force of the 21st century American Dream. Members of Richard Florida’s “creative class”⁸ have recast the American Dream into a hyper-individualized myth, one that is no less exclusive than its earlier counterpart. In fact, now the American Dream leaves behind not only racial minorities, but also the working class that had relied on it as a guiding principle. Still out there, still elusive, the Dream operates in the purview of the “creative class.”

8. Florida defines the creative class as “people...whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content...These people engage in complex problem solving that involves a great deal of independent judgment and requires high levels of education or human capital...[A]ll members of the Creative Class...share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference, and merit” (9). This list of “common ethos” operates much like a synonym for the American Dream, as it privileges the individual and entrepreneurial spirit—indeed, these traits dovetail with many of the characteristics Frederick Jackson Turner ascribes to the frontier ideology, discussed below.

The image of the creative class in the Rust Belt is perhaps most exemplified by the phrase “Rust Belt chic,” which has gotten attention in recent years in the Rust Belt blogosphere. For example, Jim Russell’s “Bar Mlcezny” was originally published in the 2011 issue of the now-defunct *The Cleveland Review* and later reposted on his own blog. In the article, Russell writes about “Rust Belt chic” and says that he coined the term “to make fun of people so concerned with the exploitation of post-industrial landscapes.” He goes on to say that “Rust Belt Chic is a form of nationalism,” and if others outside the city are interested, he’s “not going to worry about the implications for class warfare.” The term marries the concept of “rust” with “chic” to highlight the increasing “hipness” of places like Pittsburgh and Buffalo. The current Rust Belt narrative is one that seeks to re-evaluate the historic legacy of the region and capitalize on a contrived sense of “authenticity” that these urban spaces offer. While perhaps well intentioned, most of these narratives erase the working class from the equation, indeed as they actively avoid “the implications for class warfare.”

In early 2015, a seemingly unique narrative emerged from Detroit, the poster child of the Rust Belt’s decline and resurgence. First published in the *Detroit Free Press*, the story of James Robertson’s epic commute soon went viral (Laitner). Living in Detroit but working in a factory in Rochester Hills, Robertson walked an approximate 21 miles in addition to riding several more on public transit. And although the original story offered a critique of the systemic issues related to Robertson’s commute—lack of metropolitan wide public transit; insufficient funds to support more frequent transit—the circulation of the story focused primarily on Robertson’s commendable work ethic.

Instead of being outraged at the complete lack of public services, people supported a GoFundMe campaign to raise money for Robertson to buy a car. The crowd-funding website ended up raising \$350,000 for Robertson. Nevermind that crowdsourcing in this case is just consumer-driven taxation aimed at one man instead of the whole society; would the residents of suburban Rochester Hills support a millage to buy Robertson a car even though they have “opted out” of funding regional public transit in the past?⁹

5. An Interdisciplinary Methodology: Cultural Studies, Critical Regionalism and the Working Class

These distinct representations indicate not only the current historical moment of an increased interest in the Rust Belt. In addition, these cultural narratives demonstrate the broad range of Rust Belt aesthetics, including not only traditional artworks but also more popular forms like television and YouTube videos. My analysis of Rust Belt aesthetics extends from a cultural studies methodology, and my inclusion of a variety of cultural artefacts is intentionally broad. My interdisciplinary analysis builds on the discourses of working class studies, critical regionalism, and everyday life theory. Before fully explicating these different discourses, it is helpful to consider an example from *Portraits in Steel* that crystallizes this interdisciplinary approach to Rust Belt aesthetics.

9. Following the wide circulation of the Robertson story, the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transit (SMART) contacted several municipalities that had opted out of services, including Rochester Hills. When SMART was established, municipalities had the opportunity to “opt-in” to add service and contribute to funding or “opt-out” to decline service and not contribute funds. Rochester Hills decided to opt-out, leaving Robertson to walk to his place of employment (Lawrence “SMART asks”). Presently, a new initiative in Southeast Michigan seeks to link the major residential, educational, and business centres through mass transit. There is no “opt-in” or “opt-out” option for this latest initiative, which will be voted on in November 2016 (Lawrence “\$4.6B transit plan”).

In the oral history, Lynn Cieslica considers the aftermath of deindustrialization.

She says:

It's been drastic and very quick. If you look out our kitchen window, you could, until they started taking them down, you could see all the stacks from the steel plant, we used to watch the smoke. And it's all gone now—it's kind of amazing to look out that window now and there is nothing there (177).

Indeed, the demolished mill is a critical theme in Rust Belt experience, and it will be explored in a number of ways throughout this thesis. For now, I want to explicate how Lynn's stunning description of a rather mundane view encapsulates the interdisciplinary methodology I'll be using in my discussion. Perhaps obviously, the image of the mill immediately connects her analysis to the working class. What's more, the view is taken from her "kitchen window," arguably the centre of domestic labour, which she commented earlier in the interview had been similarly rocked by deindustrialization.¹⁰ Beyond the question of labour, though, being in the home, and specifically in the kitchen, positions her view squarely in the realm of the quotidian. The everyday activities of eating breakfast, washing dishes, and other daily chores are forever punctuated with the gravity of this smoke-less window. Finally, it is important to note that the experience of deindustrialization and the personal, emotional weight it carries is engrained directly into

10. Lynn discusses how deindustrialization affected the family's domestic plans as well. She says that "it wasn't just fighting the system, it was at home" (166). As one example, she explains how "when [Mark] was working at Shenango [they] had decided that he was making plenty of money...so [Lynn] didn't have to work" (166). However, after the mill stopped operating, she was forced to find a job, especially after Mark was turned down over and over for a number of positions because he had diabetes. This shift in the family's domestic politics resulted in tensions in the home.

the landscape. Here, Lynn (re)creates her place by giving her immediate geography a cultural significance. This single view elucidates the methodologies of critical regionalism, working class studies, and everyday life theory.

5.1. Critical Regionalism: Place and Space in the Rust Belt

The relationship between Rust Belt aesthetics and the region it represents is one of mutual construction. That is to say that the aesthetic and cultural projects emerging from the region make claims and arguments about the region's past, present, and future. Additionally, the specific circumstances of the Rust Belt—all the layers of its palimpsestic history—create the conditions from which these aesthetic projects emerge. The methodology of critical regionalism is a critical lens I build on and develop to help evaluate the dialogic co-dependence of the region and its representations, representations that span both geographic and ideological considerations.

Rust Belt aesthetics emerge from a specific regional identity. Although the Rust Belt is not static or monologic, it still enables a sense of shared imagery, vocabulary, and perspective. The image of an empty factory resonates in similar ways whether one is in Detroit or Pittsburgh or Buffalo even if the specific circumstances differ. The concept of critical regionalism developed by David Reichert Powell proves helpful in explicating the complex nexus of places in the American Rust Belt. According to Powell, the region is not a static construction used to simply define geographical boundaries. Instead, “[t]he region emerges...as a complex relationship among places...for the purposes of creating an argument about how relationships among places should be perceived” (Powell 61). This is a crucial element to understanding Rust Belt aesthetics. Though varied and often

competing ideologies emerge, Rust Belt aesthetics work not simply to describe the region but, as Powell describes his methodology, as a rhetoric and pedagogy to construct place and, in turn, the region. Powell's turn to rhetoric and pedagogy is marked most clearly in terms of the academy, where he argues for a student-focused approach that allows students to connect their own experiences to broader regional and, thus, international concerns.

The relational element between these various spatial levels is inherent in the term “critical regionalism.” First developed by Kenneth Frampton in architectural studies, critical regionalism focused on how the global and local interacted and were represented in the built environment. Frampton sees the attempt at universality of much modernist architecture as problematic. Instead, he offers critical regionalism as a methodology that “deconstructs universal modernism”—not that it rejects it wholesale, but that critical regionalist architecture would draw on the themes of modernist architecture yet seek to connect those themes to the local context of the building, considering issues such as climate, landscape, temperature, and lighting. This combination of modernist sensibility with local consideration would, in turn, alter the local with “alien sources” (472). Frampton sees critical regionalism as the connective tissue between the move to globalism and the rootedness of localism. The conflict and contradiction between these forces may be related back to Gramsci's conjunctural, a moment when multiple forces co-exist working in conflicting directions. As a methodology, critical regionalism emerges at the conjuncture between global hegemony and local particularity. Therefore, as a methodology to explicate Rust Belt aesthetics, it emphasizes how these aesthetic

projects act as the mediator between the local concerns of deindustrialization and the global forces that led to deindustrialization.

The distinction I am drawing between the local and the global is often rendered in the theoretical distinction between place and space. The works of Arturo Escobar and Doreen Massey are particularly helpful in delimiting and problematizing these concepts. According to Escobar, place is “the *experience* of a particular location with *some measure of groundedness...sense of boundaries...and connection to everyday life*” (original emphasis 140). Space, according to Escobar, has been understood “as the absolute, unlimited and universal” (143). Massey makes a similar distinction. She writes: “In the pair space/place it is place which represents Being, and to it are attached a range of epithets and connotations: local, specific, concrete, descriptive” (9). The distinction between place and space is often rendered in terms of a hierarchy, where space and the global are privileged above the local and place. In practice, this hierarchy operates to devalue certain experiences, like experiences of female labourers or the working class who are often seen as operating *only* in local places. Arif Dirlik has also written on this topic, and he ultimately seeks to challenge the distinction between the global and the local. Dirlik uses the neologism “glocal” to describe “[t]he ultimate indistinguishability of the global and the local...[which] forces us to think about...a double process at work in shaping the world: the localization of the global, and the globalization of the local” (158). Whereas Massey and Escobar both position place as a particularity and space as a generality, Dirlik offers a complex view of this distinction, instead suggesting how these different spatial scales interact with each other. Critical regionalism builds on both the

separation of the terms “global” and “local”—or, “space” and “place”—but, following Dirlik, the term is likewise engaged with seeing how these categories overlap and bleed into one another. The “glocal” comes to be embodied in the concept of the region as a dialectic. In other words, the region is a relational term that remains grounded, bounded, and connected to experience, even as the region remains open to porousness and mutability. The aesthetic projects emerging from the Rust Belt both explicate and construct the tensions between the local and the global.

I take seriously my current work’s intervention, not only in analyzing the phenomenon of Rust Belt aesthetics, but also, and perhaps most critically, of participating in its construction. My analysis works to define a new aesthetic moment and its relationship to a region that figures prominently in the national landscape, for better or worse. My critique is not a sideline analysis, but it is instead invested in creating a lexicon to discuss this critical issue in hopes of moving this aesthetic into a more productive, more just, and more equitable realm. Indeed, one of Powell’s key points about critical regionalist scholarship is that its function “should be not only to criticize but also to plan, to envision...a more just and equitable landscape” (25). For Powell, the scholarship itself must be cognizant of its own position in the construction of the region and in the futures available to the region. This is a critical component of how Rust Belt aesthetics operates pedagogically.

The concept of pedagogy could be extended to consider a *cultural* pedagogy, a practice that seeks to educate or inculcate a specific image or sense of the region. Rust Belt aesthetics, then, is a cultural and pedagogical practice that itself creates an argument

about what the region is, was, and can be. When Lynn describes the demolished mill, she is not merely describing a scene, but she actively constructs place through a complex overlay of geography and time. Though the smokestacks are physically gone, her statement begins with a present conditional—“If you look out our kitchen window.” Her grammar suggests an active attempt to understand her place vis-à-vis the changes wrought by deindustrialization. Indeed, she does not tell us what she *currently* sees out her kitchen window, only what she once saw. The re-presentation of Lynn’s photograph and interview—when it is rendered as an aesthetic object—constructs a cultural pedagogy about the region. In it, the reader/viewer can begin to understand not simply the economic collapse of these regions, but, more importantly, how the very social fabric of these communities was threatened by deindustrialization.

Importantly, Lynn’s comment is tied to place even as it is necessarily related to the national and international forces of capitalism and the effects of creative destruction. In other words, Lynn understands that her position is in part based on her specific place in Buffalo, but it is just as much a part of the broader patterns of capitalist accumulation and the destruction of the means of production. Similarly, the critical regionalist methodology allows for a connection between local concerns and global phenomenon, but it is equally imperative to understand regional constructions as place-based and not abstract collections of cities and their peripheries. This does not negate involvement with or critiques of globalization and space. Lynn’s lament considers, whether consciously or not, the after effects of forces that played out on a much larger stage than her kitchen

window. However, her everyday life provides a position from which to both understand these forces and, as we will see throughout this thesis, challenge those forces.

Indeed, the region can operate as the nexus between the local and the global, becoming the site where the two engage. In terms of Rust Belt aesthetics, the region exists as a metaphor for Gramsci's "terrain of the conjunctural," as it embodies the tensions and contradictions between multiple forces from different spatial and temporal stages. Powell argues that critical regionalism can "interconnect more fully, rather than disconnect, local places to broader patterns of politics, history and culture" (26). Regionalism does not have to be parochial or isolationist. It is deeply connected to the global. Furthermore, regionalism enables a reworking of the presumed hierarchy between global and local, where the local is always contained by the global. Through critical regionalism, the local and global come to be understood as deeply intertwined, not dualistically opposed but operating on different, yet perpetually intersecting planes. To return to Lynn's kitchen window: we could read that comment as a personal narrative about the loss of her husband's position and the effect it had on her family. It could, likewise, be read as a singular example of the larger forces at play across the global stage, forces brought about by international trade agreements, planned disinvestment, and capital mobility. In fact, as an aesthetic project, *Portraits in Steel* works to connect both those sites, and I contend that it is the region—in our case, the Rust Belt—that provides both a spatial and temporal place to examine and analyze the nature of these intersections.

5.2. *Everyday Life: Listening to the Working Class*

Constructing the region is also deeply intertwined with listening to the Rust Belt's working class. In order to understand how Lynn constructs her place in relation to the nation, it is necessary to listen to how she articulates the seemingly small, insignificant moments of her everyday life, like gazing out a window. In Jacques Rancière's *Proletarian Nights*, he concludes the preface by suggesting that "[i]f...we let the thoughts of those who are not 'destined' to think unfold before us, we may come to recognise that the relationship between the order of the world and the desires of those subjected to it presents more complexity than is grasped by discourses of the intelligentsia" (13). Rust Belt aesthetics is an attempt to listen to the working class, both in how the working class express their own conditions and ideas *and* in how the working class is co-opted to further other agendas. In either case, it is imperative to remain attentive to the experiences of the working class in precisely the way that *Portraits in Steel* attempts to do.

An analysis of Rust Belt aesthetics must remain attentive to the voices and everyday lives of the working class. Because of this, my analysis of Rust Belt aesthetics builds on the paradigm shift introduced by John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon. In their edited collection *New Working Class Studies*, they articulate a paradigm shift that attends to the necessity of listening to the working class. For them, "new working class studies" approaches a study of the proletariat with "a clear focus on the lived experience of working class people; critical engagement with the complex interactions that link class with race, gender, ethnicity, and place; attention to how class is shaped by place and how

the local is connected to the global” (14). This new paradigm emphasizes attentiveness to the everyday life of working people, much in the way Rancière advocated. In addition, this new working class studies engages with the relationship between class and place, a key addition to an understanding of critical regionalism. I want to build on this paradigm shift to consider how and why these everyday experiences of the working class are re-presented in aesthetic form. I want to broaden the field of what we “listen to” to include both projects made by the working class and projects made about the working class. This approach to working class studies will be discussed more throughout this thesis, specifically in Chapter 2. There, I will examine new working class studies in terms of the literature produced in the wake of deindustrialization. My goal in that chapter will be to examine the everyday events apparent in Rust Belt literature in order to better understand the dynamic between place and class. For now, it is clear that the discourses of working class studies and critical regionalism intersect in the consideration of everyday life.

5.3. Everyday Life: Finding the Aesthetic in the Quotidian

As I see it in Rust Belt aesthetics, the link between critical regionalism and new working class studies is that both methodologies focus on the everyday. Everyday life is the domain in which many of the concerns endemic to the Rust Belt are made manifest. Lynn’s kitchen window view was quotidian, yet it embodied many of the questions related to deindustrialization: economic despair; social upheaval; landscape alteration; shifting class and gender positions. Primarily, it is through the work of Michel de Certeau that I explore questions of everyday life in the Rust Belt. In *Practices of Everyday Life*, de Certeau writes that “users make innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and

within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (xiv). De Certeau sees the everyday as a site for potential resistance to the forces of hegemony, though his sense of resistance is not necessarily grandiose or revolutionary.

Rogovin’s photographs provide an insightful example of de Certeau’s sense of “resistance” in the everyday. In the initial photograph of Mark at work, we see him and his co-worker at the lunchroom table. Behind them, the words “Monkey House” are scrawled on the concrete wall. This writing, presumably unsanctioned, is one of these “infinitesimal transformations” de Certeau mentions. It asserts agency and stakes a claim on space, even though it certainly does not presume to threaten the oppressive factory system of which it is a component. It is the creative impulse Rancière might identify in *Proletarian Nights* as well; it is the voice of those most often denied a chance to speak.

Some scholars employ the phrase “everyday aesthetics” to describe the in-the-moment aesthetic experience of the everyday. For example, Yuriko Saito’s *Everyday Aesthetics* is an important volume in treating the concept of everyday aesthetics as it applies to the aesthetics of mundane activities. She provides an analysis of the Japanese tea ceremony as one example of how everyday activities contain elements of aesthetic beauty. Ways of dressing, cooking, eating and interacting in the social world can all be understood in aesthetic terms.¹¹ The event of writing and seeing “Monkey House” could

11. For additional information, see Kevin Melchionne’s “Everyday Aesthetics”; Ossi Naukkarinen’s “What is 'Everyday' in Everyday Aesthetics?”; or Thomas Leddy’s *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*.

fall into this understanding of everyday aesthetics, where the social interaction around this graffiti engages in an aesthetic project.

In addition to this usage of “everyday aesthetics,” I also follow other scholars to focus on how the everyday comes to be represented in more formal or traditional media, from photography to literature to advertisements. Rogovin’s photograph of Cieslica on break occupies this type of everyday aesthetic. While it is not exactly an immediate experience in the way that encountering the graffiti would be, the photograph certainly seeks to represent that everyday experience. Scholars like Stephen Johnstone and Ben Highmore examine the potential found in the everyday emerging in art practices. Johnstone argues that, “[c]ommitment to the everyday can also indicate the desire to give voice to those silenced by dominant discourses and ideologies—a commitment coupled with the responsibility to engage with the everyday’s transformative potential; for in this dialogue to notice the taken-for-granted conversation of others in the first step in irrevocably changing everyday life” (13). Highmore similarly attends to the importance of listening and articulating the everyday. He suggests that “[o]nly *after* the everyday is allowed to emerge would something like a politics of the everyday become possible” (*Everyday Life* 172). In other words, to realize the political power of the everyday first requires a language to speak of it. Aesthetic projects are one critical language used to speak about the everyday and thus engage without questions related to the politics of the everyday. By defining and analyzing Rust Belt aesthetics—in all its beauty and contradictions and forms—we can grow attentive to the everyday—and beyond—as it emerges from the aftermath of deindustrialization.

5.4. *Aesthetic Theory: Grounding Aesthetics in Experience*

My use of the word “aesthetic” does not neatly align with the 18th-century philosophical use of the term. “Aesthetics” has a long and varied theoretical history. Perhaps most notably, Emmanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgment* takes up the question of the aesthetic. For Kant, aesthetics are largely disinterested and disinvested from the rational realm. He argues that “[t]he judgment of taste...is not a judgment of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*” (251). Kant divorces aesthetics from the rational and ascribes it to pure subjectivity. In this construction, politics would seem anathema to the consideration of aesthetic value, given that politics is concerned principally with the rational organization of power and aesthetics with the subjective experience of a certain item.¹² My use of the term positions the aesthetic differently, largely as deeply connected to reason and politics; indeed, I see aesthetics as an integral part of political representation.

Despite the baggage of the term aesthetics, I insist on its usage for a number of reasons. As Raymond Williams argued that “culture is ordinary,” I want to suggest that aesthetics, too, are ordinary. I mean this in two inter-related ways. First, material that we

12. Robert Stecker’s *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* explores the various arguments made about aesthetics from the 18th century onward. He argues, for example, that “Kant insists that aesthetic judgments are disinterested because...we are indifferent to the existence of what is being contemplated, caring only for the contemplation itself” (5). Stecker’s main goal is to argue for a more nuanced philosophy of art that cares less about aesthetic value and more about the many functions of art, aesthetic value being just one function among many. Instead of following Stecker’s shift from aesthetics to philosophy of art, I want to insist on the term “aesthetics” in order to invest it with questions of politics, along the lines described above.

often associate with the sublime—Baroque cathedrals, cascading mountain ranges, Renaissance paintings—can become part of our everyday experience. Second, the mundane and quotidian—television commercials, street art, popular fiction—can be understood as aesthetic objects. It is no mistake that Williams’s oft-cited work “Culture is Ordinary” opens with a meditation on his surroundings waiting for the bus: he sees the Cathedral and, nearby, an advertisement for a popular film. On the bus, he notices the Black Mountains, and he pays attention to the Norman castles. He mentions the steel mills and gasworks, the farming villages and the mundane interaction of the driver and conductress. The sublime reaction to the cathedral, castle, and mountain exists alongside the mundane film advertisement and rural homes, and each of these is treated as equally significant to the experience of riding the bus home.

The archive of material I will be working with is, like Williams’s view from the bus, disparate and perhaps a bit disorienting. I have selected works from a variety of media, including television commercials, gallery art, photography, and literature. Many are associated with “high art” while others are more in line with “popular culture.” By bringing such a disparate group of works together under one rubric—a rubric that insists on itself as defining an aesthetic—my intention is to demonstrate a continuum among these works. Furthermore, the field of cultural studies has long sought to articulate a political dimension to popular culture. I want to continue this project while also connecting “popular culture” to “high art”—not focusing on one or the other, but instead bridging the gap between them through a politicization of aesthetics.

This brings me to another reason why I am insisting on the term “aesthetics”: to intentionally invest it with political meanings and ramifications. My goal is not to render aesthetics only utilitarian to achieve certain political ends. Instead, I understand my use of aesthetics as demonstrating that the re-presentation of experience, space, time, or image is necessarily engaged in politics, or questions of power. Unlike Kant, I insist that Rust Belt aesthetics—and, therefore, aesthetics more generally—are interested and invested in certain political and ideological debates and outcomes. In Rust Belt aesthetics, this political environment is often focused on the region and how power is enacted through space and place. While formal qualities are certainly important, I am much more interested in how those qualities of “taste” or “beauty” are articulated in and through a discourse that simultaneously considers political questions. My approach has been informed by Terry Eagleton, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Rancière.

In Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, he echoes Gramsci’s concept of the conjuncture. Eagleton writes, “the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact is...inseparable from the construction of the dominant ideological form of class society” (3). In other words, any aesthetic project is always already intertwined with hegemony. In *Portraits in Steel*, Rogovin presents stunningly beautiful photographs, and they demonstrate a knowledge of and respect for the form of portraiture. Photographic portraiture, like its painted forbearer, was largely a bourgeois aesthetic form; Rogovin’s work, then, is necessarily implicated in this class dynamic, drawing as it does on the formal qualities of a bourgeois aesthetic. Eagleton goes on to argue, however, that “the aesthetic, understood in a certain sense, [also] provides an unusually powerful challenge and alternative to

these dominant ideological forms” (3). While on the one hand aesthetic projects are embedded into hegemonic class ideologies, on the other, as Eagleton explicates, aesthetic projects provide an important avenue for critiquing and challenging such ideologies. If Rogovin’s photographs draw on the bourgeois form, they nonetheless challenge the presumed *content* of that form. By taking portraits of the working class, Rogovin challenges dominant ideologies about both class relations and the politics of portraits in the first place. He even seems to understand his work in this way; he is often quoted as saying, “The rich have their photographers; [I] photograph the forgotten ones” (“Biography”). In his work, Eagleton puts the language of Gramsci’s conjuncture into aesthetic terms. In doing so, he sets the stage for a deeper understanding of Rust Belt aesthetics.

I have tried to position Rust Belt aesthetics as a term that encompasses a broad range of positions, politics, and tendencies. As Eagleton demonstrates, the concept of aesthetics is malleable, being mobilized to both recreate and critique hegemony. While I do want to insist on Rust Belt aesthetics as bridging ideological divides, I also argue that Rust Belt aesthetics is most productive when it is mobilized to challenge hegemonic narratives of progress in the region. Walter Benjamin’s oft-cited “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” helps us understand how aesthetic projects can be mobilized to radical ends. Benjamin argues that as fascism aestheticized politics, “communism responds by politicizing art” (242). Benjamin is not simply articulating a desire for communist propaganda, like the Soviet social realism of the twentieth century. His injunction is much more radical. As Susan Buck-Morss explicates, “[Benjamin] is

demanding of art a task far more difficult—that is, to *undo* the alienation of the corporal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity's self-preservation*" (original emphasis 5). As Buck-Morss explains, Benjamin's political aesthetic is about undoing the alienation of capitalist production. In this formulation, a political aesthetic would shock the body into action. Like the discussion of de Certeau above, Benjamin is not necessarily talking about art toppling fascist dictators, but rather the possibility for art to jar the audience so they better understand their position under hegemony. In *Portraits of Steel*, for example, the photographic shift from work to home, in the first instance, or from 1970s employment to 1980s unemployment, in the second, both work to "undo the alienation of the corporal sensorium." In the temporal shift, for example, Mark appears visibly older and weaker, a visual juxtaposition that dramatizes the effects of factory labour on the body. Such a dramatic shift jars the viewer, possibly shocking the senses into a deeper consideration of labour and capitalism. It is this possibility within Rust Belt aesthetics that can enable a progressive future imaginary.

Rancière offers a different, yet related, understanding of aesthetics. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, he writes that "[aesthetics] is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience" (13). In order to grasp Rancière's meaning, it is helpful to parse this dense definition. In the first phrase, Rancière argues that aesthetics delimit time and space. Elsewhere, in the preface to *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière writes about this delimitation in a more concrete way: the delimitation between

the time labourers spent working and the time labourers spent on other, often more radical, activities. This is the delimitation he considers as essential to an understanding of aesthetics. And it is evident, too, in Rogovin's photographs. Purposefully, Rogovin photographed men and women while they worked *and* at home. Many posed with their families in their home portraits, like Mark Cieslica, while others were photographed with objects significant to their lives, like a boat or a music collection. In either case, Rogovin's aesthetic practice delimited spaces and times to undermine assumptions about labourers as *only* having time enough to work. In *Portraits of Steel*, Rust Belt aesthetics is mobilized to figure labourers both as recognizing their bodies as instruments of capital *and* delimiting space in which their bodies are outside, even momentarily, the limits of their labour.

If such a delimitation is necessary in the formation of Rust Belt aesthetics, it is also critical that aesthetics be formulated in political terms. Rancière continues his argument and claims that aesthetics “simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (13). Certainly, Rust Belt aesthetics delimits a specific place for politics, namely the region. Building on Powell's critical regionalism, I argue that the region can operate as a site to engage with political questions that are pertinent to, yet not limited to, the specific region. The question of deindustrialization and income inequality is certainly not exclusive to the Rust Belt. However, as the site par excellence of deindustrialization in the U.S. it does offer a critical site for political engagement. In many ways, aesthetic practices and representations are uniquely positioned to engage with the politics of place, as we will see throughout this thesis.

What's more, by asserting that this determination occurs "as a form of experience," Rancière emphasizes the intersections of place and immediate experience, or everyday life.

Albeit from different perspectives, each of these thinkers conceives of aesthetics in relation to politics. My use of aesthetics develops in a similar way. Inasmuch as Rust Belt aesthetics engage with questions of reimagining the region through the everyday lives of the working class, Rust Belt aesthetics cannot help but be implicated in politics. In other words, Rust Belt aesthetics are narratives that describe the region. In the very act of describing, these narratives are omitting and selecting different experiences. To understand such a construction as "merely" aesthetic or "merely" cultural¹³ misunderstands the deep relationship between aesthetics and politics.

6. What Comes Next: The Archive and Chapter Overviews

Despite this understanding and focus, the aesthetic projects included in this thesis were not selected because they were explicitly political. Instead, my goal was to demonstrate a breadth in the archive of aesthetic material I have selected—a breadth in both theme and media. To that end, the material I have included comes from a variety of sources: collaborations between multiple artists; authors; corporate advertisers; filmmakers; public artists. Many of the aesthetic projects in this thesis are items that appealed to me on a visceral, emotive level. The projects included here seek to be representative without being exhaustive and instructive rather than definitive.

13. In Judith Butler's "Merely Cultural," she explores how Marxist and Leftist thinkers see the cultural turn in scholarship to disparage the project of left political thinkers. She argues against these critiques, ultimately asserting that a cultural turn engages with important questions of political economy and inequality.

In Chapter 1, “Advertising the Rust Belt: ‘Intimately Foreign’ National Myths in Rust Belt Advertisements,” I investigate the relationship between formative myths of the American nation and the Rust Belt. I develop a theoretical approach based on Michel Foucault’s analysis of the painting “Las Meninas,” drawing out and explicating the phrase “intimately foreign” to understand how the myths of national belonging elide aberrations of the ideal nation, aberrations like systemic racism and poverty. My principle focus in this chapter is on two advertisement campaigns: Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” and Levi’s “Go Forth.” I argue that the Levi’s campaign develops the mythic image of the frontier and rhetorically erases Braddock’s majority Black population from the landscape. Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” advertisement draws on the myth of the American Dream to create an idealistic image of labour and the Rust Belt. Both advertisement campaigns ultimately present a depoliticized labour force, instead presenting labour as a good in its own right. Such a suggestion repositions the region as the crucible of American national identity. I conclude this chapter by turning to a performance piece by LaToya Ruby Frazier that challenges the Levi’s campaign and attempts to give a voice back to the disenfranchised people of Braddock.

In Chapter 2, “Rust Belt Lit: Toward a New Critical Regionalism in American Literature,” I develop the concept of Rust Belt literature, an emerging, regionalist genre of literature that examines the Rust Belt’s position in broader national narratives. First, I provide an overview of the variety of texts I categorize in this genre. The diverse group of texts demonstrates the breadth and depth of the genre while also articulating the prevalence of Rust Belt literature in 21st-century America. Then, I turn to Philipp

Meyer's novel *American Rust* as the primary object of study. In order to explicate the novel, I draw on the critical regionalist methodology, developing it further in order to focus on the working class. Through this analytic, I explore how the novel constructs the Rust Belt in an effort to critique the region and its position vis-à-vis globalization and national identity. Rust Belt literature, I argue, is similar to the literary regionalism of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Literary regionalism was a response to the trauma of the Civil War and the intense nationalism of American imperialism. Similarly, Rust Belt literature responds to the dismissive federal response to the trauma of deindustrialization and the seemingly incongruent nationalism of post-9/11 America.

Chapter 3, “‘The Land of Used-Ta-Be’: Rust Belt Literature as Palimpsest in Two Collections of Poetry and Photography,” continues the analysis of Rust Belt literature using two collections of photography and poetry. *From the Western Door to the Lower West Side* by Eric Gansworth and Milton Rogovin presents indigenous life in western New York, depicting the tensions between life in Buffalo's Lower West Side neighbourhood and the nearby Tuscarora Nation reservation. *From Milltown to Malltown* by Jim Daniels, Jane McCafferty, and Charlee Brodsky presents the shifting terrain of Homestead, PA, a mill town near Pittsburgh, as its industrial legacy is erased and a new open air mall is constructed on the site of the former mill. In analyzing these texts, I draw on and develop the metaphor of the palimpsest; I argue that both collections examine the historical legacies of the region and how they re-emerge in the present. Put together, these texts help demonstrate the interconnected histories of settler colonialism and

industrial capitalism. I argue that these different legacies become represented in aesthetic objects that construct a regional identity.

In Chapter 4, “Against Ruin Porn: Ruins and Everyday Life in Visual Art from the Rust Belt,” I continue to focus on the (re)production of the region, though I turn my focus to visual art. I draw on photography collections (Romain Meffre and Yves Marchand’s *Ruins of Detroit*; Gregory Halpern’s *A*; and LaToya Ruby Frazier’s *The Notion of Family*) and gallery installations (Mike Kelley’s *Mobile Homestead*; and Dennis Maher’s *The House of Collective Repair*). I draw on the work of Michel de Certeau to analyze these different projects, namely his development of “strategies” and “tactics” and the political engagement of the everyday. In this discussion, I develop two analytics: (1) *ruins of space* describes aesthetic projects that focus on static representations of urban and industrial ruins; and (2) *ruins in place* describes aesthetic projects that intersect space and time to present the everyday lived realities of people amongst ruined places. I privilege *ruins in place* as potentially imagining and enabling a better future for the region.

In the conclusion, “Listening to the Rust Belt: Rust Belt Aesthetics as a Multi-Vocal Practice,” I emphasize that the goal of this study is to define Rust Belt aesthetics and, in doing so, describe aesthetic practices that might enable a reimagining of the region’s future. I argue that the most progressively oriented aesthetic projects from the region originate from a multi-vocal aesthetic practice. That is to say, aesthetic projects that *listen* to the everyday lives of marginalized communities and then—through various methods, as we will see—represent those diverse voices—these projects can enable a

more just and equitable future imaginary, and perhaps even a more just and equitable future reality.

In this thesis, my central hope is that the voices of the working class—expressed often through aesthetic representations—come through clearly. In *Portraits in Steel*, the photographs and interviews facilitated the attentiveness I hope to foster throughout this work. At one point in Frisch’s interview, he asks Mark Cieslica about the air quality in the Shenango mill. Mark explains that it was commonplace to breathe in iron dust. The danger, he suggests, is that once you breathe in iron dust, it “has a tendency to rust real fast” (151). The condition Mark describes is all too real; called siderosis, it can result in breathing problems and has been linked to increased risks of cancer. In addition to this very real threat, Mark’s explication offers a metaphor for thinking about the connection between people and their place. The risk of factory labour was an intimate part of the labourers’ everyday life—the dust was breathed in, internalized, and spat out. Similarly, the landscape of the Rust Belt becomes integral to a number of constituencies—the residents of the region, for example, or even the nation more broadly. The region, in a way, is also breathed in and internalized.

My goal in this thesis is to analyze this internalization—to understand how the region operates as a personal identity and a national or international relation. I do not wish to coat the Rust Belt in a shiny new veneer, nor do I want to denigrate the region as a rusted husk of its former might. I hope, instead, to engage in a conversation about what these aesthetic projects communicate, how they communicate, and what sorts of futures—hopeful or otherwise—they imagine. My work is an attempt, however

imperfect, to give voice to the rust *and* to the people who breathed it in, and who breathe it in still.

Chapter 1: Advertising the Rust Belt: “Intimately Foreign” National Myths in Rust Belt
Advertisements

The focus of this chapter is on questions about American identity, the myths that sustain it, and various claims on national identity from the Rust Belt. In order to explore this relationship, I examine the aesthetics of a variety of advertisement campaigns. After establishing a brief theoretical and historical scaffold, I turn to print advertisements from the 1970s that demonstrate the inter-regional competition for businesses and jobs and how that relates to the Rust Belt’s claims on national identity. Then, I examine two more recent television advertisement campaigns, the Levi’s “Go Forth” campaign established in 2010 and Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” campaign established in 2011. Each of these advertisement campaigns will be paired with a different ideological construct – the American frontier and the American Dream, respectively – in order to demonstrate how the Rust Belt re-establishes its centrality within the American national context through a reification and depoliticization of the working class. However, in order to establish the legacy of the complex relationship between the American working class and myths of national belonging, I want to begin this chapter, somewhat anachronistically, at the turn of the last century and examine the Ford Motor Company’s Sociological Department and its explicit attempts to “Americanize” its work force. As we will see, Ford’s program emphasizes the important, if not central, role that the Manufacturing Belt played in navigating questions of American-ness well before the rust began to settle in.

Between 1910 and 1920, the Ford Motor Company implemented its Five Dollar a Day wage program in an attempt to stabilize its workforce’s high turnover rate. The

program split the daily five dollars between the worker's wage and profit sharing. In order to qualify for the profit-sharing, the worker had to meet certain criteria established and reviewed by the Ford Sociological Department. Only married men were eligible for the program; in addition, "a worker had to...demonstrate thrift, good habits, and good home conditions"; eventually, a six-month residency requirement was also added (Hooker 48). As part of the Progressive Era's rampant nativism, Ford's program worked to Americanize the recently arrived immigrant workforce.

Ford's program inculcated eligible workers into American culture. In 1908, the *Ford Times*, a circular distributed on the factory floor, suggested a New Year's resolution for Ford employees "[t]o exalt the Gospel of Work...To keep head, heart, and hand so busy that I won't have time to think about my troubles" (qtd in Meyer 68). As historian Stephen Meyer explains, time and again "Ford literature for workers reiterated similar outlines of the American work ethic with the prospect of upward mobility as a reward for patience, self-denial, and hard work" (68). This paternalism extended into the workers' homes, where the Ford Sociological Department investigated to ensure that each worker's family maintained a "proper 'American' standard of living" (Meyer 70). Suggestions included the seemingly trivial yet patronizing, like ways of using soap and middle-class table manners, to the more substantial, like saving money and purchasing property. The Ford program instilled labourers with the idealized myth of the American Dream.

Nowhere is this more dramatically demonstrated than in the reports of factory workers' "graduation" from the program's sister project, the Ford English School. The school compelled immigrant workers to attend through subtle coercion: the choice was in

theory free for the labourer to make. However, if he refused to attend, he would be repeatedly asked by his foreman about his attendance and eventually laid off to give him time to consider his decision. Only those who had attended the school were considered for promotion. Like the Americanization project more broadly, the school used grammar books filled with ideals of American identity, promoting things like private property, table manners, hygiene, the ethic of hard work, and consumerism (Meyer 74-6).

Upon completion of their English education, the workers engaged in an elaborate graduation ceremony. Clinton C. DeWitt, the director of the school, describes it as a pageant in the form of a melting pot, where all men descend from a boat scene representing the vessel on which they came over; down the gangway...into a pot 15 feet in diameter and 7-1/2 feet high, which represents the Ford English School. Six teachers, three on each side, stir the pot with ten foot ladles representing nine months of teaching in the school. Into the pot 52 nationalities with their foreign clothes and baggage go and out of the pot after vigorous stirring by the teachers comes one nationality, viz, American (qtd in Meyer 77).

Adding to this description, SS Marquis, a clergyman involved in the school, noted that the men emerge from this imagined pot “dressed in their best American clothes and waving American flags” (qtd in Meyer 77). Through this bizarre pomp and circumstance, “American-ness” can be seen clearly as a façade of sorts, as a malleable yet potent identity made manifest through a number of nationalist myths, like, in this case, the melting pot and, as we will discuss in greater detail below, the American Dream.

Although the Ford Americanization program was a relatively short-lived affair, it nevertheless left an important imprint on American culture. Soon after it was established, the city of Detroit developed its own Americanization program modeled off of Ford's. In turn, the National Americanization Day Committee, established in 1915, modeled itself after Detroit's program. These programs were each concerned with the threat of immigrant populations diluting the presumed white, Protestant character of the American people, and focused primarily on the emerging industrial cities of the Midwest and Northeast. Eventually, the "Americanization" programs subsided at the end of the Progressive Era, and after World War I "local public school systems became the principal agents for the adaptation of immigrants to American industrial society" (Meyer 78). For our purposes, however, the geographic and cultural character of the Americanization programs—both focused in the modern day Rust Belt and on the working class—makes these programs of significant interest. Primarily, my interest lies in how the region shifted from being seen as a locus of un-American-ness to, in the latter half of the twentieth-century, to being understood as central to the national imaginary.

As mentioned, this anachronistic beginning demonstrates the complex relationship between the working class and U.S. national imaginary. Before moving on, it may be helpful to consider another reason for beginning with this image of working class immigrants emerging from the crucible of Ford's plant and its symbolic melting pot. The immigrant and working class men who were stirred about in the melting pot pageant could be described as simultaneously foreign and domestic in regards to the nation proper. In contemporary parlance, the phrases "illegal immigrant" or "resident alien"

operate similarly to demarcate a simultaneous difference from yet inclusion in the body politic. In researching this chapter, I have continued to return to the phrase “intimately foreign,” a phrase I borrow from Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. Rhetorically similar to “resident alien” and, as will become crucial in the following discussion, “America’s import,” Foucault’s “intimately foreign” has become something of a refrain for me. This phrase—while taken slightly out of context—has helped me think through the various relational elements of the Rust Belt region and American national identity and belonging.

To put this decontextualized phrase back into its original context, let us examine the opening chapter of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, which analyzes Diego Velázquez’s 1656 painting *Las Meninas*. The painting depicts a scene where a painter stands to the side of his canvas, the back of which faces the viewer, as he studies the king and queen, who sit outside the frame of the painting. However, the king and queen are reflected in a well-positioned mirror in the painting’s background. Foucault draws attention to the mirror, and he posits that the mirror both reflects the painter’s subjects (that is, the king and queen the painter is about to paint) as well as the viewer of “*Las Meninas*,” in other words, us. He argues that both of these subjects—the viewer and the king and queen—are inaccessible in the painting yet central to its construction. He writes that “the function of that reflection [in the mirror] is to draw into the interior of the picture what is *intimately foreign* to it: the gaze which has organized it and the gaze for which it is displayed” (my emphasis 15). Here, “the gaze which has organized it” is both the gaze of the 17th-century Spanish monarch *and* the gaze of the painter himself, and

“the gaze for which it is displayed” is the viewer of the painting. These two “sovereign” subjectivities overlap within the fictional construct of the painting. For Foucault, what “Las Meninas” ultimately indicates is the presence of elided subjectivities: namely, in this case, the painter and the viewer are both constitutive of the work of art yet always necessarily absent from its composition. The painting and Foucault’s analysis of it provide a vocabulary to discuss the intimately foreign, that which is both constitutive of a broader body and yet distinct from it.

As one critical example, we can turn to the American frontier, a central theme of this chapter. The frontier currently circulates in American thought as a not-yet-attained goal. As a metaphor, the frontier imagines the limit of knowledge or thought even as it suggests crossing or surmounting that limit. We often hear of new frontiers in science or medicine, like the aptly titled scholarly journal *Cancer Research Frontiers*. Based on the title alone, one would expect to find research that understands the limits of current knowledge *and* moves passed it. As another example, U.S. President John F. Kennedy’s famous “New Frontier” speech in 1960 identified a series of policy initiatives couched in the rhetoric of the frontier, including the frontier of space. In that speech, Kennedy used the phrase to appeal to presumed American characteristics of inventiveness, hard work, and exploration (Kennedy “Acceptance”).

Frederick Jackson Turner would likely not be surprised by the ubiquity of the “frontier” metaphor. In 1920, he published *The Frontier in American History* to describe the impact of the geographic frontier on the American psyche. The book traces the moving boundary between the frontier and the American nation and how the concept of

the frontier formed a national identity. From the Old West of the Allegheny region to the Ohio Valley, the Great Plains to the Pacific Northwest, the central themes and characteristics remained constant, according to Turner. He writes:

From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance. The works of travelers along each frontier from colonial days onward describe certain common traits, and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier (37).

Turner situates the frontier at the centre of American identity. He provides a litany of traits that he assigns broadly to the “American intellect” and sees each as “traits of the frontier.” Although Turner ultimately declares that “the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history” (38), the residual effects of the frontier ideology remain prescient in the United States, primarily as a national ethos.

Of course, Turner’s analysis of the American frontier largely renders indigenous people as absent or, at best, as nuisances to expansion. Turner describes that the frontier

moved continually westward, and these new territories were “won by a series of Indian wars” (9). His flippancy suggests an adherence to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, where the indigenous populations of North America merely stood in the way of the divinely ordained progress of Europeans across the continent. Though not part of his litany of inherent American traits, it is important to note that racism could easily be added to Turner’s long list of characteristics that contribute to American national identity. Indeed, we may say that racism is “intimately foreign” to the American national imaginary inasmuch as it is constitutive of, yet necessarily elided from, discussions of national legacy and character.

Similarly, the geographic frontier is intimately foreign to the body politic: foreign because it stands outside the nation, and intimately so because it in fact defines a national identity. Similar to Foucault’s “Las Meninas,” the frontier is both constitutive of and yet distinct from US national identity. Its contemporary currency indicates that it operates as a metaphor or myth of national identity. The characteristics associated with it – like rugged individualism, inventiveness, restlessness – operate less as descriptions of national identity and more as prescriptions for national belonging. When Ford’s English School promoted the ethic of hard work, it did so to establish a standard for immigrants to meet and not necessarily as a description of the realities of the American worker.

The American Dream is another national myth that operates in a similar way. Elsewhere, I have written about the overlap between frontier ideology and the American Dream (Manning). For sociologists Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong, “[t]he American Dream is predicated on the belief that...American society offers equal and unlimited

opportunities for upward mobility for those who embrace a strong work ethic.” Although recognizing the Dream’s variability, they identify the typical attributes as “economic comfort and security...higher educational levels...a rewarding job, home ownership, and personal freedom” (42). Much like the frontier characteristics described by Turner, the trappings of the American Dream are based on a similar sort of rugged individualism, mobility and economic comfort. As discussed in the introduction, the American Dream is the 20th-century fruition of the frontier ideology and, like the frontier, it too can be understood better as a prescription instead of a description.

The graduates of Ford’s English School demonstrate just how malleable and transferrable the characteristics of the American Dream can be. Through cultural assimilation and a bit of pageantry, the immigrant labourers emerged as full-fledged Americans—at least in the context of the pageant—having been inculcated not just with the English language, but also with the cultural characteristics valued by mainstream American society, specifically the managerial class. These characteristics, as mentioned above, were traits such as hard-work, optimism, and individualism, characteristics that overlap with both the frontier and the American Dream ideologies. As Stephen Brooks argues, the power of the American Dream lies “in the fact that it is at the core of what America means...in no other country is the idea of getting ahead so central to the national narrative” (120). For Brooks, the Dream is centred on hope more so than reality.

The industrial Midwest in the early- to mid-twentieth century was the crucible of the American Dream. While certainly not exclusive to the region, the characteristics attributed to the American Dream were most fully realized, packaged, and dispersed in

and from the industrial Midwest. One contemporary example demonstrates just how pervasive this assumption continues to be. In 2013, the Cleveland-based organization Saving Cities released a feature-length documentary titled *Red, White and Blueprints: A Rust Belt Documentary*. Visiting locations across the region, the documentary explores how these various places are connected, and it focuses heavily on issues related to entrepreneurial opportunities. At one point in the film, an interviewee from Cleveland remarks that “[w]e [the Rust Belt community] can figure it out [i.e., economic revitalization]. But it’s also up to us to show the rest of the country why we are so important to them.” In many ways, this sentiment is the central theme of the documentary: the Rust Belt must rise from the ashes through individual initiative and demonstrate its continued worth to the nation.

In a somewhat crystallized manner, this documentary demonstrates the centrality of the American Dream in narratives about and from the Rust Belt. While not mentioned specifically in the film, the trappings of the Dream are obvious: individual initiative; emphasis on hard work; rise-from-the-ashes mentality; upward mobility; focus on economic success as the true indicator of worth. What’s more, the documentary offers another interesting insight into the relationship between the Rust Belt and the formative myths of American national identity, like the American Dream. At one point, an interviewee comments that the Rust Belt will once again become what it was historically: “the lifeline of America.” Here, the region is reimagined as representing an ideal American identity, indeed the very lifeline of the nation.

While the documentary had a relatively small distribution, these themes can be seen in other, more far-reaching media. From television sitcoms to popular blogs to viral news stories, the narrative of Rust Belt decline and resurgence is increasingly common. To be sure, the origins of this sentiment can be found in the legacy and history of the unionized, relatively well-paid workforce of the region. In post World War II Detroit, for example, workers “were among the highest paid in the country” and “[t]hey used their relatively high wages...to purchase or build modest single-family houses” (Sugrue “Crabgrass” 554). As a key component of the American Dream, this home-ownership boom is significant. According to Thomas Sugrue, the percentage of owner-occupied homes in Detroit went from 39.2 percent in 1940 to 54.1 percent in 1960. Like the American pageant earlier in the century, these numbers indicate that the U.S. manufacturing region was the crucible of the American Dream, however mythic the dream was in actuality. However, given the prevalence of racial covenants in Detroit real estate, which forbade the sale of homes in white neighbourhoods to Black families, these numbers strongly suggest that this seeming broad-based economic prosperity was applicable only to whites. This underscores that the Dream was not a promise so much as a description, a description that emphasized white communities as the standard-bearers of American national identity.

Following 1960, the fortunes of the whole region began to change as job layoffs and plant closings increased. Although the antagonist of plant closings was often seen as other countries—China and Japan were often the targets of virulent nationalism and racism—it was very often the case that the runaway plants were moving not

internationally but rather inter-regionally. According to Bluestone and Harrison, the ability “to move capital between regions within the same country provides corporate management with the necessary economic and political clout to insist upon reductions in local taxation, and therefore cuts in community services and the social safety net” (18). In other words, regions that offered better business climates—specifically, lower taxes, lax labour laws, decreased social responsibility—were more attractive to companies and, as it became easier to relocate through technological advances, many companies did just that. This regional shift greatly altered the ideological relationship between the Manufacturing Belt and the nation.

Demonstrating this ideological shift, many southern states ran advertisements celebrating the right-to-work policies of the corporate-friendly environment in order to attract northern businesses. In 1971, *The New York Times* published an advertisement inset focused exclusively on the advantages of various southern locations (Advertisement Inset). It was filled with advertisements from a plethora of states. Take for example an advertisement that promoted the workers of Georgia (see Figure 7). A white father sits on a floral patterned armchair with his son sitting on his lap. They both smile broadly. The father is wearing blue jeans and work boots. The ad copy tells businesses to “[h]ire a Georgian and you hire an individual. Dedicated. Determined. He wants a good life for himself and his family. And he’s prepared to work hard for it.” The (not-so) subtle message is that the labourers of the north have forgotten about the ideal of hard work. The northern labourers are no longer self-reliant; they are no longer “individuals” like the

Georgian man, but a unionized collectivity. The concluding line, written in larger, bolder type-face, makes the point again: “Georgia, the unspoiled.”

In the same edition of *The New York Times*, Virginia made an even more overt bid to lure businesses away from the unionized labourers of northern industrial towns (Advertisement Inset). In *Industrial Sunset*, High also identifies this advertisement in exploring the promotion of southern states and their business-friendly climate. The advertisement features a white man and his family (see Figure 8). Here, his wife is pictured along with three children, and they are all gathered near an old jalopy. The opening lines, again in large typeface, declare, “Working is a Privilege. Not a backache.” In the main text of the advertisement, the man in the image speaks, and he says, “with riots and strikes and all, I wonder about people sometimes.” On the heels of the social upheaval of 1968-9, when northern cities were involved in mass resistance and uprising over class and racial discrimination, the advertisement recalls an idyllic image of America as a peaceful, conflict-free nation. Embedded in this image is a subtext, too, of America as a white nation that could ignore racial strife. The speaker also reveals a wilful ignorance when he admits that he’s “never been involved in anything like a strike.” Once again, the southern worker is pitted against the unionized labourers of northern industrial centres. Then, as if it was necessary to be more straightforward, the speaker says that Virginia has “a strong Right-to-Work Law,” which all but precludes the emergence of trade unions. In the final line, one last appeal to good-old-fashioned American individualism, rendered not in the first-person, as had been the rest of the text, but in the

third-person, as a more omniscient, omnipotent narrative voice: “Virginians. They make their own way.”

These advertisements attempt to extract the association between the industrial Midwest and the American Dream and redefine the south as the “true” site for realizing that dream. In doing so, they perform two simultaneous actions. First, they confirm that the image of the American Dream—hard-work, middle class comforts, home ownership—was the unique purview of the industrial Midwest. Not, of course, that the Dream didn’t have far-reaching implications, but that it had become deeply connected to the labourers in Ford’s factories and Carnegie’s mills. As mentioned above, this association was most likely because these positions paid relatively high wages and could create a broad-based middle class.

Second, these advertisements demonstrate and solidify the image of deindustrialization as a regional problem, not a national one. For example, the ad copy replaces the working class with the “working man.” That is to say, the collective identity honed in the mills, factories, and union halls of the industrial Midwest is vilified as the reason for the shift from the Industrial Belt to the Rust Belt. Through the subtle argument that southern workers are inheritors of the American Dream, the advertisements pin the failures of the Industrial Midwest on individual workers and their unions. Northern labourers and their cities can no longer be properly understood as “American,” the implication goes, since they failed to maintain the ideological core of that national identity, principally a focus on self-reliance and individualism.



Figure 7. Courtesy of University of Pittsburgh Archives. Used with permission.



Figure 8. Courtesy of University of Pittsburgh Archives. Used with permission.

Alongside this national quarantine of the Rust Belt emerged a local resistance to that moniker, a resistance often articulated as a reclamation of that identity. Like the documentary *Red, White, and Blueprint* discussed above, the Rust Belt started to re-emerge as a different sort of moniker. As one speaker in the film suggests, being from the Rust Belt comes with a sense of survival and honour. In the 21st century, the Rust Belt re-emerged with a different image, one that hoped to recapture its position as the flag-bearer of the American national character. In many ways, it was well-positioned for this narrative shift: what better image of the formative boot-strap ideology than a city that was economically devastated and re-emerged as, effectively, upwardly mobile?

The regional reclamation of national identity, and all the tensions inherent to it, can be seen in two contemporary advertising campaigns. In what follows, I will focus on Levi's "Go Forth" campaign, as it was launched in Braddock, PA, and Chrysler's "Imported from America" / "America's Import" campaign. Both campaigns were created by the Portland, OR-based advertising agency Wieder & Kennedy; this coincidence may have contributed to the invocation of similar themes in both campaigns. For example, in both campaigns *place* figures prominently and comes to be overlapped with a collage of Americanisms and American ideologies. The products being sold—cars and jeans, respectively—are uniquely positioned in this regard, as they carry, in and of themselves, symbolic weight in terms of what it means to be "American," and, at least in the case of the automobile, what it means to be from the Rust Belt.

The Levi's advertisement campaign used Braddock, PA as its principle subject and backdrop (Elliot). Braddock is a small city just outside of Pittsburgh that was

devastated with the disinvestment in the steel industry. Following massive unemployment, Braddock became a centre of crime, poverty, and racial injustice. In 2001, John Fetterman was elected mayor by one vote. Fetterman was a young, white man with a PhD in Public Management from Harvard University. He was a charismatic figure who quickly captured national attention for his attempts to turn around the failing city. Fetterman welcomed the partnership with Levi's, calling it "an authentic, organic partnership" (Elliot). Because Levi's hired local people for the advertisement and donated millions of dollars for a community centre and urban farming program, Fetterman and others saw the partnership as a good opportunity. Not only did the campaign feature local people in the commercial, but they also created mini documentaries about different residents and their relationship to the community. These mini documentaries appeared online, and in both the commercial and the documentaries, the myth of the frontier figures prominently as a metaphor for the deindustrialized city.

The television commercial opens with a classic frontier image: a solitary man at a bonfire watching a train penetrate the wilderness (Freshnessmag). Even the title of the campaign—"Go Forth"—suggests a frontier-image as it instructs or demands workers to go forth and construct a new place. Then, the idea of the frontier is made explicit when the voiceover reminds the viewer that "we were taught how the pioneers went into the west; they opened their eyes and made up what things could be." Against images of dilapidated buildings, impoverished residents (sporting fresh Levi's jeans, of course), and hopeful signs of renewal, the viewer is reminded that this space needs to be reinvented or remade. As the commercial concludes, the camera pans through the streets, toward the

sky, and the voice again recalls the frontier: “People think there aren’t frontiers anymore. They can’t see how frontiers are all around us.” The multiple references to the frontier refigure Braddock as a fresh canvas: the empty homes and rusted factories and abandoned lots are opportunities for reinvention, not memory, and not both. Reinvention in the frontier requires cultural and historical amnesia.

In the Levi’s advertisement, the frontier imagery essentially erases the fraught relationship between capital and labour that is integral to the history and culture of places like Braddock. By drawing on the central trope of the frontier, Levi’s constructs the Rust Belt as empty, as in Neil Smith’s seminal study *The New Urban Frontier*. For Smith, gentrification is the twentieth century iteration of the frontier ideology. He argues that the “consequence of the frontier imagery is to tame the wild city, to socialize a wholly new and therefore challenging set of processes into safe ideological focus...the frontier ideology justifies monstrous incivility in the heart of the city” (16). The subtext of the frontier imagery, as mentioned earlier, is that it is fundamentally racist inasmuch as it renders various peoples invisible. Indeed, the Levi’s commercial insists that Braddock is a frontier space—an empty space ready to be remade by a “pioneer.” This assertion elides the fact that Braddock is 72% African-American (“Braddock”). The incivility Smith addresses is precisely this erasure; although the commercial features Black residents, the rhetoric used effectively renders African-Americans “intimately foreign” to Braddock and thus easily ignored, erased, and written over. The commercial depicts Braddock as a blank slate whose history is mostly ignored. At one point in the commercial, for example, we are told that “things got broken here. People got sad and left.” Then later the

voiceover says that, “maybe the world breaks on purpose so that we have work to do.”

The advertisement, not surprisingly, uses an intentionally passive voice to absolve runaway plants, strategic disinvestment, and destructive capitalism from any culpability in the struggles facing Braddock—both class- and race-based struggles—instead figuring blight and renewal as cyclical and unavoidable, indeed as a gift.

Like the Levi’s commercial, the Chrysler advertisement campaign repositions the Rust Belt, and Detroit specifically, as central to the American nation. Chrysler’s campaign featured three high-profile television commercials, each airing during Super Bowls (2011, 2012, 2014), the highlight of the U.S. advertising calendar. In each of these three advertisements, “America” becomes a central signifier, though it remains abstract and thus malleable. The long, almost poetic voice-overs are juxtaposed with various signifiers of the United States or, specifically, Detroit. In addition, each commercial features a white, male celebrity as the central figure. Interestingly, when strung together chronologically, something of a narrative begins to emerge, a path from exile to inclusion. Where we begin is with an image of Detroit that is decidedly distinct from the America it purports to represent. By the final advertisement, however, this structure is flipped, where Detroit is seen as not only part of America, but indeed as the genesis of American identity.

The 2011 campaign features rapper and Detroit native Eminem, though the main voice of the commercial is not his (Chrysler). The commercial pans over images of Detroit’s factories, skyline, and road signs. In addition to the highway exit sign for “Detroit,” iconic images let the viewer know where we are: The Monument to Joe Louis;

Diego Rivera's fresco "Detroit Industry"; the Spirit of Detroit monument; the Fox Theater. The speaker references news articles in circulation that were "written by people who have never even been here," and he claims that the city has "been through Hell and back." Though identifiable, the speaker in the commercial holds back on the city's name, so tension arises from unspoken knowledge, from knowing where we are but having the location still shrouded in mystery. As the bass intensifies, Eminem is seen driving the latest Chrysler model through the city's streets; the speaker says, "Now, we're from America. But this isn't New York City. Or the Windy City. Or Sin City. And we're certainly no one's Emerald City." Then, an all Black gospel choir on stage at the Fox Theater begins to sing a series of *ah*-s in a minor scale, and Eminem parks the car, steps out, and enters the theatre. In case the viewer hasn't determined the location yet, the marquee lights read "Keep Detroit Beautiful." Eminem walks down the aisle of the beautiful art deco theatre as the choir's song crescendos and then abruptly diminuendos when Eminem takes the stage. He is close to the camera when he says, "This is the Motor City, and this is what we do." The bass picks up again and the shot returns to the car outside, amidst the marquee lights and steam from the gutters. As the commercial fades to black, the slogan appears in white letters: Imported from Detroit.

The 2012 ad features Clint Eastwood, both in the flesh and as the commercial's speaker (ENTV). The commercial begins with a general overview of the nation, and Eastwood says "people are out of work and they're hurting." Then, the commercial focuses on Detroit as Eastwood declares, "the people of Detroit know a thing or two about" the struggle of unemployment. In an interesting move, Chrysler calls attention to

the federal bail out it received, when Eastwood mentions that “we all pulled together. Now, Motor City is fighting again.” This movement focuses on how the bailout helped the average American worker. This “we” – arguably an abstract and indistinct American “people”—reappears throughout the remainder of the commercial, appealing to a hard-working, persistent and, paradoxically, individualist identity. The question becomes “how can we win,” and the answer lies in Detroit, because it “is showing us it can be done. And what’s true about them is true about all of us.” Here, the collective “we” becomes distinct from the Detroit “them,” a fascinating syntactical difference that suggests, at one and the same time, that “we” can learn from Detroit, but “we” are not necessarily “them.” A half-way point between exile and absorption. The complex idea of “Imported from Detroit,” which flashes across the screen at the conclusion, is once again entirely apt.

In 2014, Chrysler once again featured a white, male celebrity to star in their advertisement: Bob Dylan (Brenner Chrysler Jeep). In this commercial, Chrysler builds on an ideal American identity, one that is abstract and self-referential. Indeed, the opening line of the commercial, spoken in Bob Dylan’s distinctive voice, is so circular as to be almost comical: “Is there anything more American than America?” The images that pan across the screen draw on an imagined lexicon of images that are saturated in American nationalism: the U.S. flag, farmhouses, cowboys, roadside diners, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Rosy the Riveter. Dylan speaks into the camera and says, “Detroit made cars, and cars made America.” Then, as focus returns to Detroit, the workers’ labour is highlighted as essential to the product, indeed as what distinguishes it. Dylan notes that Chrysler is built with the one thing you can’t import: “American pride.”

Then, as Dylan enters a pool hall, surrounded by what appears to be a group of other middle-aged, white men, he instructs us to “[l]et Germany brew your beer; let Switzerland make your watch; let Asia assemble your phone. We will build your car.” The “we” in this construction seems to suggest “America” as a parallel construction to the preceding nation-states, Asia notwithstanding. It also references the surprisingly homogenous group of men Dylan stands with as he speaks. What the grammar suggests, then, is that Dylan’s “we” defines both “America” and white men. At its farthest extension, then, this grammar asserts that American identity is properly understood as white, male, and blue-collar. Read in a different way, Dylan’s “we” recalls the distinction made in the Eastwood commercial between “us” and “them.” In this final advertisement, America and Detroit are no longer distinct. In fact, they function now as synonyms—albeit synonyms that depend on a racialized understanding of the American nation.

As the commercial draws to a close, the subtle guitar music in the background picks up to hear Dylan’s recent “Things Have Changed.” The slogan, still the same white, block letters, is slightly modified: “America’s Import.” The move is small but provocative. Much like Dylan’s earlier injunction that, at its logical conclusion, is equal to “Detroit built...America,” here Detroit and America become melded together. Much different than the 2011 campaign, which specifically established Detroit as unique among American places, in this final campaign Detroit is identified as synonymous with American national identity.

The shift from “Imported from Detroit” to “America’s Import” highlights not only the subtle movement from the local to the national, but, when the three ads are put side-

by-side, it calls to mind this chapter's refrain—"intimately foreign." Detroit has a complicated relationship with the nation in this construction: somehow both representative and distinct, intimate and foreign, depending upon the rubric with which Detroit is judged. In the American consciousness, Detroit is inseparable from the automobile industry, and the automobile is inseparable from the American way of life. Yet, Detroit is also synonymous with crime, racial tension, violence, and poverty, and, though these are equally, if not more so, constitutive of the United States, they are aberrations of the ideal nation.

In addition, we also come to see labour as central to the advertising campaign. Typically, labour is erased from the commodity—again, it is intimately foreign to it. However, in these campaigns, the labour used to produce Chrysler automobiles is central. In the first instalment of the advertisement campaign, "hard work" is added to the automobile as one might add a pinch of salt to a recipe: labour is constitutive of the product, and explicitly so. In the second commercial, Clint Eastwood intones that "Detroit is fighting again" over more images of autoworkers on the assembly line. Then, in the third instalment of the advertisement and over more images of autoworkers, Dylan's grainy voice reminds the viewers that "you can't import the heart and soul of every man and woman working on the line."

This flips the traditional Marxist understanding of commodity fetishism, where labour is erased from the commodity. In these advertisements, labour is not erased in the commodity. Instead, labour becomes not simply one component but in fact the focus of the commodity's appeal. However, true to Marxist analysis, the focus on labour does not

pull back the curtain on industry labour practices. Instead, the idea(l) of labour is extracted from the practice of labour. These advertisements appeal to the ideal form of labour in the American national imaginary; much like the advertisements from Virginia and Georgia, Chrysler's campaign presents hard work as a positive national trait, though, for Chrysler, the site of that labour has returned to the Rust Belt, and Detroit specifically.

In both the Levi's advertisement and the Chrysler advertisement, the working class is offered as the central subject. Bob Dylan intones that he is speaking for "the men and women on the line," and the Levi's advertisement celebrates urban devastation by suggesting that "perhaps the world breaks on purpose so we have work to do." These invocations of labour, along with the other visual cues discussed earlier, demonstrate how central the working class is to these advertisements and, in turn, to the myths of American national belonging. However, such a representation turns the working class into *nothing more than a representation*.

It's as if the Rust Belt, benefitting from the tendency of American amnesia, emerges from the attic of the nation, no longer exiled or cast out, no longer considered an aberration of the American Dream, the very palpable evidence of capitalism's failure, but instead, all of the systemic and structural conditions that forged the region's economic and social collapse are forgotten, white-washed, wiped away and now, in the light of the day, the Rust Belt is not just re-incorporated, but it becomes the pinnacle of the American Dream as it rebuilds, pulls itself up by the bootstraps, refocuses on the entrepreneurial individual to recreate a new image from the negative of the old. Not only does such a revision simultaneously praise *and* reify the labourers that built the American century,

but these narratives also strip away the concept of class and race struggles, of poverty and chronic unemployment. The Rust Belt is effectively depoliticized, both in terms of ignoring the complicated political histories of the region and in evacuating the region of political power in the future.

This depoliticization may be best demonstrated by the atomization and hyper-individualization apparent in these two advertisement campaigns. In Chrysler's campaign, the use of male celebrities is one way that the individual is emphasized over the collective, where the celebrity figure comes to be identified as a hyper-individual figure. What's more, though, for all the talk of the authentic American work ethic, the commercials make no mention of the union activity that is so central to the American automobile industry. The language of collectivity employed—the grammar of “we” and “us” and “them” discussed above—suggests not a collective labour force but an atomized national identity. Thus, much like the *New York Times* advertisements that sought to lure businesses to the American South, the Chrysler advertisement erases the political power of a unionized work-force in favour of an idealized and individualized work ethic. This ideal national identity is not only depoliticized, not only individualized, not only masculinized, but it is also racialized as properly “white.” When Levi's insists on frontier rhetoric to recreate a majority Black city, or when Dylan's script exclusively suggests white male workers as the national identity, this racialized notion of American national belonging is hard to ignore.

One artist certainly did not ignore the racist subtext of the Levi's commercial. In 2011, LaToya Ruby Frazier, a photographer and social activist from Braddock, presented

a performance piece in response to the Levi's advertisement campaign (Art21). In front of Levi's photography exhibition in New York City, Frazier dressed in Levi's jeans and mimicked the motion of steel mill labour. She scraped her body across the pavement, pulling and pushing imaginary slag from the steel mill. As the performance went on, her jeans became shredded and revealed an armoured body underneath the denim. Elsewhere, Frazier discussed how the effects of deindustrialization come to be written on the body, and how she explores that specifically in her photography (Frazier "A visual history"). In an ironic twist, through her labouring, Frazier enacts what is intimately foreign to the Levi's commercial: the Black, female, working class, labouring body. I use this phrase "intimately foreign" again to address how Frazier's aesthetic speaks a similar language as Levi's aesthetic, but in the inverse. Whereas the Levi's commercial idealized labour and used it as the advertisement's background—thus evacuating it of its political potential—Frazier reasserts the strife associated with both labour and deindustrialization and returns a voice to Braddock's disenfranchised and ignored population.

Most importantly, Frazier's work gives voice back to the community whose identity is erased through the rhetoric of the frontier, namely the Black working class people who make up the majority of Braddock. Frazier does not attempt to overwrite the narratives of the American Dream or frontier mythology. On the contrary, she reveals these myths and all the underpinnings of racism, classism, and dispossession that they both require and support – the "intimately foreign" details that are ever present, yet easily ignored or looked past. Through her aesthetic work, Frazier attempts to repoliticize the working class in this region, insisting on their voice at a time when the working class is

being told, simply, to “go forth.” Frazier refuses to be told what to do, and instead she speaks back and says, “go forth—where?”

Chapter 2: Rust Belt Lit: Toward a New Critical Regionalism in American Literature

The myths of American national identity—like the frontier and the American Dream—are tenuous constructions that are nonetheless pervasive and powerful. Earlier, I analyzed how these myths worked to exclude large members of the United States from inclusion in the national imaginary based upon race and class. In this chapter, I build on these earlier discussions through a focus on literature. Broadly, my goal is to consider how literary texts critique and analyze national myths like the American Dream and how this critique is embedded in a consideration of spatial relations, principally the region. I call this emerging genre of literature Rust Belt literature.

The emerging genre of Rust Belt literature engages with questions of spatial scales and interrogates how deindustrialization altered not only spatial relations but also the social, cultural and economic landscape of the US Great Lakes region. Because deindustrialization so altered the landscape, literature of the Rust Belt engages in place-making through its reflections on geography and history, place and memory. Not unlike the regionalist writers of the late nineteenth century who responded to post-bellum US reunification and US imperialist expansion, Rust Belt literature responds to the national crisis of deindustrialization and, frequently, to the national trauma of 9/11 and the ensuing wars abroad. The focus on national events in a regional context serves to critique American nationalism—in Rust Belt literature, this critique occurs often through the lens of class. As an example of Rust Belt literature, Philipp Meyer's 2009 novel *American Rust* demonstrates how the working class engages in place-making, an activity that

necessarily critiques the myths of American national identity and thus challenges the hegemonic responses to regional, national, and international crises.

One of the novel's principle themes is the myth of the American Dream. Take, for example, the character Henry English, who is mostly silent throughout the novel. After an accident at the steel mill where he worked, he lost the use of his legs. His son Isaac, the novel's protagonist, refers to him simply as the "old man," and Henry appears mostly as a background character, a specter that haunts the lives of his children. After the local mill closed in the fictional western Pennsylvania town of Buell, Henry relocated to the state of Indiana in order to keep the new home he had purchased for his family, sending money back home to make mortgage payments. The house, "a big Georgian revival," is a particular point of pride for Henry (37). At one point, Isaac sees his father on the porch in his wheelchair and thinks he looks "[l]ike an old planter looking over his plantation—how much overtime he worked to buy this house. How proud he was of the house, and look at it now" (37). After Henry's accident and his wife's suicide, the house fell into disrepair. Despite this, and despite the disintegration of the broader factory system and the social and cultural relations it engendered, Henry clings to one of the American Dream's most important trappings: home ownership.

Because the reader has come to see Henry as a background, silent character, it comes as something of a surprise when, late in the novel, he is afforded two point of view chapters. In one of these chapters, Henry recalls the accident that caused his disability. He remembers how "steel washed over [two co-workers] like lava from a volcano...Felt the building shake as the back end of the shop blew out...Didn't seem fair...Tower was

burning and the whole place was on fire and [Henry] decided to jump” (348). He recalls, too, that there was “supposed to be a safety brake on the hoisting drum. Company too cheap” (348). Henry’s accident epitomizes the inherent danger of factory labour, often at the hand of negligent employers. Ironically, it is Henry’s commitment to the ideal of the American Dream—hard-work to achieve individualized economic stability—that leads him only to disempowerment. For Henry, the American Dream yields only a nightmare.

Through Henry’s recollection, Meyer constructs an anachronistic analogy. Henry’s leap from the fiery building—where the “[t]ower was burning and the whole place was on fire and [Henry] decided to jump”—quotes the now iconic image of the Falling Man, a photograph of a man leaping from the north tower of the World Trade Center after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.¹⁴ Through this subtle visual cue, Meyer connects the very visible national trauma of 9/11 with the almost invisible (or at least quarantined¹⁵) national trauma of deindustrialization. Broadly, the spectral presence of 9/11 in the novel demonstrates how events on the global scale impact and connect to events on a local scale so that these two spatial domains become inseparable. This phenomenon is part of the larger body of Rust Belt literature emerging from and/or about

14. The image was the subject of Don DeLillo’s 2007 novel *Falling Man* and of the 2006 documentary film *9/11: The Falling Man*. For more information, see Rob Kroes’s “The Ascent of the Falling Man: Establishing a Picture’s Iconicity.”

15. As discussed in the introduction, Steven High argues that through the construction of the regional “Rust Belt” identity, “the problem [of deindustrialization] became imaginatively contained, tied to one place” (*Industrial Sunset* 192). Effectively quarantined, the ills found in the Rust Belt could be excised from the rest of the national imaginary.

the formerly industrialized US Midwest—a body of work that must engage the national and international within the local and regional.

Literature emerging from this historical and geographic context remains diverse and individually unique. However, due to the shared legacies of industrialization and deindustrialization, works of Rust Belt literature share many themes. Sherry Lee Linkon provides an important analysis of the literature emerging from these conditions. In her critique of what she terms “literature of deindustrialization,” Linkon demonstrates that “[s]ince the last decades of the twentieth century, economic restructuring has been a powerful force transforming economic and social conditions in ways that require the reconstruction of white working-class masculinity” (“Men without Work” 150). Linkon’s emphasis on the white, male worker underscores a common trait of Rust Belt literature. While not exclusively the purview of white men, a survey of literary texts about the region—which is discussed below—certainly suggests that a majority of these texts focus on white experience, and very often male experience. It is not the case that this reality always goes unquestioned; indeed, as we will see in *American Rust*, many literary texts critically interrogate whiteness and its relationship to deindustrialization.

In addition to her presentation of white working class masculinity, Linkon also points out that deindustrialization has drastically altered the social, cultural, and geographic landscape of the Rust Belt. Such a drastic social and economic restructuring has resulted in a shift in the cultural production of and about the American working class. By focusing on the after effects of shuttered factories, Rust Belt literature explores this sudden and sustained crisis and how it comes to be represented textually.

My use of Rust Belt literature differs in two small yet important ways from Linkon's use of "literature of deindustrialization." First, the term Rust Belt literature focuses explicitly on space as a critical component of the literature's construction. Though not explicit in Linkon's "deindustrialization lit" article, her earlier work suggests a shift in focus to how place and class intersect, and my analysis builds on this earlier work.¹⁶ Rust Belt literature creates place through a literary exploration of the region. In addition, and perhaps more critically, Rust Belt literature narrates the efforts, however futile, of characters who actively try to re-imagine and reconstruct place. As we will see, place-making affords the dispossessed an avenue for agency, however small.

Rust Belt literature also differs from literature of deindustrialization because it is, even through the choice of nomenclature, self-consciously involved in the very same act of place-making. In other words, the critical activity of defining this new genre and explicating its texts necessarily contributes to the activities of regional place-making, whether recognized or not. The focus on place and region in Rust Belt literature intentionally calls attention to this critical activity. As discussed in the introduction, the methodology of critical regionalism "should be not only to criticize but also to plan, to envision...the construction of texts that can envision more just and equitable landscapes" (Powell 25). Not simply a mode of explication, critical regionalism as a scholarly practice

16. As discussed in the introduction, Linkon and co-editor John Russo propose a "new working class studies" that offers an alternative approach to the traditional focus on the history of organized labour (*New Working Class Studies*). Their new paradigm emphasizes "a clear focus on the lived experience and voices of working-class people; critical engagement with the complex intersections that link class with race, gender, ethnicity, and place; *attention to how class is shaped by place and how the local is connected to the global*" (my emphasis 14).

also helps to construct the region. My analysis of Rust Belt literature develops from critical regionalism, so my argument constructs the region alongside the literary texts it seeks to critique.

The literary intersection of place and class builds on the legacy of US working class literature of the early 20th century. In texts like Phillip Bonosky's *Burning Valley*, Lloyd Brown's *Iron City*, or Thomas Bell's *Out of this Furnace*, working class immigrants and migrants construct their new homes through class relations. Place comes to be imbued with class. In Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, for example, Gertie and her family migrate from rural Appalachia to the wartime boomtown of Detroit. The novel begins in Kentucky, and the sense of place pervades the narration: pristine, rural, and idealized. When Gertie finally moves to Detroit to join her husband, the stark contrast of the heavily industrialized metropolis devastates her. However, Gertie, her family, and the multi-ethnic community of working class people create a place, however imperfect, from and for their own agency. This community is perhaps rendered most powerfully when, following the bombing of Hiroshima, the community comes together and grieves with Mrs. Saito, a Japanese immigrant. The local community transcends racial and ethnic differences and, in this instance, challenges the racist policies of wartime America against Japanese-Americans. Rust Belt literature continues to explore the intersections of place, class, and race, albeit from a different, twenty-first century perspective.

Rust Belt literature includes a broad range of texts, including works published by the small press Belt Publishing. Belt Publishing focuses exclusively on literature emerging from the various cities of the Rust Belt. Their anthologies focus on one

particular city of the region, and they include anthologies about Pittsburgh, Detroit, Flint, and Youngstown, among others. *Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology*, for example, collects short stories and personal essays focused explicitly on Cleveland. Published in 2012, the collection takes “Rust Belt chic” as its focus. The term, discussed briefly in the introduction and bandied about in Rust Belt blogs and online journals, is effectively a sense of authenticity and nostalgia as it relates to people, food, architecture, music, and literature. The definition remains vague, and the “authenticity” that is proposed is certainly elusive but also pervasive. Richey Piiparenen and Anne Trubek, editors of the collection, write in the introduction that the collection is “a community effort to tell the story of a city” and the “goal for this book is to retell Cleveland’s story, to create a new narrative that not only incorporates but deepens and widens the familiar tropes of manufacturing, stadiums, and comebacks” (12). Although the idealization of Rust Belt chic is problematic,¹⁷ it is, for better or worse, self-consciously invested in constructing a regional identity.

17. Piiparenen and Trubek define Rust Belt Chic as follows: “Rust Belt Chic is churches and work plants hugging the same block. It is ethnic as hell. It is the Detroit sound of Motown. It is Cleveland punk. It is getting vintage t-shirts and vinyl for a buck that are being sold to Brooklynites for the price of a Manhattan meal. It is babushka and snakeskin boots. It is babushka in snakeskin boots. It is...old wood and steel and vacancy. It is contradiction, conflict, and standing resiliency. But most centrally, Rust Belt Chic is about home, or that perpetual inner fire longing to be comfortable in one’s own skin and one’s community. This longing is less about regressing to the past than it is finding a future through history” (11-12). It is a well intentioned vision, but one that is rife with contradictions, perhaps reflecting the complex landscape of the Rust Belt itself. “Ethnic as hell,” for example, is so incredibly vague as to be meaningless at best, and insulting at worst. Furthermore, the quest or longing for “home” is already a privileged position, one that is about mobility and commodity—we might even say the commodification of mobility—and afforded to certain classes of people. Regardless of

In addition to the explicitly regionalist texts, more mainstream literary works also explore and define the region. Memoirs and creative non-fiction like Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (2013) and Edward McClelland's *Nothin' but Blue Skies: The Heyday, Hard Times, and Hopes of America's Industrial Heartland* (2013) approach the Rust Belt in terms of personal history *and* national import. McClelland, a native of Lansing, MI, posits his authorial position this way: "Although neither I nor anyone in my family ever built cars, as the son of an auto-making town, my life has been shaped by the auto industry's fortune. Most American lives have...[This book] is an attempt to answer, on a historical scale, the question I ask myself whenever I stand on the grounds of [my old high school in Lansing] and look across Michigan Avenue: What happened to the factory?" (7). Through interviews, personal narrative, and archival research, McClelland assembles a book that explores multiple sites of the Rust Belt, implicitly understanding the connections between cities like Lansing, Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo. The local and regional is then translated into concerns facing the United States more broadly, concerns related to the working class, unemployment, and poverty.

Poetry also engages in the questions surrounding place and class in the Rust Belt. In Chapter 3 I will discuss the collaborative collections *From Milltown to Malltown* by Jim Daniels, Jane McCafferty, and Charlee Brodsky and *From the Western Door to the Lower West Side* by Eric Gansworth and Milton Rogovin, where poetry is paired with photography of the region to address questions of race, class, and place. In addition,

the problems, however, Rust Belt Chic is perhaps the most pervasive way the region is understood by white, middle class residents.

single poems similarly evoke the multiple layers of Rust Belt literature. Take, for example, Jan Beatty’s beautiful “Pittsburgh Poem.”

On Sarah Street on the South Side,
the old woman still stands with her broom, imagining
the air full of lug and swish from the steelworker’s boot,
armies of gray lunchbuckets grace her thoughts
as she sweeps with the part of her that still believes (11).

The specificity of place, down to the street in a neighbourhood in Pittsburgh, is connected to the memories of the place. In Beatty’s poem, memory overlaps with labour (both the steelworkers’ and the homemakers’) to create a rich sense of place.¹⁸

The focus in this chapter, however, is on the long narrative form of the novel, and specifically Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*. In addition to Meyer’s work, a number of other novels have been published in recent years that deal with questions about the Rust Belt, race, place, class, and memory. The work of Tawni O’Dell focuses mostly on rural communities in the coal regions of western Pennsylvania. In her impressive debut novel *Back Roads*, she chronicles a family’s dysfunction and destruction and how it mirrors the landscape. Her novel explores the interconnectivity of place and the social and cultural

18. In the conclusion to this thesis, we will return to the notion of “sense of place,” specifically through the lens that Powell describes. Powell writes that “‘senses’ of place and region are not so much essential qualities, imparted by singular events, practices, or topographical features, as they are on-going debates and discourses that coalesce around particular geographic spaces. Furthermore, it is by looking at those features of a place that seem, at least superficially, to be the permanent stable markers of its identity that we can begin to see the dynamic, evolving, and rhetorical qualities that create and sustain what has often been taken (reductively) to be an ineffable or ethereal, sensory property: the sense of place” (14).

connections made by the people who live there. She writes, for example, that “[t]he plant [constructed to treat the acid mine water emerging from the area’s closed mines] only served its original purpose for about a year before...the DER shut it down, but its remains lived on...as a monument to the folly of trying to clean up a region that was poisoned from the inside” (152). The poison seeps into the soil and water. But, even more, the poison here refers to the disintegration of the region’s social, cultural, and physical landscapes.

Novels like *Buffalo Lockjaw* by Greg Ames and *Second Hand* by Michael Zadoorian take memory as a key theme in exploring deindustrialization. In *Buffalo Lockjaw*, for example, the central plot revolves around the protagonist James’s mother’s dementia; she is unable to communicate, and it seems unlikely that she retains memories, as she appears to not know her family members. Interspersed throughout the main narrative, however, are small clips from James’s earlier project of an oral ethnography of Buffalo, NY. As his mother loses her memory, James recalls the city’s history. At one moment, driving through the city, James regards, “[t]he decaying mansions on Delaware [Avenue]” and, after rehearsing Buffalo’s illustrious history, asserts that “it’s time to face reality. We’ve fallen from grace” (219). In this passage, questions of memory and history intersect. James recalls the city’s history, and, elsewhere in the novel, he recalls his mother’s lively spirit. However, in the end he can muster only acceptance and resign himself to the present circumstances, both of his hometown and his mother. James’s memory constructs an idea of place, however fraught with apparent “failure” these places may be.

One of the common threads throughout these texts is the centrality, even if just a haunting, of the working class and its legacy in the region. Nowhere is this explored more poignantly than in Dean Bakopoulous's novel *Please don't come back from the moon*. The novel's central conceit is that, following deindustrialization and massive unemployment, the fathers in a working class suburb of Detroit left their families and went to the moon. It is a beautiful narrative about family connection, community, friendship and, ultimately, hope. But it is equally about the fragility of working class solidarity in the twenty-first century. The novel's protagonists Mike and Nick, along with their cohort of friends, find themselves employed in various retail positions at the new mall. Nick becomes something of a radical, and he coordinates a sit-down strike on Black Friday modeled after the historic sit-down strike at Flint's GM plant in the early twentieth century. The strikers of that earlier era are specters and, in a sense, role models. However, after learning that his girlfriend is pregnant, Nick cancels the strike, so engrained is the ideology of individual responsibility. The desire for collectivity is countered, and in this case supplanted, by the perception of collectivity's futility.

Arguably, it may seem that such a breadth of texts renders the category of Rust Belt literature too general and, therefore, unnecessary. However, the genre depends upon this diversity of voices. Far from negating the construction of "the region," Rust Belt literature's multivocality emphasizes that the Rust Belt itself is constructed dialogically, across multiple social, cultural, political, and economic texts. These literary texts offer a critical example of Rust Belt aesthetics in this regard. The diverse voices indicate the often competing visions inherent in this aesthetic.

Philipp Meyer's *American Rust* creates a sense of this multivocality through its narration. The novel is told in third-person, but each chapter is told from the perspective of one character. In a way, the narration passes through the individual to construct a collective consciousness. No single perspective can capture the complex narrative. Indeed, this is why Henry English's chapters, discussed earlier, come as such a surprise. The reader has accepted Henry as a passive character, one who the other characters consider only briefly. Hearing his inner voice late in the novel complicates that initial reading, and it opens up considerable perspective on the broader story that unfolds around and now through him.

Like the Rust Belt itself, *American Rust* is both devastating and beautiful. The novel is set in Buell, a fictional small town in western Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh, and the setting—rolling hills, abandoned factories, lush forests—proves critical for the narrative. In the first chapter, Isaac English, Henry's son, persuades Billy Poe, Isaac's friend, to accompany him as he escapes the obligations of caring for his disabled father. Isaac plans to hop a train west, establish residency in California, and then study physics at Berkeley. Before making it to the train, they encounter three drifters in an abandoned industrial shop. When one man tries to sexually assault Poe, Isaac—who is set up as the physically and emotionally weaker of the two—kills the man. In the chaos, Isaac and Poe flee the scene and return to their respective homes. The novel follows the characters as they deal with the fall out of this murder. Isaac decides to run away after all, and he gets as far as Detroit before he is forced to return to Buell. Poe is implicated in the murder and is eventually imprisoned to await trial. Additional characters populate the narrative,

provide alternate perspectives, and give voice to a wide range of experiences in the Rust Belt town. In addition to Isaac, Poe, and Henry English, Meyer writes perspective chapters for Grace, Poe's mother; Harris, the police chief and Grace's lover; and Lee, Isaac's sister and Poe's former girlfriend. This fills out a fabric of the town, and each perspective contributes to an ever-growing sense of inevitability and failure. Even escape cannot guarantee happiness: Lee, who attended Yale University and then stayed in Connecticut with her new husband, visited her family infrequently, but she remains dissatisfied with her life despite achieving the success for which she had dreamed. Hope is difficult to find in this novel. Perhaps it comes through most clearly in the multivocality of the narration. By weaving a narrative and constructing a place, the characters create a fragile and ephemeral collectivity.

Early-twentieth-century working class literature focused on the labour movement and unionization as sites of collectivity. In Rust Belt literature, the focus shifts to how that vision became frustrated through the neoliberal, anti-worker policies of the late twentieth century. In *American Rust*, Henry remembers that when he first joined Penn Steel "he hadn't minded being nonunion, like Reagan said, the labor costs were out of control, it was a real problem with the unions" (347). He continues, though, to compare the United States to "all those welfare states" who "still made plenty of steel" (348), realizing the problem hadn't been the unions at all. Instead, Henry suggests that corporate greed led not only to the negligence that precipitated the accident in the mill, but, as something of a metonym, that same greed exacerbated or even contributed to the decline in U.S. manufacturing. While the relationship between Reaganomics and

deindustrialization is an important issue, what's most interesting in this passage is how Henry, the only mill worker in the novel, articulates the political landscape of the white, working class.

As mentioned earlier, Rust Belt literature, including *American Rust*, focuses primarily on the white, working class. Perhaps this is most obvious when Isaac encounters two neo-Nazi youths. Walking along the railroad tracks, he runs into an old friend who is now hanging out with the local skinheads, a group organized under the name Stormfront. The group had organized “when the mills went under and Pennsylvania was now full of [neo-Nazis]. More than any other state...Still, no one took them seriously. Never heard of them hurting anyone. Of course it's easy to say that when you're white” (104). Isaac's observation links the legacy of deindustrialization with the rise of white supremacy in the region. In Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive*, he similarly identifies a relationship between deindustrialization and racial tensions. He writes that in the 1980s “[t]he new, more populist right proved effective in offering refuge for blue-collar whites” and “Reagan's New Right offered a restoration of the glory days by bolstering morale on the basis of patriotism, God, *race*, patriarchy, and nostalgia for community” (my emphasis 16). For Cowie, the New Right of the 1980s offered white, working class men an avenue to re-assert their authority and centrality to the American body politic. Isaac's encounter makes a similar claim. It is also telling that the white supremacists Isaac encounters are spray painting a quote from Nietzsche, altering the physical landscape much in the way their ideology seeks to alter the social and cultural landscape. In both examples, specific ideologies (the New Right and white supremacy,

not equal but neither are they perfectly distinct) attempt to recreate the Rust Belt as a place for white, working class men.

Given the largely futile efforts at resistance to deindustrialization, this remaking of the Rust Belt is particularly telling. The remaking does not involve a reassertion of work ethic or labour practices. At one moment this is explored by Lee, the only character who “escaped” Buell’s gravity. She offers a different perspective on the apparent ineffectiveness of the labour movement. A graduate of Yale, Lee recalls the Ivy-league “notions of...[her] Marxist friends...solidarity, noble workers, an impending revolution” (229). Through association with a high school teacher, she is also privy to the fact that many socialists moved to Buell to bring radical unions to the mills. In the end, though, she thinks,

there had never been any revolution, not anything close, a hundred fifty thousand people lost their jobs but they had all gone quietly... There was something particularly American about it—blaming yourself for bad luck—that resistance to seeing your life as affected by social forces, a tendency to attribute larger problems to individual behavior. The ugly reverse of the American Dream (229-30).

Lee understands that the failure for any resistance to mobilize isn’t necessarily the futility of the American labour movement per se, but rather a particular sense of American identity that precluded action, namely the pervasive ideology of the American Dream.

When Lee identifies the “ugly reverse of the American Dream,” she identifies a critical aspect of this national myth. The American Dream is not necessarily the *cause* of

collective failure, but rather the *tool* used to render collectivity ineffective in late twentieth century America. Grace Poe, for example, works as a seamstress. When a union organizer visited the shop, all of the workers “knew they’d lose their jobs immediately” if they spoke with him (40). The constitutive elements of the American Dream, like individuality and self-reliance, are here imagined not as liberating but imprisoning, forcing Grace to continue to labour even through her arthritic pain, likely caused by the sewing that’s required of her. When “liberty” and “freedom” are understood as abstract individual rights and not concrete social responsibilities, and when those very same abstract rights become synonymous with American nationalism, any movement that depends upon collectivity, like unionization, is immediately suspect and ultimately rendered anti-American.

Isaac’s westward journey dramatizes in many ways the failures of these foundational myths. Isaac is committed to his autonomy. Following his mother’s suicide, Isaac begins to understand human life as nothing more than specifically arranged atoms. He contemplates death and thinks “[y]our molecules scattered, were used again, became atoms and particles, quarks and leptons” (38). As he travels west, the Baron, another drifter, offers to help Isaac despite Isaac’s insistence that he’s ““doing fine on [his] own”” (183). They jump the same train, and, after arriving in Detroit, the Baron robs Isaac. This seems to validate Isaac’s initial mistrust. Left broke, alone, and in unfamiliar territory, Isaac decides to hitchhike home, and he is picked up by a tractor-trailer driver. It is this offer of assistance that suggests an almost religious experience for Isaac. After some varied conversations about North Korea and Britney Spears, the driver confides to Isaac,

“I’m glad I stopped [to pick you up]. I promised my little girl I’d be home so I’ve only slept about an hour since yesterday morning, and then...I realized I better find someone to talk to or I’d end up asleep in a ditch. Anyway, there you were. So in a way, if you think about it, you’re saving my life” (333).

To which, Isaac replies, “That’s the Jesus in me” (333). The small connection, preceded as it is by a number of demonstrations of Isaac’s inability to find positive interpersonal connections, alters Isaac’s perception of the human experience from one of utilitarianism to a more nuanced, complicated vision. When he returns to western Pennsylvania, his first thought is of his sister. And then, he turns to the landscape and, because of the darkness, “[h]e couldn’t see the river but of course he knew it was there...Familiar ground” (334). For Isaac, place is not only deeply familiar, but, given his narrative of exile and return, it is simultaneously new and provides for an alternative vision of the future.

Place is a central component of the novel, and Lee’s unique status as insider-turned-outsider contributes to her particular experience of place. During one trip to her father’s doctor, she is “distracted by the beauty of the Valley.” Then, she notices

a rash of abandoned structures, an enormous steel-sided factory painted powder blue, its smokestacks stained with the ubiquitous red-brown streaks, its gate chained shut for how many years...In the end it was rust. That was what defined this place (131-2).

For Lee, place is defined through history and the legacy of deindustrialization. Lee’s juxtaposition between the natural world of “beauty” and the “rusted” view of

deindustrialization, constructs a specific sense of place, one where the juxtaposition seems to suggest not difference, but congruence between nature and industry.

Against the seemingly stalled labour movement, place-making offers an alternative, if less overtly political, avenue for working class agency. In his essay “Working Class Geographies: Capital, Space and Place,” Don Mitchell explores the relationship between place and class. He argues that “labor geography is primarily concerned with putting flesh—and social will and intentionality—on the theoretical bones of radical geography with two goals: showing how people make their own geographies, even if not under conditions of their own choosing (to paraphrase Marx); and showing what this making of geography *means* to the people who do it” (original emphasis 94). Whereas Marx’s famous phrase suggests that the working class creates history under inherited, and often less-than-ideal, conditions, Mitchell’s paraphrase intertwines space and place with history. Furthermore, Mitchell emphasizes the everyday labour that contributes to place-making and how this, in turn, creates not simply built structures, but also *meanings*—ideas, ideals, or even (counter) ideologies. It is not only the place that carries meaning, but the very act of its construction, inasmuch as it is necessarily a collective action, also creates meaning. Mentioned earlier, the collective voices that construct *American Rust* as a novel is one (albeit metafictional) example of how the novel engages in place-making through narrative.

The active construction of the region takes place at various moments in *American Rust*. After Isaac jumps the westward train, the train travels

along a big river, much wider than the Mon[ongahela River in western Pennsylvania], in the distance he could see a factory that resolved itself into an enormous steelmill... There was a sign: U.S. Steel, Great Lake Works. That is Michigan, he thought. One of the mills they kept open. Parking lot of cars, the way Buell used to look, there's the town behind it. Never seen land so flat (220).

The steel mill in Michigan reminds Isaac of his hometown. He remarks on both the similarities and differences: the river is wider, the factory is operating, the parking lot is full, but, like Buell, the factory serves as the town's centre. Despite topographical differences, Michigan and western Pennsylvania are linked through the network of train tracks as well as through their similar industrial histories *and* cultural geographies, the centrality of the mill being the most obvious example. The region operates not only as a geography, but as an analytic. To return to critical regionalism, Powell asserts that “regionalism, despite traditionally being used to describe, define, and isolate networks of places and spaces, can provide a rhetorical basis for making claims about how spaces and places are connected to spatially and conceptually broader patterns of meaning” (4). In critical regionalist scholarship, the region is a dynamic and critical lens through which both global and local power structures can be analyzed and, indeed, revised. Therefore, because Rust Belt literature constructs the region, it is also necessarily implicated in constructing, maintaining, and challenging American national identity.

Though it may seem anachronistic to discuss literary regionalism of the late 19th century, its similar focus on place and the way place comes to negotiate national and global relations can help explicate Rust Belt literature's role in the same processes.

Nineteenth-century literary regionalism is perhaps best exemplified by the works of Sarah Orne Jewett, whose novels focused on the rural areas of New England. Generally, regionalist texts focus on a specific region of the U.S., and the narrative is often told from the perspective of an outsider, like a visitor or new migrant. In addition to Jewett's New England, other regions commonly represented in regionalist texts include the Midwest, the South, and the West. Many regionalist texts were penned by women writers, which in turn led to their initial devaluation by critics. Thanks in large part to the scholarly shift precipitated by second-wave feminism, these texts were reintroduced into the academy for critical evaluation.

Much scholarship on literary regionalism explores the political function of the genre in the post-bellum, imperialist climate of the U.S. at the turn of the last century. In her article "Nation, Region, Empire," Amy Kaplan argues that, following the national trauma of the Civil War, regionalism "contributed to the process of centralization or nationalization" (250-1). For Kaplan, though regionalism may at first appear to be provincial, it connects the local and the national in the arguably conservative project of consolidating a homogenous national identity. The work of Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse offers an alternative critique of literary regionalism. Because the genre was largely written by women writers, Fetterley and Pryse argue that it cannot be complicit in the post-bellum, pro-imperialist nation building project. Instead, "to the extent that regionalism engages in white and male critique as a critique of nation, it also challenges turn-of-the-twentieth-century US imperialism" (29). Fetterley and Pryse see regionalist, women writers as critiquing the prevalent sexism of the late nineteenth century. The

ideology that supported sexism as the status quo simultaneously supported campaigns of U.S. imperialism. Therefore, because regionalist writing was anti-sexist, it was necessarily anti-imperialist because it challenged the ideologies that were central to both campaigns.

Despite the obvious differences, there is some congruence between Kaplan's and Fetterley and Pryse's critiques of literary regionalism. For both, literary regionalism responds to the national crises of the Civil War's aftermath and the official nationalist tenor of U.S. imperialism, both situations that were deeply invested in questions of race, class, and national identity. More generally, regionalism destabilizes the distinction between the local and the global. As Kaplan puts it, these literary texts "deploy the local periphery to cast a critical eye on the national center in a critique of social oppression that linked region and nation" (254). Similarly, Fetterley and Pryse claim that "[w]hile regionalist writers obviously invest in and commit to the specificity of place, they do not do so in a way that reifies or essentializes place, for place is also always a discursive location, an analytic, subject position from which meaning can be constructed" (37). Like earlier regionalist writing, Rust Belt literature focuses attention on the local not to privilege it as the most authentic place, but in order to examine how different spaces, like the global and national, are made comprehensible in the local. In effect, Rust Belt literature explores how these spaces, which are perceived so differently, intersect.

In *American Rust*, the Rust Belt coalesces around, in part, the crisis of unemployment and poverty wrought by deindustrialization. For example, after Poe has been arrested for murder he sits in his cell and ponders the decisions that have led him to

this moment, thinking mostly of the missed opportunities for gainful employment. He recalls an opportunity to work sealing off old landfills across the country, but Poe thinks, “[y]our country is supposed to do better than that for you” (289). Poe undermines a central component of the American labour market—that hard work should be valuable in and of itself. As a mechanism to maintain the status quo, such an ethic insists that labour is its own reward, so the poor should be grateful for any position available to them. Poe, however, articulates a level of social responsibility in asserting the role of the government in guaranteeing gainful and satisfying employment. This view is different than even the generation preceding Poe’s. For example, Grace works as a seamstress despite her painful arthritis because “[o]nce people get jobs, even crappy ones, they tended to stay in them” (41). For American hegemony, this is a much more palpable, if crudely put, way of being poor in the United States: quietly accepting one’s prospects without expecting any improvements. Poe recognizes this generational difference and understands it thusly, “[h]e had not been old enough to see [the steel mill] fall...we’re the first ones to grow up with it like this. The new generation” (97). The ambiguity here is telling. Either the new generation acquiesces to the status quo, thus abandoning hope for an alternative future, or the new generation can imagine the future otherwise.

For his part, Harris sees this generation gap in a specific way. As police chief, he sees how deindustrialization and the poverty it creates contributes to the increasing level of crime in the area. He thinks that “many of the young people, the way they accepted their lack of prospects, it was like watching sparks die in the night” (120). Harris places the impetus on individuals, so that the young people become apathetic to their social and

economic position. Despite his emphasis on individual drive, Harris goes on to identify the stark lack of opportunities, even for the college-educated. When questioning Poe about the murder, however, Harris tells him that he should've gone to college when he had the chance, and Poe replies, “[y]ou ought to be able to grow up in a place and not have to get the hell out of it when you turn eighteen” (127). Poe’s response strikes a chord with Harris, who asserts that he “‘might agree...and...might not’” with Poe (127). This exchange dramatizes how the mainstream American ethic of industriousness, self-reliance, and personal responsibility is in tension with a progressive social contract.

As he considers his failed employment prospects, Poe asserts that “[t]he work was all in the Midwest now, taking down the auto plants in Michigan and Indiana. And one day even that work would end, and there would be no record, nothing left standing, to show that anything had ever been built in America” (289). The labour of dismantling is about far more than recycling former building materials; it is about erasing from the landscape the legacy of the working class. The work of erasing this history serves to unite the region around another shared legacy. Steven High makes a similar argument in his *Corporate Wasteland*. He argues that “[t]he toppling of large industrial structures—the ‘visual signatures’ of industrialism—[...]put workers in their place: that ‘place’ now being on the margins of local, regional, national, and global culture. In one town after another...mill workers struggled to understand their changing place in their local and national communities” (39). If the factory was the visual marker of the presence of the working class, its demolition signals a violent removal from the physical and cultural landscape. Poe understands this implicitly, that the work of taking down the auto plants is

about erasing “the record” to create a new sense of “America” not despoiled by the past failures of industrialization. We might map Poe’s comment thusly: the local concern over unemployment is juxtaposed with the regional labour of dismantling auto plants rendered redundant by the flows of globalized capital, all in the name of reconstructing American national identity.

If regions are sites where the contestation of national identity occurs, they, too, become sites where globalization is fixed in local space. For example, in the opening of *American Rust*, Isaac, en route to Poe’s house, “reached the overlook: green rolling hills, a muddy winding river, an expanse of forest unbroken except for the town of Buell and its steel mill...[the mill] now stood like an ancient ruin, its buildings grown over with bittersweet vine, devil’s tear thumb, and tree of heaven” (3). At first, the specificity with which place is described, down to the exact species of overgrowth, suggests an intense focus on the local, to the point of parochialism. Bittersweet vine, devil’s tear thumb, and tree of heaven, however, are not in fact local but are instead invasive species. Originating in Asia and arriving in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, these plants arrived via the same networks of global capital that contributed to the rise and fall of the U.S. steel industry. A number of allegorical readings could be pursued from this brief passage: for example, the perceived threat of overseas manufacturing to American-based manufacturing or the impossible, idealistic post-industrial “return to nature.” At the core of these readings—and at the core of the allegory of invasive species itself—is the interconnected and indeed overlapping spaces of the local and the global—overlapping, that is, almost to the point of being indistinguishable.

As mentioned in the introduction, Arif Dirlik coined the term “glocal” to name just such a relationship between these different spaces. He argues that what the neologism “forces us to think about is a double process at work in shaping the world: the localization of the global, and the globalization of the local” (158). In this process, Dirlik sees new possibilities for resistance against globalism’s hegemony. In the first instance, this new form of resistance must “‘place’ globalism so as to counteract its mystification of its own location” (171). For Dirlik, the concept of globalization mystifies place, in effect rendering itself a spaceless and timeless operation. Therefore, to challenge the hegemony of globalization, it is first necessary to unveil this myth of spacelessness and fix globalization in place. In *American Rust*, the invasive species signify not only the interconnectedness of various spaces, challenging the presumed hierarchy that privileges the global. Even more, it also argues for and demonstrates that the global is always already fixed in place: the plants, made mobile by the networks of global capitalism, have become fixed in local place.

There are other, perhaps more obvious, moments in *American Rust* that similarly demonstrate how global and national concerns infiltrate and indeed form regional and local identities. At one moment, Poe remembers a former girlfriend of his who had joined the military and had been killed by an IED in Iraq (69). Poe almost ends up in a fight with a uniformed soldier, until he realizes that the man has only one leg (69). Like the invasive species though more directly, these moments return the abstract, global operation of neo-imperialist war into the local. Importantly, it intersects with issues of unemployment and deindustrialization, the underlying assumption being that the volunteer army draws on the

population of young people who see the army as a viable path toward a career, either through higher education, technical training, or simply as a means to escape the circle of unemployment typified by the fictional Buell.

Later in the novel, Lee and Poe make love outside, and as they lie together, “they could hear a stream running down the ravine where it met the other stream and then the river...From there it met the Ohio and the Ohio met the Mississippi and then down to the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic” (71). The immediacy of *hearing* the stream—the local event—connects across the nation and even transcends the nation, traveling through the Ohio Valley into international waters. The interconnectivity does not suggest a hierarchy, though. The Atlantic cannot exist without the streams that feed it. In a similar way, the local is not a subset of the global, but is rather integrally connected to it through a variety of pathways, including most prominently the region.

In *American Rust*, like so many other pieces of Rust Belt literature, the trauma of deindustrialization cannot be understood apart from events imagined on a different spatial scale. This is most poignantly explored in the following scene. Suffering from arthritis, Grace leaves her job early to make the trip from Brownsville to her home in Buell. Passing the “few old mill buildings still standing” on her way home, Grace recalls when the mill had been fully operating and its eventual demise (43). Following the layoffs, Grace remembers all the personal tragedies, including foreclosures, divorces, and suicides, all three of which happened to her ex-husband’s cousin: “it was a horror show,” she recalls (44). Then,

She remembered when everyone came out to watch the two-hundred-foot-tall and almost brand-new blast furnaces called Dorothy Five and Six get toppled with dynamite charges. It was not long after that that terrorists blew up the World Trade Center. It wasn't logical, but the one reminded her of the other. There were certain places and certain people who mattered a lot more than others. Not a single dime was being spent to rebuild Buell (45).

In this moment, Grace destabilizes not only the hierarchies between places, blurs not only the distinctions between space and time, but she simultaneously and proactively challenges the underpinning assumptions of American national belonging. Like Kaplan's argument about 19th century literary regionalism, Grace Poe's juxtaposition "deploy[s] the local periphery to cast a critical eye on the national center in a critique of the social oppression that link[s] region and nation" (254). The marginality of the Rust Belt comes to be emphasized through the comparison to the emphatically nationalist response to September 11.

In the scene that opened this chapter, Henry English recalls the accident that left him paralyzed. In his memory, Henry recalls that the "[t]ower was burning and the whole place was on fire and [he] decided to jump" (348). We may at first be tempted to see in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 echoes of the accident at the mill, an accident caused almost directly by the company's negligence. Of course, such a reading is anachronistic inasmuch as the accident at the mill, and deindustrialization more broadly, predates by at least a decade the events of 9/11. Skillfully, however, Meyer calls attention to this reading, asking the reader to reconsider the relationship: not to see in deindustrialization

echoes of 9/11, but to see in 9/11 the echoes, and perhaps even the ramifications however nebulously connected, of deindustrialization.

Much like the turn-of-the-twentieth-century's literary regionalism, which was bookended by the national trauma of the Civil War on one end and the national project of imperialist expansion on the other, Rust Belt literature similarly engages with national trauma and imperial wars abroad, i.e., the war on terror. The national trauma from which Rust Belt literature emerges is, as evidenced in Grace's discerning view of the mill, the twinned events of deindustrialization and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. If the factory was the visual marker of the presence of the working class, its demolition signals a complete removal from the physical and cultural landscape. Grace's juxtaposition, though, goes beyond articulating this marginality, though it certainly does that. Through her active remembering of these two events side-by-side, Grace constructs both the *place*, in geographical terms, and *her place*, in terms of her relationship to that geography, to that temporality, and to broader national and international concerns. Rust Belt literature not only describes the region, but it in fact constructs it and all of its sinewy connections to global and national events. It's as if Grace is responding to the horror and shock – the “how could this happen here” – of 9/11 by asserting that this destruction has happened here, right here, in the Rust Belt, without so much as a shoulder shrug.

Grace's understanding of the mills' demolition is not totally dissimilar from Frazier's performance in response to the Levi's advertisement. Although articulating different, and often competing, legacies and realities, Grace's view of the mill underscores her understanding of the working class being excised from the landscape

and, thus, from the national imaginary and the myths that sustain it, e.g., the American Dream. This understanding is similar to Frazier's performance that emphasizes how the Levi's commercial erased the Black working class from Braddock's landscape through the rhetoric of the frontier. In addition, Grace overlays her experience with the mill with multiple spatial and historical realities—most obviously 9/11. Similarly, Frazier refuses to concede history to the narrative of progress, insisting on the current and historical presence of Black people in Braddock. In many ways, these different aesthetic points of view render the Rust Belt as a complex, geographic palimpsest—a metaphor taken up extensively in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: “The Land of Used-Ta-Be”: Rust Belt Literature as Palimpsest in Two Collections of Poetry and Photography

As discussed throughout this thesis, various national and international concerns intersect within the geographic and cultural borders of the Rust Belt. The complex legacies of indigenous displacement and resistance, racial segregation, class discrimination, and corporate disinvestment and deindustrialization have all left enduring marks on the landscape and culture of the region. Rust Belt literature, which we explored in the last chapter through Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*, often builds on these various themes. As Meyer did with the intersection of the US-invasion of Iraq and Rust Belt unemployment, Rust Belt literature can overlap multiple histories to reveal complex interpretations of how these often disparate concerns interact. Like a palimpsest, these layers of meaning can come together in surprising, challenging, and captivating ways.

The metaphor of the palimpsest proves a valuable lens through which to read Rust Belt literature specifically and Rust Belt aesthetics more broadly. Sarah Dillon defines the palimpsest as “an involuted phenomenon where otherwise unrelated texts are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other” (245). She explores the neologism “palimpsestuous”¹⁹ to describe “the structure with which one is presented as a result of [the palimpsest’s textual relationality], and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script” (245). The palimpsest, then, becomes a

19. Dillon argues that this neologism, and its more nuanced definition, is increasingly favored by scholars of the palimpsest (245). She details the lineage of the term “palimpsestuous.” See page 260-1, note 3.

metaphor or dialectic for examining varied cultural texts, including, for our purposes, both literature and geographic regions.

In this chapter, I focus on two collections, both of which are collaborations between poets and photographers. The first collection is titled *From the Western Door to the Lower West Side* (2010), with poetry from Eric Gansworth and photography from Milton Rogovin; the second collection is *From Milltown to Malltown* (2010), with poetry from Jim Daniels and Jane McCafferty and photography from Charlee Brodsky. My goal is to draw on the metaphor of the palimpsest to further our understanding of Rust Belt literature. Through the palimpsest, I interrogate how the collections encounter time and space in the Rust Belt, drawing on shared imagery of movement, displacement, and in-between-ness. My palimpsestuous reading enables a future imaginary that draws together (and challenges) the often disentangled yet intimately connected struggles of indigenous peoples and the working class, or, said from a different point of view, the narratives of settler colonialism and capitalism.

To present this argument, I will first provide an overview of each of the texts and the accompanying photographs. From these foundational overviews, I will then provide a close reading of each of the collections, with attention paid to how the images and texts overlap. In conclusion, I will examine how these texts critique the inter-related narratives of settler colonialism and capitalism and offer tentative visions of a more equitable future.

From the Western Door to the Lower West Side is a collaborative project between poet Eric Gansworth and documentary photographer Milton Rogovin, whose photographs

from *Portraits in Steel* were discussed in the introduction. Rogovin, a former optometrist who was labeled “Buffalo’s Top Red” during the McCarthyism period, documented the lives of the working poor through his photography. Rogovin approached Gansworth, a Haudenosaunee writer and visual artist, with the photographs and initiated the collaborative project. The photographs were from Rogovin’s Native American Series, depicting the life of the indigenous people living in the Tuscarora Nation in western New York and in the nearby city of Buffalo, bridging the space between rural and urban indigenous life. Gansworth accepted the invitation to collaborate, and the poems and photography were originally shown in a gallery.²⁰ Later, they were collected and published as a book (Gansworth 12-15).

From the Western Door to the Lower West Side elegantly illustrates two different yet interconnected sites of indigenous life. The collection moves continuously between the “Western Door”—a reference to the western edge of the figurative Long House of the Iroquoian nation, which Gansworth connects to the Tuscarora Nation although this western door was traditionally guarded by the Seneca Nation—and the “Lower West Side”—a low-income neighbourhood in Buffalo, NY where many indigenous people settled, particularly those from the Tuscarora and Seneca Nations. Sometimes, one poem focuses only on one site, but often, the movement between the two places is fluid, so the reader encounters both sites multiple times within the same poem, and the images mirror

20. The photographs and poetry were first shown at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in Buffalo, NY in 2009. The show was reproduced in 2010 at the Seneca-Iroquois National Museum in Salamanca, NY (“List of Exhibitions and Awards.”).

the poem's movement. This fluidity creates an intimacy between the two places, so that the spaces tend to bleed into each other.

From Milltown to Malltown accomplishes this overlap, but in a different way.

Based on the photographs of Charlee Brodsky, each photograph is accompanied with one poem, written by either Jane McCafferty or Jim Daniels. The collection focuses on the steel town Homestead, just outside of Pittsburgh's city limits. Formerly the site of Homestead Steel Works, a part of the Carnegie Steel enterprise, an open-air mall was recently constructed on the remains of the former mill. The mill was the site of the Homestead Strike, an important labour struggle that ultimately resulted in the union's defeat.²¹ Like *Western Door*, *Milltown* explores the layers of meaning in these intimately connected places.

However, unlike *Western Door*, the two sites of *Milltown* are delineated in the book's two sections, appropriately named "Milltown" and "Malltown." In the first, the images and poems focus on the town proper: shuttered homes, empty storefronts, abandoned churches, and the people who live there. In the second, the mall, from construction to completion, is the focus: parking lots, new condos, retail clerks, shoppers. The distinct sections suggest a tension between the two sites, though they also overlap in important ways, as I'll discuss below.

21. Paul Krause's *The Battle for Homestead, 1880-1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* outlines the significance of the Homestead Steel strike, not only for the Rust Belt, but for its broader implications in the American labor movement. He writes that "the Homestead Lockout became part of the folklore of industrial America. It entered popular culture as a quasi-mythical epic that pitted the aspirations of organized labor against the heartless rule of greedy tyrants" (4).

Though I will discuss a number of similarities and differences below, perhaps it is helpful to frame the following discussion with two obvious examples of how these two collections are similar, examples that elucidate major themes of both texts. First, the titles of both collections—*From the Western Door to the Lower West Side* and *From Milltown to Malltown*—emphasize a movement between two places. Perhaps more precisely, the prepositional phrases suggest both a difference and an overlap, highlighting not just one or the other but the place that falls in-between. More than the sum of its parts, this in-between space is the site of the palimpsest, the place where two “texts” intermingle, altering and informing one another to create new meanings. Second, both texts are collaborative projects that are built upon the intersection between image and word, photography and poetry. This multimodal expression further emphasizes the sense of overlap and intermingling, suggesting further the efficacy of the palimpsest metaphor.

The metaphor of the palimpsest opens a critical avenue for exploring Rust Belt literature. As discussed above, Rust Belt literature constructs place even as it explores or reveals it. It is a layered text necessarily, not only because it explores a complex region and people at a moment of economic and social crisis, a region that has been rewritten a number of times; as discussed in the introduction, the region has been alternately the promised homeland of indigenous peoples, the industrial heartland, the rusted-out remnants of American industry and, now, the phoenix rising, the land of “Rust Belt chic” and civic boosterism. Literary representations of the region add yet another layer to an already complex tapestry, yet these texts can also help in analyzing or understanding the region through carefully listening to marginalized groups, like the working class.

Made evident in the preceding analysis of *American Rust*, the working class is central to the Rust Belt identity, and Rust Belt literature reflects the pivotal role class dynamics play in forming the region. Such a focus on the marginalized working class often leads to Rust Belt literature examining the economic and personal struggles of deindustrialization. As we saw in *American Rust*, Grace Poe remembers all the personal tragedies that followed the local steel mill's closing, including foreclosures, divorces, and suicides. She describes that period in their small town as “a horror show” (44). Despite the seemingly unhelpful situation, Rust Belt literature does leave room for hope, however small or incomplete. Although *American Rust* is grim, its conclusion is hopefully ambiguous. Grace imagines Poe, who remains in police custody, “walking...down the road, toward a new place” (367). Despite the ambiguous imagery, the conclusion at the very least refuses to condemn the characters, instead allowing the reader to imagine an alternative to deindustrialization's “horror show”—not in a way that negates the struggles of the region, but rather a complex concept of hope that embraces the difficulty without extinguishing the hopeful. The collaborative collections of poetry and photography that are our present focus—*From the Western Door to the Lower West Side* and *From Milltown to Malltown*—are similarly concerned with marginalized communities and explore in different ways this complex vision of hope.

In *From the Western Door*, this alternative imaginary is enabled through a focus on in-between spaces. In the prose introduction to the collection, Gansworth reflects on the interaction between his poetry and Rogovin's photographs, and he draws on the metaphor of the Two Row Wampum Belt. The belt “is made up of two identical rows of

purple wampum beads on a background of three rows of white wampum beads, in equal ratio” and is “meant to represent two canoes, traveling side by side, as equals, neither interfering in the other’s business...each respectfully acknowledging the presence of the other” (12). Gansworth hoped to create the collection in a similar way: he tried “to find that space where these photos and these poems will run parallel lines, as equals, informing each other and sharing space, alive in their tension and grace—two rows defining themselves and each other” (15). While the poems and the photographs each contain meaning, when put in dialogue that meaning is not erased, but neither is it merely combined: a new space opens that is neither one nor the other. Not completely unlike the palimpsest, where unrelated texts intermingle to create new connections, the text and the image, while in this case related, do construct alternate meanings not necessarily contained by one or the other. In addition to the relationality between image and text, the metaphor of the wampum belt also emphasizes the intersection between spaces: the Tuscarora Nation and Buffalo’s Lower West Side.

The first poem of the collection, in fact prior to the prose introduction, is titled “Artery.” It is accompanied by a photograph of a middle-aged indigenous man leaning against the front bumper of a car (see Figure 9). The man stands in the centre of the image, and the car’s bumper runs horizontally behind him, effectively segmenting the photograph into four quadrants. On its own, the photograph calls to mind an intersection and synergy between the man and his automobile. When thought in connection with the poem “Artery,” the image’s four quadrants echo the four chambers of the heart,

establishing the recurrent theme of blood and circulation. In the poem, Gansworth writes that the man

knows he is too old
to walk from
the Lower West Side
to the Western Door,
and the only way
to ride that forty mile lifeline connecting
the two halves of his divided heart
is his faithful Buick (11).

The image of the “artery” takes on multiple meanings in the passage: the artery of the heart; the artery of the car’s engine; and the artery as the road. The image of the heart and arteries suggests, not only the underlying theme of “blood” and its complicated history in indigenous relations with the west—a point to which we will return—but also the idea of circuits and circulation. Although the path in the poem from “the Lower West Side / to the Western Door” suggests only one avenue of movement—from the city to the reservation—the title inverts that path, suggesting a more fluid, dual image of “home”—an image emphasized when the car is described as the “keys to both homes” (11). These mirrored paths—from the city to reservation and vice versa—suggests that both sites as well as the pathways between them construct “home.”



Figure 9. Photograph by Milton Rogovin. Used with permission from the publisher.

Articulating home is a central focus of the poems and the photographs. Moving between the two sites, trying to assert one or the other as more authentic becomes increasingly difficult. In “What the Photographer Saw,” Gansworth plays with the distinctions between these two sites.

Two places separated by forty miles,

an ambitious day's journey by foot
reduced to less than an hour
with cars and a highway, two places,
where the roads could hardly be
more different from one another (29).

The poem is accompanied with a number of different photographs. Some depict life on the reservation; some life in the urban neighbourhood. Much like the highway between the two places, the poem moves fluidly back and forth, at turns detailing snow games common in the Tuscarora Nation and then moving back to the dance moves of the city. The road, in fact, becomes the image through which the reader, like the frequent traveler from one to the other, enters each place. In the first stanza, Gansworth describes “the first, dirt paths / in rolling hills and family / farm patches”; then, in “the second, measured, blocked / and orderly, an urban grid in place” (29). Initially, these stark contradictions seem to emphasize the difference between the city and the reservation.

Gansworth, however, challenges the apparent distinction, and assumed hierarchy, between traditional, rural indigenous life and assimilationist, urban indigenous life. The narrative rhythm of the poem is punctuated three times by couplets, which alter the rhythm and suggest a shift in focus. The poem opens with the initial comparison between the roads of the reservation and the roads of the city. The couplet—“He [the photographer] saw what remained / and he saw what was left”—breaks this initial structure and transitions to a more focused look at the reservation. The couplet itself refers the reader back to the photographs, using the “he” to refer back to “the

photographer.” The focus on reservation life reflects Rogovin’s accompanying images: an elderly man preparing corn for winter; a landscape portrait of a snowy field with stacked wood in the foreground and an outhouse in the background; and another elderly man smiling and displaying a carved “snow snake.” In these images, Gansworth sees “A man who keeps doing / what his family has done / for more generations / than his collective relatives / have the capacity to remember” (31). The actions implicit in the images—preparing corn, chopping wood, carving snow snakes—carry a weight of tradition.

Gansworth again breaks with the narrative rhythm to repeat, with a difference, the couplet: “And he saw what remained / and he saw what was left” (33). The repeated phrase sets up a difference between “what remained” and “what was left,” a difference between remains and left-overs. The syntax here at first splits what might otherwise be considered synonyms. The split calls attention to the double-movement that occurs both, though with specific differences, in regards to indigenous peoples and to deindustrialized cities. That is, while “remains” are often romanticized and valued as relics, left-overs are regarded as obstacles to progress. Not shying away from this dilemma, Gansworth and Rogovin meet it head on, unmasking the diversity of indigenous experience in contemporary North America, and insisting not only on acknowledging the “romantic” remains, but also the “inconvenient” left-overs.

At this turn in the poem, Gansworth focuses on Rogovin’s photograph of an indigenous man and an African-American woman dancing. The woman wears a shirt with “BUFFALO, N.Y.” emblazoned across her chest. In the background, two

loudspeakers sit on the patterned linoleum floor under a pair of tables, and the man looks cautiously at the ground, appearing to struggle with the unfamiliar rhythm. The woman next to him smiles broadly, her hat tipped forward covering one eye. They dance side-by-side facing the camera, and, though they aren't touching, the shadow that falls on the wall behind them appears as if they are holding hands. Gansworth writes,

the only drums in this room
are recorded, a backbeat
for a different kind of movement,
a different kind of dance,
a different kind of social (35).

Underneath the rhythms of the recorded backbeat are the drumbeats of the reservation and the dances of traditional socials. The resulting “different kind of social,” then, is derived from the overlap between the reservation and the city. Not merely a heterogeneous mixture, but a “social” that is both new and rooted in history.

Following this stanza, another couplet disrupts the narrative rhythm again, though this time the content is quite different. Whereas the previous couplets took the photographer's perspective, this refocuses on the photographs' subjects: “and this is where they discover / themselves and each other” (35). Gansworth calls attention to the “here” of the previous stanza: not a physical location, but the site of intersection—where traditional dance intermingles with contemporary rhythms, where the erased text of indigenous life is revealed underneath and equal to the text of contemporary Buffalo.

The poem concludes, not with a return to the Tuscarora Nation nor with an idealization of urban diversity, but with a call to action. The final photograph of the poem's series depicts graffiti on a brick wall (see Figure 10). The sidewalk is badly cracked, and a parking sign has been spray-painted over. The graffiti on the wall reads: "Attica & Wounded Knee Means Fight Back!" and to the left of this message, "Los Jobos June 15 7:30 PM," likely a reference to a meeting place in the Lower West Side. Importantly, Gansworth emphasizes the location of the graffiti before turning to its content:

...the message left
for anyone wandering lost
in this particular territory
housed within the borders
of the Western Door (35).

In a poem that has delineated the differences between the reservation and the city, Gansworth now draws the two together as he places the Lower West Side squarely inside the Western Door, and thus a part of the Tuscarora Nation. Any call to action within the photographs and poem necessarily includes the active participation of people in both places, and even beyond.

If Rogovin's image isn't clear enough in its demand for action, Gansworth drives the point home. All of the people within "this particular territory"

are asked to think
of the parallel histories

of Wounded Knee
and Attica and
if they are not sharp
enough to draw
their own conclusions,
one has been provided
sprayed onto the permanency
of these bricks piled
on one another,
sealed with mortar
and blood (37).



Figure 10. Photograph by Milton Rogovin. Used with permission from the publisher.

The graffiti references two important political moments of the early 1970s. Attica, NY, only 60 km from Buffalo and the Tuscarora Nation, was the site of a prisoner revolt that was put down by the State government and resulted in the deaths of more than 40 people. In Wounded Knee, SD, a town on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, members of the American Indian Movement occupied the town to protest the corrupt leadership of the tribal president and to demand that the United States honor its treaty agreements. The graffiti claims that the message of both events is to “fight back,” and the poem refers to them as “parallel histories.” Together, the events highlight the systemic racism and classism in the U.S. settler state, so the call to action is a broad one, meant to include a number of constituencies. Importantly, too, the call to action is permanently inscribed, drawing again on the idea of circulation through the image of being written in blood.

Blood, as an image and a theme, recurs throughout the collection. Given the significance that blood quantum plays in legitimating claims to indigenous belonging vis-à-vis the settler states of North America, it is necessary to unpack how Gansworth and Rogovin re-present this theme. Much like the double movement involved in “What the Photographer Saw” between “what remains” and “what was left,” the concept of “Indian blood” proves more complex. To take something of a detour, Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* offers a unique perspective on this double movement. At one point, Lucy, a nanny from the West Indies, is told by Mariah, her wealthy New York employer, that Mariah has “Indian blood.” Lucy thinks, “I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?” (41). A bitingly insightful question, one that uncovers the

palimpsestuous layers of indigenous life in North America: how can indigenous life be valued as “natural” or “traditional” even as its eradication is sought? (We may be able to pose a similar question of the place: how can deindustrialized cities be valued as hip, chic or regenerating even as the cities’ long-time, impoverished residents are relocated?)

In “‘Indian Blood’: Reflections on the Reckoning and Refiguring of Native North American Identity,” Pauline Turner Strong and Barrik Van Winkle draw on this example from *Lucy* to discuss the ways in which indigenous people of North America are simultaneously oppressed by blood quantum while at the same time needing to employ it to legitimate land claims and tribal membership. They conclude that in order to counter the inherent racism of blood quantum, it is necessary to “acknowledg[e] ‘Indian blood’ as a discourse of conquest with manifold and contradictory effects, but without invalidating rights and resistances that have been couched in terms of that very discourse” (565). Drawing on visual art, literature, and ethnographic examples, Strong and Winkle argue that indigenous people and specifically indigenous artists can and do employ the discourse of “blood” in creative and even subversive ways. Gansworth does similar work in this collection, where even the message of “Fight Back” is written in blood.

In “Family Connection, Once Removed” the discourse of blood becomes entangled with themes of family and place. Two photographs accompany the poem. The first is a photograph of a large, extended family, representing at least three generations, with the matriarch standing and smiling in the back row. The family poses in front of a home with peeling paint, and a large fan is propped up in the open window. The young children are unable to hold still; some of the family members smile as they look at the

camera. In the second photograph, the matriarch of the same family is now alone, years later. She sits on the cement porch steps of her home and smiles. She holds the earlier family photograph, carefully grasping it in opposite corners. Gansworth's poem opens by focusing on her position: "She holds this photo, smiling, tentative, / as if it were crystal, ready to shatter / leaving only blood and loss in her hands" (59). At first, blood in this case reflects the pain of losing a once abundant family, of being left alone. However, the layered meanings of "blood" call attention to how this loss becomes integrated with broader and deeper cultural losses.

The remainder of the poem circles around the question of place, highlighting the physical details of the home and surroundings: "on an urban porch, lawn chairs / behind her at a city home where / there is no lawn for them, and she is framed / by another door" (59). Instead of the Western Door of the reservation, the woman is framed by the door of her urban home on the Lower West Side. Then, in the final stanza of the poem, Gansworth writes,

And though this is the city removed,
removed, are those beaded moccasins
on her feet, and if not,
can we say they are
with the same conviction
she uses to hold on?

The "same conviction" referenced here returns the reader to the first lines of the poem, referencing the woman's grip on the photograph of her now absent family. The poem

returns the reader to the opening, creating yet another circuit or artery of circulation.

Instead of being about one woman and one family, by the poem's conclusion the reader is asked to consider the whole "city removed." The reader must consider how the reservation bleeds through the concrete steps of these urban porches; how the beaded moccasins are as much about claiming a history as it is about claiming a place.

The temporal implication of the photographs in "Family Connection, Once Removed"—the visual dramatization of passing time *in space*—demonstrates clearly how time and space must be thought of as enmeshed. The "removed" of the title is echoed in the conclusion where Gansworth writes that "this is the city removed, / removed" (59). The multiple permutations of this word, tracing back to the removal of indigenous peoples from their native lands and forward to the twentieth century removal of poor, inner city populations from lands slated for redevelopment, demonstrate the palimpsestuous nature of this text: namely, the overlapping and intertwined logics of settler colonialism and industrial capitalism. We read these intermingled yet discrete layers, and though different, together each voice informs the other.

What the collection reveals is how urban space itself can be read palimpsestuously—that is, read through a keen awareness of the various intersecting layers of past, present, and future. In *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen argues that

we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of place... an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what there was before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The

strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias” (7).

Like the graffiti in “What the Photographer Saw” or the multiple layers of “removal” in “Family Connection, Once Removed,” the palimpsest of place sees the specters of the past just beneath the surface of the present. The multiple meanings of the word “removed” demonstrates how such a reading becomes associated with place. The Lower West Side contains the legacy of indigenous removal as well as the ever-present possibility of “urban redevelopment” and forced relocation. But, the palimpsestuous reading—reading not only disparate “texts” but also how they interact—can also enable an alternative imaginary, something like the coalition called for in graffiti: the call to “Fight Back!”

Like *Western Door*, the photographs and poems in *From Milltown to Malltown* explore two sites and the shared history layered just beneath the surface. The collection opens with the poem “Used-Ta-Be” as something of an introduction. A photograph of the former Homestead Steel Mill accompanies the poem (see Figure 11). The site is mostly empty, except for a single smokestack in the foreground and, in the background, a row of similar smokestacks. The Monongahela River and the sloping hills form the backdrop, recalling a time even before the mill and town had clear-cut the ancient riverbank. The solitary smokestack, which is at the photograph’s center and stretches above the horizon behind it, is reflected in a puddle at its base. Its shadow is cast long and at an angle. The whole composition gives the impression of a clock face, of time written directly onto the land. Twelve-forty, it seems to say.

The smokestack divides the image in two. On the left are the further remains of the mill, and on the right the waterfront, and the soon-to-be Waterfront Shopping Center.

The poem picks up this temporal and spatial split:

...The ancients recall battles
and blood. They search the landscape for some sign
that it was not imagined. They clean their glasses
and lean into the shopping carts for the precarious
balance of the new (3).

In this new terrain, “the ancients” recall the historic battles of Pinkerton forces against union workers, and perhaps the smaller battles fought from paycheck to paycheck.

Importantly, “the land of Used-Ta-Be” exists on the threshold between past and future, navigating between both spaces, the not-there mill and the not-yet mall—like Huyssen’s analysis, a heterotopia of sorts where past and future co-exist.



Figure 11. Photograph by Charlee Brodsky. Used with permission from the publisher.

Jim Daniels's poem "Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple," in the "Milltown" section of the collection, responds to Brodsky's photograph of a dilapidated church. The lancet windows are the only remaining sign of the building's history, and those appear to all be broken. Even the door appears missing, a gaping hole under the aluminum awning. Inside, the hint of debris is visible. To the right of the building, a row of parked cars, and to the left, an empty lot and, set further back, two other buildings, homes apparently, that have so far escaped the church's fate. Electrical wires crisscross the image, intersecting the vertical lines of the church façade and creating something of a ghostly Christian cross. Though a sense of haunting pervades the image—the hint of myth and religion, the dilapidated building, the neighbouring empty lot—the viewer is simultaneously grounded in the present. In front of the church, a sports car is parked, and it looks out-of-place amidst the signs of urban decay. The car disrupts the familiar narrative in Rust Belt photography: the beautiful ruin, empty and desolate, a narrative discussed in more depth in Chapter 4. Instead, the dilapidated building is juxtaposed with a well-kept, sleek car. If the photograph suggests mythic and historic hauntings, it also grounds the viewer very much in the materiality of the present.

The Daniels poem builds on this friction between myth and materiality. It opens with a telling line: "No such thing as a vacant lot. Every lot rubbled with sin. Bottom of your / shoes. Twisted vision of history's broken glasses. His story. Her story" (21). Here, the poem gives flesh to the oft-cited "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where Walter Benjamin writes, "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (254). For Daniels, the vacant lot operates much like the palimpsest, where what

is seen as an empty space is in fact full of history and, in this case, “sin.” The debris of the past, clinging to the soles of shoes, composes an alternative, material history, one that challenges the grand narratives seen through “history’s broken glasses.” Instead of these master narratives, history becomes a potential site of multiple voices, of “his story” and “her story.”

Similar to how Brodsky’s photograph disrupts expectations—not just another empty Rust Belt building—so too does the poem. By rehearsing and then revising well-known phrases, Daniels stylistically echoes the underlying theme related to place and history. He writes, “Let he without sin cast the first stone. Let he without a contractor’s license repair the first window” (21). Daniels invokes the oft-quoted Biblical phrase and then, using similar syntax, revises it. The religious overtones of the first sentence are juxtaposed with the practical, material concerns of the second. Daniels goes on to write “Shelter from the storm. Storm in the shelter” (21). Again, we move from the Biblical quotation that suggests religion as a protective abode, to the darkly humorous reality that the church in the photograph—with missing boards along its façade—would permit the storm to enter. The debris in the doorway, in fact, suggests the storm has already arrived. Again, I am reminded of Benjamin’s “Theses.” Not only does Benjamin’s analysis interrogate history through mythic images, but the theme of a storm is similarly central. Analyzing the Klee painting “Angelus Novus,” Benjamin writes,

...a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in [the Angel of History’s] wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm

irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (257-8). Not only the echoes of the storm in both passages, or the image of debris that litters the photograph as well as the texts, but the idea of Benjamin's "Paradise," or Eden, is also echoed in the poem's closing lines: "A rock smooth in the palm. Like an apple, But not an apple in sight" (21). Given the Christian overtones of the poem and image, this turn toward the "apple" recalls the Edenic fruit. By comparing it to a rock, a rock presumably used to break the church's windows, we are again confronted with the juxtaposition of "paradise" and destruction, the storm of Benjamin's analysis and the future to which the angel is propelled. Progress, as Benjamin identifies the storm, is ignorant of the future toward which it moves while being negligent to the past and present, failing to recognize that there is "[n]o such thing as a vacant lot."

In the "Malltown" section, Jane McCafferty's "On This Very Spot" approaches this tension between progress and historical consciousness from a different position. Brodsky's photograph centers on a small evergreen tree alone on a well-maintained plot of grass. On either side of the tree, parked in neatly lined parking spots, are two vehicles. To the right, a Ford SUV; to the left, a Toyota sedan. Taking up the entire background frame are the newly built condos, with clean white siding, clean white garage doors, and clean white fences on their second story balconies. On a small patch of dirt between two garage doors, there is an even smaller evergreen shrub, and the leaves of a tree peak through on the top left corner. Compared to the images of homes from the book's first section, this image is particularly striking in its uniformity and sterility. No graffiti, no

outdoor decorations, it is characterized by clean lines and pure whites and predictable patterns.

The poem calls attention to the regular patterns of the image by doing the opposite: a free verse poem that breaks lines unexpectedly, and its visual presence on the page is disruptive. Its content, too, disrupts the expected rhythms of life in these new homes. Its opening echoes the opening line of Daniels’s “Here’s the Church, Here’s the Steeple”:

Because every inch of this geography
contains blistered history,

some people
choose to tip-toe.

They go so slowly others get annoyed.

They’re not with the program (original emphasis 57).

McCafferty explores the palimpsestuous nature of the landscape, recalling the history of the place where “scalded ghosts / mingle, and speak” (57). Referencing the dangers of early steel mill work—the many workers who died pouring the molten liquid—the poem initially imagines a general nostalgia. In the poem’s conclusion, however, this becomes concrete, when she writes,

Hank Kalvecic, father of eleven
steel-worker since 1951, knelt
down and tried to pray on this very

spot—long before they dug a hole

for this exiled shrub (57).

No longer the history of abstraction, McCafferty connects very specifically to one of these “scalded ghosts.” The new condos, the sleek façade, the forced landscaping, all work to pave over the very real destruction wrought by industrial capitalism, both in a general sense and in a more specific, Hank-Kalvecic sense.

The Malltown section of the text explores how the cultural text of the historic mill shapes our understanding of the present context of the mall. If the new shopping centre imagines a middle class recreating the old mill, the workers at the mall reassert the same issues of class disparity and inequality once so prominent in the labour movements of the Homestead Steel Mill. In one photograph, Brodsky has taken a side portrait of a young man, his tie loosened, his nametag clipped to his uniform vest reads “Eric.” Eric gazes off camera to the left, an easy smile on his face: a break, finally. The brick wall behind him, a series of horizontal and vertical lines, frames his face as he sits on the bench. The photograph is accompanied by the Daniels poem “Hello, My Name is Eric and I’m...” The poem re-establishes the class difference so eagerly erased when the mill was demolished. Instead of physical labour, it is replaced with precarious service work, where “customers / who call us by name / do so with a mocking sneer” (53). Though not explicitly connecting this to the mill, Daniels does suggest a long legacy of working-class struggle, writing

How many of us

have worn that vest?

It stinks with our sweat
passed down like a talisman
against wealth (53).

Daniels figures class as an inherited talisman, one that is intimately associated with place. The physical characteristics have changed, the landscape itself has been scrubbed clean, but the class dynamics re-emerge, like erased words on a palimpsest, to intermingle with the new text with which they should've been divorced. Place and class bleed together, laid one on top of the other—we might say “intimately foreign” to one another.

As mentioned above, this taboo intimacy is a central component of Dillon's use of “palimpsestuous.” In the palimpsest, two texts that were not meant to overlap not only intersect but have become inextricable from each other. In Chapter 1 we discussed how racism and classism were intimately foreign to American national identity. In the present analysis, we can see how the palimpsest operates similarly to explicate the complex relationship between conflicting ideologies and histories. In *From the Western Door*, Gansworth and Rogovin explore the myriad overlappings of place and time, class and indigeneity, reservation life and city life, and the complex relationship between western modernity and indigenous identity. Similarly, we've seen how *From Milltown* emphasizes the historical memory within the place, unable and unwilling to be bulldozed over and forgotten. In both cases, the palimpsest becomes related to the geography of the city, where the city, as Huyssen identifies, puts things in different places, things not necessarily imagined side-by-side. Like a mall and a smokestack.

In *From Milltown*, the photograph that opens the book's "Malltown" section is of eight remaining smokestacks, diminishing in size toward a vanishing point (see Figure 12). In the foreground, a sign advertises Longhorn Steakhouse and nearby another sign reminds incoming traffic of the changing traffic speed: SPEED LIMIT 25. The empty road travels toward the same vanishing point, pulling the eye back to where it all disappears. The poem that accompanies the photograph, "On This Site," is prefaced with a brief excerpt from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. The excerpt explains that the film "'The Homestead Strike' spent one day filming in Pittsburgh, but the crew was unable to shoot re-creations locally. 'The Homestead mill is now a shopping mall, so that didn't really bring us back to 1892, although you can get a Starbucks,' director Kennedy said, laughing" (45). The poem uses the juxtaposition of the smokestacks with the mall to build on the disconnect between place and history. Throughout the poem's nine couplets, ordered evenly like the eight smokestacks in the photograph, the image of smoke recurs. Though the smokestacks are of course dormant, there is now "the wispy smoke of cars quickly dissipating." Smoke is the end result of capitalism, as the poem continues: "Where there's smoke, there's / the flammable whiff of dollar bills" (45). Smoke connects the smokestacks of industrial capitalism with the car-filled parking lots of retail capitalism. Moreover, though smoke is prevalent in the poem, fire is absent. In the concluding lines, the reader is reminded that the smokestacks "are lit up artistically, though no plaque / explains history, no fire burns inside" (45). Smoke without fire, smokestacks without a mill, space divorced from time: all simulacra, as Baudrillard defines it, "the generation of models of a real without origin or reality" (1). Reading

palimpsestuously, or reading with keen eyes to see not only disparate layers, but interacting layers, reconnects space and time to see, as this poem suggests, that retail capitalism and industrial capitalism are two sides of the same coin. Both leave only smoke in their aftermath.



Figure 12. Photograph by Charlee Brodsky. Used with permission from the publisher.

Reading palimpsestuously does not identify a static past emerging within the texts of the present. Importantly, it is an act that (re)figures the future. As Dillon concludes in her analysis, “in [the palimpsest’s] persistent figurative power and its theoretical adaptability it determines how we view the past and the present, and embodies within itself the promise of the future” (260). Huyssen similarly argues that “[w]e need both past and future to articulate our political, social, and cultural dissatisfactions with the present state of the world” (6). In *From the Western Door*, this future promise is evident in “Artery” and “What the Photographer Saw.” We also find it in the beautifully wrought

“Three More Sisters.” Drawing on the traditional metaphor of beans, squash and corn as three sisters, Gansworth builds a poem that challenges western ideas of temporality while imagining the work of transplantation. The accompanying photograph is of a young woman in a machine shop wearing dirty work gloves, smiling easily at the camera. Her head is tilted to the right, and her shoulder is slightly shrugged as she presses her right hand onto a standing tool drawer, and her left onto a workbench. The poem begins with the traditional three sisters being torn from the land and “learn[ing] to grow / in tougher soil” (60). The poem moves through the labour the new transplants endure, “working days in factories / fingers shrouded in rough gloves / leaving no traces of prints” (60). This industrial erasure of identity is reimagined when the poem moves to the woman’s home. Here, in an apartment building listening to “smashing glass, arguments, screams / a near miss at a STOP light” one of the sisters thinks that perhaps ““this is what it was like / in the olden days / when we lived together / in longhouses” and that this forced relocation may make connections anew and help the community to “grow[...] / stronger in resistance, / like steel tempered / in a firestorm” (62). Here, the past merges into the present—the apartment building like a longhouse—and in doing so it refigures or reimagines the future, a future that can create productive alliances and build a stronger resistance to the forces of settler colonialism. Here, the various temporal layers intersect in such a way as to alter each other, and ultimately to recreate the vision of the future.

As examples of what I want to call Rust Belt literature, *From the Western Door* and *From Milltown* demonstrate that this genre is not about a catalogue of themes or motifs, though these texts certainly share both. Instead, Rust Belt literature interrogates

how place comes to be constructed in the deindustrialized region. Through a focus on moments of conjuncture, where space and time intersect, Rust Belt literature offers multiple images of the same place. The poets and photographers in these collections provide not only an image of the past and present as embedded in place, but they offer alternative futures as well. When time is spatialized in this way, it ceases to be linear: the past recurs in these places just under the surface of the newly laid layers. Such is the power of this “land of used-ta-be.” The past is always already present, in the dust accumulating on the soles of our sneakers, in the arguments seeping through the walls of our apartment buildings.

By categorizing these texts as Rust Belt literature, I certainly do not wish to lock them into a single, static definition. On the contrary, I hope that such a suggestion can contribute to the ongoing discussions around the emergent literary scene in the deindustrialized Midwest. As a critic, I am aware of my own practice, and that, as much as I seek to describe the phenomenon as it exists, my own naming of it as Rust Belt literature effectively creates connections that were not necessarily present. By intersecting these two texts and creating yet another, my own practice acts as something of a palimpsest. Perhaps, like Gansworth’s invocation of the Wampum Belt, these texts move toward a common goal without disrupting either project. The idea of Rust Belt literature specifically, or Rust Belt aesthetics more broadly, may contribute in some small way to envisioning a future for the region that addresses all of the various modes of oppression found within its amorphous borders, oppression often wrought by the overlapping of capitalism and settler colonialism.

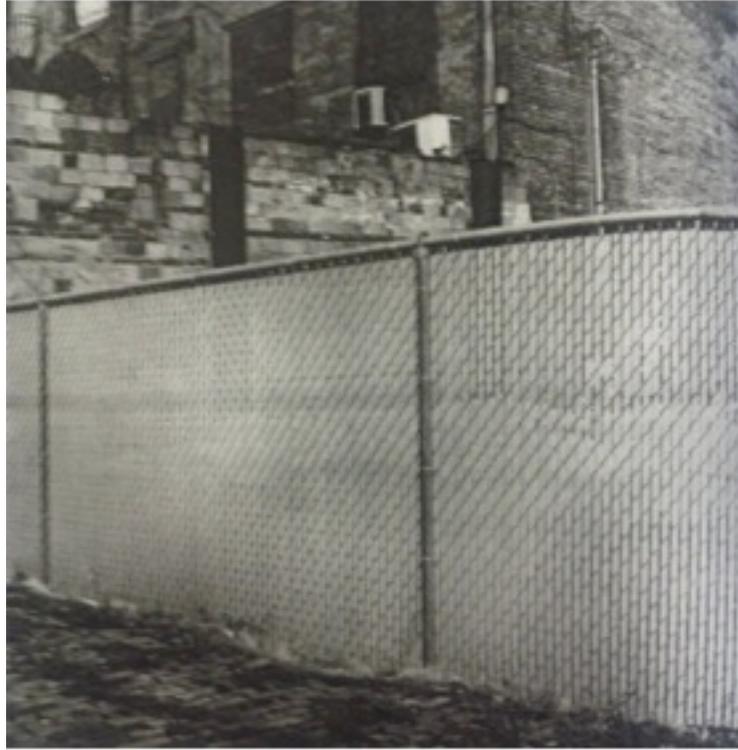


Figure 13. Photograph by Charlee Brodsky. Used with permission from the publisher.

In closing, I want to turn to one poem and photograph from each collection, poems and photographs that find echoes and reverberations in one another. In *Milltown*, the poem “A Series of Questions in Commemoration of a New Fence” is accompanied by a photograph of a newly constructed fence that separates an overgrown brick road from an ill-maintained brick building (see Figure 13). In *Western Door*, “What the Photographer Saw,” discussed above, is accompanied by a number of different photographs. The final photograph, discussed in detail above, is of an exterior brick wall with the spray-painted message “Attica & Wounded Knee Means Fight Back!” (see Fig. 10). The excerpts I want to focus on are as follows:

“What the Photographer Saw”

...

and the dividing walls
are so consuming
that even the windows
are covered with brick,
implying the world
inside and the world
outside are not so good
for the future of either

“A Series of Questions in Commemoration
of a New Fence”

...

How high does the fence have to
be?
Who decides? What good is a fence
you can't peer through, can't claw
your fingers around, can't
shake and rattle, can't climb?
At what point are windows
bricked in, and how does one
maintain the light?

What at first may have been overlooked in the photographs is called attention to in the poems. A window has been bricked over in both, evidenced in the images by the noticeably different colored bricks in the perfect outline of a window. The liminal space between inside and out has been erased, an attempt to clearly define a difference and, in defining, create a difference.²² And while the violence of such an action—of constructing

22. Here, I am drawing on Derrida's *Of Hospitality*. In that text, he writes, “in order to constitute the space of a habitable house and a home, you also need an opening, a door and windows, you have to give up a passage to the outside world. There is no house

walls where there was once connection—cannot be ignored, neither can we ignore the fact that those connections remain, even if only through a palimpsestuous reading of space. The different colored bricks become windows themselves—windows into different times, different places, windows onto different intersections. In these poems and photographs, the work of equitable future-building and place-making can be seen, ever so slightly, through the cracks in those brick windows.

or interior without a door or windows” (61). He goes on to complicate any straightforward notion of hospitality, arguing instead that it is always already a power dynamic that often results in xenophobia. However, in this passage, we might see how the bricked-over windows dramatize not only the rejection of any outsiders but also, inasmuch as “home” can only be constituted by its ability to be hospitable, this blocking off also precludes the possibility of being at-home. In interrogating this dual outcome of being both inhospitable and un-homed, the photographs and poems imagine a more hopeful, open community.

Chapter 4: Against Ruin Porn: Ruins and Everyday Life in Visual Art from the Rust

Belt²³

Reading hope into the photographs and poetry of *From Milltown to Malltown* and *From the Western Door to the Lower West Side* requires attentiveness to how everyday life is rendered visually and poetically. In this chapter, I build on this focus on everyday life through a close analysis of visual art. Therefore, I want to begin with an anecdote about my everyday experience in Detroit, Michigan. In 2013, I visited the Museum of Contemporary Art-Detroit (MOCAD) to view the exhibit *The Past is Present*.²⁴ Coinciding with the 80th anniversary of Diego Rivera's famous mural *Detroit Industry* housed at the nearby Detroit Institute of the Arts (DIA), MOCAD commissioned 14 artists to create murals relevant to 21st-century Detroit, much in the way that Rivera's work was relevant to the city in the early 20th-century. Diego Rivera's mural, completed in 1933, was the result of Rivera's study of the River Rouge Ford plant, the largest automobile factory in the world. The mural still figures prominently in the Detroit imagination, even being featured in the 2011 Chrysler advertisement discussed earlier. According to Jeffrey Belnap, Rivera's "'Detroit Industry,' a twenty-seven-panel mural cycle in the museum's courtyard...explores the manufacturing process that transforms raw materials into automobiles and the place of the workers in the process" (91). The mural blurs distinctions between modern, industrial America and pre-Columbian

23. A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in a future edition of the journal *Transformations*.

24. More information on the exhibit, including images of the paintings, is available at MOCAD's website. A video about the exhibit features many of the paintings, and Carolina Caycedo's piece *SCRAPCITY*, the focus of my analysis, appears at the 3-minute mark of the video. See <http://www.mocadetroit.org/past-exhibitions.html>.

America, drawing on motifs of indigenous cultures as well as the cultures of factory labour. In many ways, Rivera's mural offers an alternative to our earlier discussion about the Ford plants melting pot graduation. Instead of creating a homogenous mass from disparate pieces, Rivera's mural embraces a multi-vocal, multi-ethnic imagery in order to render his conception of 20th-century Detroit.

The MOCAD exhibition was meant to both honour Rivera's work and reimagine it. Many of the paintings at MOCAD, these murals-in-miniature, invoked historical legacies like automobile manufacturing and Motown to position the city's history as constitutive of its present, and others built on the city's ruined reputation. As an example of the latter, Carolina Caycedo's *SCRAPCITY* was particularly striking (see Figure 14). At the centre of the painting, Caycedo reimagined the city's seal, misspelling the city's name as "Destroit"—a homophone of "destroyed"—to demonstrate how destruction had become constitutive of the city itself. Although the city had been nicknamed the "Arsenal of Democracy" for its role in World War II, Caycedo's work rechristened the city as the "Arsenal of Bankruptcy," which alludes to Detroit's 2013 bankruptcy. The date of the bankruptcy filing (July 18, 2013) and the total amount of the city's debt (\$18.5 billion) appear at the bottom of the painting on a mock celebratory ribbon.²⁵ Behind the city seal,

25. In 2013, Detroit became the largest municipality to file for Chapter IX bankruptcy. The filing came after the state's appointed Emergency Financial Manager (EFM), Kevyn Orr, took charge of the city. In Michigan law, an EFM is an unelected, governor-appointed official that yields unilateral power to make financial decisions for financially struggling municipalities. The bankruptcy, the EFM argued, allowed Detroit to liquidate assets and relinquish responsibility for pension benefits, thus saving the city billions of dollars. As one side effect of the bankruptcy that is perhaps of particular interest here, the EFM suggested that the works of art held by the Detroit Institute of the Arts yet owned by the municipality be auctioned to the highest bidder. Works by Matisse,

Caycedo painted Detroit's skyline, and in the background a heap of rubble towers over the modernist skyscrapers. Below the horizon line that divides the painting, Caycedo painted a blurry reflection of both the city skyline and the towering rubble.

I kept returning to this painting as I walked through the gallery. I was drawn to it, in part, because of its disorienting effects. It depicted images I was familiar with—the skyline, the city seal, even the city's name—yet all with a difference. In the next room, a post-modern jazz ensemble rehearsed, sending atonal music through the open warehouse exhibition space. This dissonance contributed to the feeling of intrigued unease I had with Caycedo's piece. Perhaps, too, I was drawn to it because of the critical echoes the painting had with Walter Benjamin's analysis of the Klee painting *Angelus Novus*, a connection apparent in other Rust Belt aesthetic projects like *From Milltown to Malltown* discussed earlier. Writing of the painting, Benjamin says that “[w]here we perceive a chain of events, [the angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (“Theses” 257). Caycedo's mural-in-miniature captured this sentiment, and, in doing so, it redefined Detroit through its ruins—one more pile at the angel's feet.

Rivera, Picasso and others were included in the appraisal by Christie's Auction House. Ultimately, public outcry and resistance halted the sale of these pieces of art (Kennedy “The Agony”). Though beyond the scope of the present analysis, this incident offers particular insight into the relationship between politics and art, specifically how the public imagines itself in relation to artworks that are not necessarily about the community though arguably a part of the community.



Figure 14. Photograph of Carolina Caycedo's *SCRAPCITY* from the author's personal collection.

The angel's all-encompassing view is reminiscent of, though certainly distinct from, Michel de Certeau's view in "Walking in the City" from his text *The Practice of Everyday Life*. There, de Certeau is atop the World Trade Center in Manhattan, and he ponders his bird's-eye-view, a view with special significance in post-9/11 Manhattan. Far from intimate, de Certeau's view rendered Manhattan grid-like, readable, and comprehensible, while providing the viewer with a feeling of separateness and omniscience. However, this image of the city is nothing more than a fiction. De Certeau describes it as "a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum... a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and misunderstanding of practice" (93). In other words, the panoptic view of the city cannot apprehend the way residents, or practitioners of de Certeau's "long poem of walking" (101), make daily use of the streets, sidewalks, and

alleys. Similarly, Caycedo's repositioning of Detroit as defined by its ruins cannot imagine everyday life amongst the debris. Instead, the city appears as a reciprocal metaphor of ruins, where Detroit is synonymous with ruins and ruins synonymous with Detroit. The tensions arising from this strategic, panoptic fiction and the tactical, experiential practices of the street persist. And it is with this tension in mind that I want to analyze visual art from the Rust Belt.

In this chapter, I examine a variety of genres of visual art emerging from and about the U.S. Rust Belt. Through an examination of 21st century photography collections, gallery installations, and public art, I argue that artistic projects interpret the ruins of the Rust Belt in competing ways, and much of this contestation occurs through a discourse about everyday life. Therefore, I focus on this discourse, drawing primarily from the work of de Certeau, to distinguish between *the ruins of space* and *the ruins in place*. While cognizant of the limitations and pitfalls of dualistic categorization, my goal is not to argue for a foreclosed, definitive distinction, but rather to offer a framework for looking at the poetic and aesthetic representations of urban ruins. This distinction builds on cultural geographers' distinction between space and place and follows closely de Certeau's contrast between strategies and tactics. Ultimately, what's at stake in the visual poetics of the Rust Belt is a claim on the region's future—and for that matter the nation's future—claims that are often invested with hope.

Before turning to the archive of visual art that concerns us presently, I want to first spend time discussing key terms from de Certeau that will prove critical for what follows, terms including strategies, tactics, and poetics. These terms will help in

understanding the different way urban and industrial ruins become aestheticized.

Eventually, these concepts will also help to establish the ways these artistic projects imagine a future for and in Rust Belt places.

Strategies and tactics are best explored comparatively. Drawn from a lexicon of warfare, a strategy refers to “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power...can be isolated” (36-7). Strategies, therefore, are deeply integrated into space. Indeed, as in warfare, a base is required, a space of one’s own, from which to launch attacks on some “other.” De Certeau develops this concept of strategies further, demonstrating that a strategy represents “*a triumph of place over time*”; “a mastery of places through sight”; and a practice of transforming “uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (36). De Certeau’s view of Manhattan provides one example of how this concept of strategy can be applied in the urban context. In that example, the messy, lived space of New York is rendered graph-like, predictable, and readable—a fiction if there ever was one. In this example, space triumphs over time. The diachronic experiences of manoeuvring through the city streets are erased in favour of the synchronic map. And, what’s more, the ability to render the chaos of Manhattan readable is made possible through sight, the visual rendering of the city as static. In a similar way, Caycedo’s *SCRAPCITY* renders Detroit as fixed in its relation to ruins, providing an example of how de Certeau’s strategies may be executed through aesthetic projects.

In contrast to strategies, de Certeau defines a tactic as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus...It operates in isolated actions...[and] takes

advantage of ‘opportunities’” (37). Unlike strategies, then, tactics operate without the benefit of a base or a specific space. Therefore, instead of being invested in space, tactics tend to be more related to temporality. That is, tactics make use of time to challenge the omnipotence of spatial relations. Thinking still of Manhattan, Occupy Wall Street may be a clear, if more dramatic, example of de Certeau’s tactics. Using the semiotics of space imposed through the powerful, Occupy attained political notoriety because it challenged—albeit mostly symbolically—the use of “Wall Street” in the relations of globalized capital.

One of the key differences between strategies and tactics according to de Certeau is how each concept engages with space. He argues that “strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose...spaces...whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces” (30). Here, strategies function as an omnipresent power over a generalized map. Tactics, on the other hand, operate at the level of the street, the everyday, or the local. In the lexicon of cultural geography, we might say that strategies impose *space* while tactics enact or enable *place*. The distinction between space and place provides one way to conceptualize how time fits into de Certeau’s project. As discussed in earlier chapters, space connotes globalized, timeless geography, and place privileges the intersection of time and spatial relations. Scholars like Henri Lefebvre,²⁶ David Harvey,²⁷ Doreen

26. In Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, he focuses on space as a social product and argues that the shift in capitalism’s productive force—from things to space—is “conflict-laden” and makes it “possible to preserve the Marxist thesis of the fundamental role of the forces of production while at the same time liberating this thesis from the ideology of productivity and...growth” (410). Through capitalism, space is produced socially; this production of space, paradoxically, creates the social that enables

Massey²⁸, and Arturo Escobar²⁹ have articulated this distinction in different yet related ways. While we will see how aesthetic representations of the Rust Belt occur both through space and place, it is place—as the site of tactical, experiential, and temporal relations—that engenders a transformative poetics of the everyday.

For cultural studies scholar Benjamin Highmore, a poetics of the everyday is in fact central to de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*. If de Certeau's principle project is to provide a way to “articulate [everyday practices]” (de Certeau xi), then, Highmore argues, “a poetics, a *poiesis*—an inventive language that will register the inventiveness...of everyday life” is necessary to that very project (*Everyday Life* 153-4). According to Highmore, such a poetics intends “at least to make a start at listening to the practices of everyday life” (*Everyday Life* 169). For Highmore, a poetics of everyday life is carefully attentive to the quotidian and necessarily creative; it is the discourse through

the production of space. Seen in this way, space is a product of temporal, social relations and cannot be separated from it.

27. David Harvey builds on Lefebvre's concept of space (see note above). In “Space as a Keyword,” Harvey configures space in a tripartite system: absolute, relative, and relational. This system is configured in relation to Marx's value-form: respectively, use-value, exchange-value, and value. In addition to being a useful correlation to Marx's work, this comparison highlights that space operates as a social product mediated by the commodification of space-time. By focusing on space as a social product, Harvey emphasizes the importance of both abstract considerations of space and the temporality or lived realities of space.

28. Doreen Massey's *Space, Place and Gender* offers yet another way to think about the difference between space and place. Building on the work of Lefebvre and Harvey, Massey argues that space “represents Being, and to it are attached a range of epithets and connotations: local, specific, concrete, descriptive” (9). This is in contrast to place, which is understood as global and general.

29. For Escobar, place is “the *experience* of a particular location with *some measure of groundedness...sense of boundaries...and connection to everyday life*” (original emphasis, 140). Conversely, space, according to Escobar, is understood “as the absolute, unlimited and universal” (143).

which the everyday becomes intelligible and articulated. This is at one and the same time an incredibly humble and yet transformative project.

My use of de Certeau's work is best understood within Highmore's framework of everyday poetics. I understand everyday poetics as contributing to the broader project of Rust Belt aesthetics. In my analysis, strategies and tactics operate as metaphors to better articulate how aesthetic projects emerging from the U.S. Rust Belt engage with questions of space and place in relation to power dynamics. In Highmore's analysis, he argues that de Certeau's project can be most productive when "[t]he urgency and instrumentality of politics (what must we do?) is exchanged for an analysis (what's going on?)...[T]o designate a practice as strategic is akin to claiming it as metaphorical rather than metonymical" (*Everyday Life* 158). In other words, de Certeau's project is not a prescription for resisting power. Rather, it is an analysis of how power and the everyday exist side-by-side. My ensuing analysis attempts to build on this understanding of strategies and tactics as useful metaphors or analytics to investigate how specific poetic and aesthetic practices (re)organize and (re)interpret urban ruins to a variety of ends.

Because the Rust Belt is often linked to the concept of actual and metaphorical ruins, I position my analysis at the intersection of everyday poetics and the aesthetics of ruin. In his text *Cityscapes*, Highmore offers a provocative definition of urban ruins that connects space and time, and his explanation proves helpful in our present analysis. He writes that

Ruins, monuments and urban architecture point to an environment where the past continually impinges on the present. Ruins signal the trauma of history as the past

remains in the present as a reminder of violence and destruction. Ruins, because they are fragments of the past, physical debris cluttering up the present, make the actuality of urban culture vividly evident; here the past haunts the present... In this sense all cities are haunted; they are ghostly accumulations of past lives (4-5).

Highmore argues that urban ruins make visceral the temporal overlap of past, present, and future—recalling our earlier discussion of the region as palimpsest. In this sense, ruins enable de Certeau's everyday tactics, given that tactics also depend upon temporal play. However, whereas ruins contain this potential for temporal play, it is a potential that is not always realized and can, in fact, be suppressed through various practices.

In the Rust Belt, ruins have been investigated as serving multiple functions. Steven High and David W. Lewis, for example, investigate the ruins of the American Rust Belt through photography and ethnography. Writing specifically about industrial ruins, they write that “[i]ndustrial ruins are memory places, for they make us pause, reflect, and remember. But remember what, and to what end?” (9). They recognize the inherent ambivalence in ruined landscapes, suggesting that, in part at least, the aesthetic representation of ruins can be multiply motivated. These competing motivations, in turn, can lead to different tropes, images, and, ultimately, meanings emerging from the ruined space. High goes on to answer his own question, suggesting that these specific ruins serve as a site of memory that unites displaced labourers. Indeed, *Corporate Wasteland* is a testament to precisely how these industrial structures contribute to a sense of camaraderie among displaced workers. More broadly, when deindustrialization devastates entire cities not only the factories, but also the civic buildings, retail centres, schools, train stations,

and hospitals are all at risk to end up as ruins. These ruins contain the traces and memories of everyday life, and a poetics of the everyday would re-present these traces in order to make them legible and known.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the image of the Rust Belt as a region in ruins is fairly common in North America. Cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, and, perhaps most notably, Detroit all have national and, at least in Detroit's case, international recognition as modernist cities that have been decimated by deindustrialization. Images of abandoned factories, empty blocks, and vacant downtown cores populate the present discourses about these urban spaces. The interest in these ruined, urban spaces has created a boon in the culture industry, particularly in amateur photography. The term "ruin porn" has been coined to describe the proliferation of photographs that depict defunct factories, eroded office buildings, and abandoned homes. Often, the genre focuses on deindustrialized regions like the American Rust Belt. "Ruin porn" is often used derisively, but some ruin porn photographers have sought to reclaim the term. I argue that the ruin porn archive in general lacks a critical lens and instead decontextualizes Rust Belt ruins, inhibiting political potential that the images may contain.

With the prevalence of social media platforms for sharing photographs, it is fairly easy to locate a number of different amateur archives of Rust Belt and ruin porn photography. On the popular site Flickr, for example, there are over 2,000 photographs included under the tag "ruinporn" at the time of writing. On Instagram, the count at the time of writing was 17,000 for photographs that included the "#ruinporn" hashtag. The trend was so notable, in fact, that the online magazine *Thrillist* published an article titled

“#Ruinporn: The Latest Instagram Travel Trend.” Published in April 2014, the brief article sites 7,000 #ruinporn photographs on Instagram, and most of the photographs the article discusses come from cities in the Rust Belt, most prominently Detroit (Villagomez).

However, even a cursory glance around these platforms will quickly demonstrate that the term “ruin porn” isn’t unique to the Rust Belt: photographs from Cleveland to Glasgow to Pretoria to Mexico City are all tagged “#ruinporn.” Searching for a more specific term reveals equally large online archives. Though different in tone than “ruin porn,” “Rust Belt photography” is likewise a prominent category on these social media platforms, and it is typically specific to the Great Lakes region of the U.S. Midwest. For example, the Flickr group “Rust Belt (Industrial Midwest USA)” has over 600 members and more than 13,500 photographs, and the Instagram hashtag “#rustbelt” yields more than 17,000 images. These figures demonstrate significant interest in the photography of Rust Belt ruins.

In the Flickr group, the vast majority of the photographs depict architectural or structural ruins like buildings, farms, railroads, or highways. Take, for example, the photograph collection of the Flickr Rust Belt group’s top contributor, whose username is David Grim. The user’s photo collection is almost entirely of homes and factories in various states of disrepair. Primarily, the collection is focused on the Pittsburgh area. Though the odd image of people or contemporary life is present, the user’s archive consists mainly of images much like “Feelin’ Woozy,” a photograph David Grim shared in June 2015. The image, which at the time of writing received more than 72 “faves”

(Flickr’s answer to Facebook’s “likes”), is of an abandoned home. By every measure, the home is most certainly in ruins: the front windows have all been broken, and the front door has been boarded over; the foundation has clearly shifted, and the beams supporting the front porch roof are askew; the vegetation surrounding the home is overgrown, and ivy has begun to cover the roof. The image’s title is something of a pun. The house is “woozy” in the sense that it is ill, but it also connotes an inability to stand upright, akin to drunkenness. The use of the colloquial “feelin’ woozy” is almost playful or light-hearted, creating a sharp juxtaposition with the otherwise grim reality of the abandoned home.

Though executed with some degree of sophistication, the Rust Belt Flickr group photo stream exemplifies, unabashedly it seems, the intersection of Rust Belt and ruin porn photography. Exemplified by “Feelin’ Woozy,” the stream of collapsing buildings and rusted factories creates a narrative about the region, one that depends upon a seeming emptiness, collapse, and devastation. What’s more, this narrative is woven from the fabric of spatial relations. In his article “Detroitism,” John Patrick Leary writes that ruin porn “aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, *dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them*, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation...of the city” (my emphasis). In effect, ruin porn, a category under which much Rust Belt photography falls, isolates spaces from their temporality and relationality; they become, in de Certeau’s lexicon, a strategic practice. The consequence of *strategically* defining the region in terms of rusted space is that it ignores the legacy of social relations—including class struggles, racial tensions, and resistance—and it

precludes the imaginative potential to think otherwise about these spaces. Ruin porn, as Leary argues, cannot think the origins of poverty or think resistance to the systemic issues of the region. Instead, ruin porn creates only an aesthetic object of desire without past or future.³⁰

If ruin porn is largely understood as an archive of amateur photography, how might a more professional collection contribute to or challenge its overarching, *strategic* practice? Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's *Ruins of Detroit* is a professional photography collection focused on the modernist ruins of Detroit. Despite its more sophisticated presentation and its sometimes stunningly beautiful photographs, the collection as a whole offers a stereotypical view of Detroit as a space of utter ruin. Not totally dissimilar from the Flickr photo stream, this published collection barrages the viewer with image after image of ruined homes, factories, and modernist architecture. Throughout the collection, the abundance of ruin becomes apparent, even obscene.³¹

30. Of course, there are thinkers who offer alternative analyses of the political efficacy of ruin porn. On the popular website Rustwire, Richey Piiparinen wrote a feature titled "Things are Broke. Can Ruin Porn Help?" In it, he discusses various representations of ruin porn and argues that "Rust Belt photography"—a phrase used to avoid the baggage of the word "porn"—"has the ability to be the tip of a powerful perceptual movement that allows America to change the way it has confronted its structural failures in the past." For Piiparinen, ruin photography can offer a critical lens to think about broader, systemic issues. While I might agree that much of the work labeled "ruin porn" *may hope* to spark such a conversation, it is too narrowly focused on space without reference to experience or temporality, and, because of this, it fails to effectively offer a critical lens with which to understand the systemic issues of the American Rust Belt.

31. Here, I am drawing on Baudrillard's concept of the obscene as developed in "The Ecstasy of Communication." Baudrillard argues that "[i]t is no longer then the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible. It is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely

In *Ruins*, the abundance of architectural ruins stands in stark contrast to the absence of people. *The Ruins of Detroit* is almost entirely void of photographs of people, giving the impression that Detroit is a de-populated space. Certainly, the city has suffered a precipitous decline in population, but the abundance of ruined space is noticeably lacking in the inhabitants of that space. Importantly, the majority of Detroit's inhabitants are African Americans, so the decision to erase people from the landscape is wrapped up in the politics of racial representation. Much as we discussed earlier in terms of the Levi's commercial, African Americans are erased from the landscape. This erasure is conducive to a broader attempt to erase Black identity from sites long established as the crucible of American identity. Instead of people among the ruins, *Ruins* provides only an abundant decay.

If the entire collection presents an ironic abundance out of emptiness, this motif is repeated at times within individual photographs or montages. Take, for example, the photograph of the Cass Technical High School. Opened in 1907 as Detroit's first technical high school, Cass Tech eventually grew into a magnet school for technology and science. The school building was completed in 1922, and later an addition was completed in 1985. In 2005, the school building was abandoned for a newly completed building just north of the original site. The 1922 and 1985 structures were abandoned quickly; in 2007 these buildings were badly damaged by a fire; and by 2011, the

in information and communication" (131). In our present discussion, images of ruined buildings in the American Rust Belt are obscene precisely because they are the most visible representations of the region.

buildings were demolished (Austin). Marchand and Meffre photographed the 1922 and 1985 structures after they had been abandoned but prior to the fire.



Figure 15. Photograph by Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.

The particular photograph I'm interested in depicts the courtyard façade of the building, with 12 evenly spaced windows: 3 rows and 4 columns (see Figure 15). As reliably as a rubber stamp, each window reproduces the rubble and abandonment of the last one. There are toppled desks, old computers, dilapidated dry wall, and general debris. As something of a synecdoche for the entire collection, this image presents a stereotypical view of Detroit ruins as a series, presenting similar imagery over and over, either through each of Cass Tech's windows, as in the specific example, or in repetitive images of ruins, as the entire collection does. We can read this overproduction of ruins as

a spectacle, in Debord's sense,³² or as a phantasmagoria, in Benjamin's sense.³³ In either theoretical frame, *Ruins of Detroit* floods the senses with the aesthetics of ruins, but in doing so anaesthetizes the viewer to the broader social concerns that created the ruins in the first place.

This anesthetization is part of what I characterize as *the ruins of space*. Following the distinction discussed earlier between space and place, this category of Rust Belt photography emphasizes space over time much like de Certeau's strategies. The images in both the online, amateur galleries and Marchand and Meffre's published collection emphasize architectural ruins and ignore the everyday experiences of life amongst the ruins. Walter Benjamin argued that architecture was "appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception" ("The Work of Art" 240). If we can understand use as a corollary for a temporal experience of architecture and perception as a spatial experience of architecture, we may see more clearly how these collections of Rust Belt photography privilege only perception, or space, and disregard the experiential, temporal components

32. Guy Debord defines the spectacle as "the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production...the spectacle serves as a total justification of the conditions and goals of the existing system" (7). In other words, the spectacle reaffirms the existing system of exploitative capitalism and the ideologies that support it. Far from critiquing the inherently wasteful spectacle of late capitalism, *Ruins of Detroit* becomes an excess of ruins, of trash, of emptiness. Where consumption (seems to have) ceased, these photographs have been inserted to reassert, albeit differently, the process of commodity production and consumption.

33. Drawing on Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss argues that the "social function [of phantasmagorias] is in each case compensatory...It has the effect of anaesthetising the organism not through numbing, but through flooding the senses" (22). In *Ruins of Detroit* the senses are flooded with images of urban detritus, leading to a numbing of the senses and a related inability to perceive the broader social concerns.

of these buildings. Everyday life, then, becomes similarly objectified and rendered invisible at best.

That is not to say that the chaos of everyday life does not irrupt into these collections. In *Ruins of Detroit*, everyday life emerges in small, seemingly accidental moments of the photograph. In the photograph of Cass Tech, for example, the seemingly stamp-like repetition is interrupted upon closer examination. At the intersection of the third row and the third column, the window opens to a scene quite different than the others. Instead of overturned chairs and toppled bookcases, the window reveals a more organized space. A bright yellow chair is in the centre of the room, and a loveseat is against the wall, facing outward. The orderliness of the room operates like Roland Barthes punctum and belies the image of chaotic disrepair.³⁴ It suggests life—an indication of squatters or at least the shadows of those who had previously walked the halls.

As another example, *Ruins of Detroit* includes a brief historical narrative, written by the preeminent Detroit historian Thomas Sugrue. The historical account provides background to the photographs being viewed as well as a contextual account for the social and economic relations that led to the ruination detailed in the photographs. This narrative resituates the spatial, strategic project of the photography collection back into the temporal, historical context. Though it provides a thoughtful, bird's-eye

34. Roland Barthes describes the punctum as that part of a photograph that offers a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice...[it] is that accident which pricks me” (27). The punctum, according to Barthes, is a result of a relation between the photograph and the viewer; he writes that it “is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there” (55). Therefore, on yet another level, this relational element itself interpolates the photograph into a temporal realm.

contextualization, this context alone cannot alter the overwhelming focus of the collection on abstract ruins. Therefore, despite small moments that open up possibilities to think otherwise, the collection as a whole remains focused on static, ruined space.

Contrasting with ruins of space, an alternative aspect of Rust Belt aesthetics might be classified as *ruins in place*. Instead of focusing exclusively on space, projects that explore ruins in place focus on the temporal-spatial relations between urban ruins and the related effects of everyday life. In other words, aesthetic projects have the potential to make legible the lived experiences of urban ruins instead of anesthetising them. These intersections between space, place, time, and everyday life are evident in Gregory Halpern's photography collection *A*.

Halpern's *A* is a photography collection that is more expansive than *Ruins of Detroit*, both in terms of themes and locations.³⁵ Whereas *Ruins* focused exclusively on Detroit, *A* features photographs from across the entire Rust Belt region. An editor for the collection remarked that the photographs came from “Buffalo, Rochester, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Memphis, Detroit, and other small cities in between” (Fulford). In addition, if *Ruins* focused almost exclusively on structural ruins—and, even more specifically, modernist, urban ruins—*A* examines the concept of ruins with a much broader lens. While there are certainly photographs of dilapidated buildings, much more attention is paid to the social realities that surround the ruins. Portraits of both human and non-human animals fill the collection alongside images of ruined landscapes, functioning modernist

35. A number of the images can be viewed on Gregory Halpern's website at <http://www.gregoryhalpern.com/a.html> (“*A*”).

architecture, homes, and graffiti. Halpern's photographs capture a wide swath of everyday life in the American Rust Belt.

Take, for example, a photograph of Halpern's that at one level appears to function like some of the most obvious examples of ruin porn. Appearing toward the end of the collection, the photograph captures a Victorian-era home. Like many of the images in *Ruins of Detroit*, this home suffers from peeling paint, an overgrown yard, and a cracked foundation. Christmas lights hang from the columns and porch in various stages of assembly, or disassembly. The porch roof appears to be compromised, but makeshift beams have been erected to help prevent any future damage. The camera is focused specifically on this corner of the house, centring the two-by-fours that support the porch roof. These makeshift supports force the viewer to accept a human action on the scene of ruin even as it calls attention to the inter-related *processes* of destruction and construction. Given this, we may say that the beams operate much like de Certeau's *tactics*. Imagining a user of this site, the image suggests that, although beyond the user's ability "to produce, tabulate, and impose" a new space, these beams at the very least suggest that the user *is* able to "use, manipulate and divert" within the place of ruin (30). In other words, the beams interject a temporality into the image, and that temporality, to my mind, is imbued with a critical hope.

This theme of hope is emphasized in the image that is on the facing page of the dilapidated Victorian home. A yellow-sided home is in the image's background, partially hidden by the photograph's central focus on a sparse-yet-blooming magnolia tree. Amidst the brown, scraggly brush of the foreground, the white and pink flowers are especially

vibrant. The flowering tree works on a number of levels. First, it again introduces temporality into the photographs. The viewer is given a glimpse into spring, and the emphasis on this seasonal change implies shifting time. The introduction of time cognitively alters the question of ruins. No longer is it about the object, but instead the process. What's more, spring is a clear indicator of hope—amidst the deep freeze of winter, spring offers a future that is alternative, different, made anew from the ruins of winter's frost. Like a mirror, this image reflects back onto the Victorian home, offering a similarly hopeful view of the future.

Halpern's expression of hope is not naïve. In an interview about the collection, Halpern says that he “wanted to punctuate [the] inevitability [of death] with images that are...very hopeful...Hope is the envisioning of that which is not present. At times I think the creation of a photograph can function that way” (Fulford). Perhaps ironically, Halpern tasks photography with capturing that which is not visible; the photograph must be able to envision that which is beyond the object represented. Put differently and more specifically for our context, Rust Belt photography can be most successful when it enables the viewer to see *through* the represented ruins to an alternative, imaginative future. In a similar way, this is what Highmore argues is at the heart of de Certeau's poetics. Like photography that captures what is not yet there, a poetics of the everyday works to represent a discourse that does not yet exist, a discourse that is non-representable. The image of the blooming magnolia works toward just such a discourse—a discourse of hope within the everyday.

Many of Halpern's portraits also enable a critical vision of hope. In one pair of photographs, Halpern's subject is a young boy. The boy is swimming in a pond or a slow-moving river. In the background, there is a single smokestack and a concrete building—perhaps the ruins of an oil refinery or steel mill. On the banks abutting the factory is lush greenery, and a branch hangs above the child, just barely visible in the top left corner of the photograph. The two images face each other and appear to have been taken in quick succession. In the first, the boy stands behind a rock that juts out of the water just a little. He is still and stern with his hands on his hips in something of a classic Superman pose. The boy's reflection is clearly visible in the water, and even the smokestack is reflected behind him. In the next image, it appears as if someone standing off camera has splashed the boy. Water droplets soar through the air, and the water surface ripples with activity. The boy's posture eases, and his shoulders hunch over; he grins widely, revealing a missing front tooth. Both his and the smokestack's reflections are obscured in the rippling water.

This pair of photographs clearly demonstrates a temporal shift, and the images ask viewers to imagine the spaces of deindustrialization as both peopled and in process. In stark contrast to the photographs in *Ruins of Detroit*, Halpern's work not only admits to the presence of people, but, as in this pair of photographs, it focuses on their in-the-moment experiences of the place. These two photographs specifically emphasize the way in which experience opens up dynamic relationships with place. The boy is not only present in space, but he is experiencing and changing his place.

Furthermore, these photographs ask us to imagine a future that is different than the present. Like the disrupted reflections in the pond, the viewer must consider an alternative image, even if blurry, of the future. The joy of the young child disrupts the common Rust Belt narrative of repetition, decay, and lamentation. In his work, Steven High identifies the common yet reductive understanding of the region as a “dominant narrative” of “victimization and loss,” a narrative produced over and over again in *Ruins of Detroit (Corporate Wasteland 12)*. Halpern’s work forces a reconsideration of this central narrative, one that is not idealized yet not wholly defeatist either.

In LaToya Ruby Frazier’s *The Notion of Family*,³⁶ she asserts hopefulness differently than Halpern’s *A*. Frazier, whose performance art response to the Levi’s commercial was discussed in Chapter 1, turns her camera on her family and community of Braddock, PA—a majority Black and impoverished mill town near Pittsburgh. Throughout her collection, she remains focused on documenting the everyday lives of three generations of African-American women: Grandma Ruby, Mom, and herself. The autobiographical nature of the collection makes it incredibly personal and moving. Frazier’s work finds hope in making Black lives visible in these deindustrialized places.

On the title page of the collection, there is a 4-page booklet that takes up the left-hand quarter of the page. After the initial title page, there are three different photographs. The first is a photograph of a historic landmark identifier that is dedicated to John Frazier—a Scotsman and founder of Braddock. Notably, John shares LaToya Ruby

36. Examples of Frazier’s photography, including images included in *Notion of Family*, are available on her website at <http://www.latoyarubyfrazier.com/photography/> (“Photography”).

Frazier's surname, a coincidence that resurfaces later in the collection when Frazier outlines her lineage as "Scottish / African / Braddonian / Blue-collar / Steel workers" (18). The second photograph in the booklet is Frazier as a young girl, dressed in a white dress. The final photograph is of Andrew Carnegie, the steel tycoon who owned the Braddock steel mill in the 19th century. These initial images set the stage for a collection that is both deeply historical and deeply personal. Frazier punctuates images of the white, male protagonists of Braddock's history with her own image: a young, Black girl from the working class. This tension is played out throughout the collection.

Take for example an image Frazier took of a seemingly abandoned lot. In the background, there are the tops of buildings—some are homes, others are clearly abandoned industrial sites. There is a chain-link fence that is leaning and about to fall. In the left side of the photograph, there is a pile of tires. At the centre, there is a pile of rubble. On top of the rubble heap, Frazier lies face up. Two inter-related readings emerge from this image. First, recalling Benjamin's analysis of the Klee painting, Frazier has positioned her own body—female and Black—as another layer of rubble, another casualty of deindustrialization. She enacts what collections like *Ruins* do subtly: discarding the working class people of colour who populate ruined spaces. Second, in presenting herself as part of the rubble, she forces her body to be present and visible amongst the ruins. In other words, she refuses to be erased and forces viewers to consider what narratives like ruin porn or, to recall earlier discussions, the frontier do to the poor, often minority populations of Rust Belt cities.

As Halpern's work did, Frazier's work participates in the *ruins in place* paradigm; another way she accomplishes this is through her use of captions. In one photograph, Frazier captures Grandma Ruby leaning against a lamp post with her hands in her jacket pockets. Behind her and with his back to the camera, a man stands, also with his hands in his pockets. Next to him on the sidewalk is a large black duffel bag. In the background, the sign for UPMC Braddock, the local hospital, is clear. The photograph is accompanied with a caption that explains how Grandma Ruby and Frazier spent mornings in the hospital gift shop and how Grandma Ruby's "favorite shortcut was taking the lower-level elevator from Braddock Avenue up the main lobby on Holland Avenue" (101). Grandma Ruby's shortcut operates like de Certeau's tactic—an everyday use of space that challenges, however subtly, its intended use. The caption continues to explain how the hospital permanently closed in 2010, with the community given only 4 months notice. Much like the short booklet that began the collection, this photograph and caption integrate multiple narratives to emphasize what the loss of the hospital meant. The hospital closure affected more than employment opportunities or local health care—as critical as these considerations are. Not unlike the closure of the steel mill, this closure also devastated the mundane, daily activities of the community—like morning coffee routines.

The closing of the hospital is part of a larger theme in the collection related to health care and deindustrialization. This relationship is perhaps most dramatically demonstrated in a pair of photographs. In the first image a woman—presumably Frazier herself—sits with her back to the camera. She wears a hospital gown, but the back is

opened and her skin is exposed. Wires are strapped to her head and they fall down her back, connected to a machine on the wall. The wires, which appear haphazardly arranged, are tied together with gauze. The accompanying photograph is of a building in the process of demolition. Wires hang from exposed beams, referencing the wires connected to the woman's head. The skeletal insides of the building are exposed, and construction debris covers the ground. Side-by-side, these images suggest a paradoxical relationship between vulnerability and resiliency. Both the body and building are exposed bare, yet a certain strength remains. What's more, Frazier again connects the Black, female body to the legacy of deindustrialization and disinvestment.

As mentioned above, Halpern's work is about the envisioning of that which is not visible. This is where Halpern's understanding of hope is made manifest. Hope for Frazier is arrived at a bit differently. Instead of envisioning that which is not visible, Frazier's work is about revealing that which has been erased. This is where her approach to critical hope is made most obvious—not necessarily in imagining a radical futurity, but in making evident what has largely been ignored—namely, the Black, working class women who populate her work. Her work demonstrates the *ruins in place* are populated with bodies long defined as exterior to the nation proper.

In comparing these various photography archives, I have tried to distinguish, however hesitantly, between projects that detail structural and architectural ruins and projects that intentionally intersect images of ruined space with lived experience. One way to conceptualize this difference is through de Certeau's everyday poetics and the metaphorical lens of strategies and tactics, where the former focuses almost exclusively

on the preservation of power through spatial relationships and the latter works within that power to intersect space and time and thus imagine things otherwise.

In order to further explore how everyday poetics are relevant to the Rust Belt, I'd like to return to the Museum of Contemporary Art-Detroit where our discussion began. In addition to *The Past is Present* exhibit, I also visited the installation piece *Mobile Homestead* (see Figure 16). *Mobile Homestead* was created by the late artist Mike Kelley as a replica of his childhood home in Westland, a working-class suburb of Detroit.³⁷ Being the same size as a small suburban home, the installation sits on the exterior grounds of MOCAD. The exterior of the installation looks like any suburban, ranch-style home from 1960s America. It is white-sided with a small front porch and a one-car garage to one side. In the front, there is an enviable lawn. Behind the home is an abandoned building, which was painted a bright sky-blue to serve as a backdrop to the installation. While currently stationary on its manicured lot in Midtown Detroit, the main structure of the home is in fact mobile, as the name suggests. Prior to its installation, the home went on an almost ritualistic path, beginning in front of Kelley's childhood home in Westland and returning to the city, a path that dramatized in reverse the white flight of the mid-twentieth century and, simultaneously, mimicked the return of many young, white suburbanites to cities like Detroit.

My immediate impression of the installation was its stark, ironic contrast with its surroundings. The home is so perfectly suburban that it draws considerable attention to itself in the dramatically different space of Midtown Detroit. *Mobile Homestead* faces

37. Images of the installation are available online at <http://www.mocadetroit.org/Mobile-Homestead.html>

Woodward Avenue, one of the city’s main thoroughfares, so the installation is intimately foreign to the urban landscape. In other words, *Mobile Homestead* articulates the inherent yet often unspoken tension between the everyday life of the deindustrialized city and the everyday life of the suburban bedroom communities at its fringes. Kelley uses this tension to interrogate urban ruins from a radically different perspective.



Figure 16. Mark Kelley’s *Mobile Homestead*. Photograph from author’s personal collection.

Kelley’s work draws attention to urban ruins through the representation of its opposite, the well-kept suburban home. In a city with a stereotypical reputation for urban ruins—depicted emphatically in *Ruins of Detroit*—the site of a newly constructed, white-sided home is a marked departure from standard representations of the city. Even the well-maintained lawn invokes a comparison to its largely concrete and asphalt surroundings. In a certain sense, then, *Mobile Homestead* draws attention not to the structural ruins that are the focus of much ruin porn. The installation explores a different

type of ruins—the ruins of the social—made evident in the tensions between private space and public space.

Mobile Homestead explores this tension not only through the visual cues of the suburban home, the fenced yard, and its surrounding urban setting. The interior of the house plays a vital role in how the separate spheres of the public and private are understood and problematized. Not knowing much about the exhibit when I visited, I was surprised that the home's interior wasn't decorated to mimic the style of the 1960s and 1970s suburban home. Instead, the space had multiple functions, including a community library and community space that could be reserved for activities “relevant to the cultural interests of the local communities” (Kelley “*Mobile Homestead*”). Perhaps most fascinating, however, are the underground studios that are not accessible to the public. According to the installation's pamphlet, the basement space is “reserved for covert, personal use.” In his plans for the installation, Kelley described this space as “antisocial” and critical to the entire piece (Kelley “*Mobile Homestead*”). In this way, Kelley emphasized the installation's layered irony: situated along one of Detroit's busiest public roadways, a private, suburban home houses a community-oriented centre yet has at its foundation a private, even anti-social, space that remains hidden from the majority of the community.

Given these contradictions, Kelley's *Mobile Homestead* demands an alternative approach to thinking about time and space. The installation calls attention to temporality because of its layered responses to suburbanization, white flight, and the present trend of urban pioneers. Even beyond its content, however, the installation's form similarly

engages with the intersection of time and space. If *Ruins of Detroit* could be experienced solely in spatial terms, *Mobile Homestead* requires that the viewer move through space, experience the installation, walk through doorways and hallways, and regard the home from the nearby street. At each of these moments, time and space necessarily intersect, calling attention to an experience of ruins—in other words, a poetics of ruins in place.

In some ways, the distinction I'm drawing between *Mobile Homestead* and *Ruins of Detroit* may seem more related to the formal differences between installation art and photography than to a difference in the political projects of each. Is it reasonable, for example, to expect photography to engage temporally with its subject? To reveal to the viewer not a static object, but an image that is in process? While certainly the formal elements matter, it is not the case that only installation pieces are capable of doing this work. For example, Halpern's *A* and Frazier's *The Notion of Family* expertly employ photography to develop a poetics of ruins in place. The distinction between ruins *of space* and ruins *in place* hinges not so much on formal qualities as on the way the artist gives voice to those most impacted by the representation. Halpern, for example, photographs a number of people in the Rust Belt, giving a sense of a ruined yet peopled landscape, and Frazier gives voice to a marginalized, often erased minority population. Likewise, Kelley's installation presents the viewer with a layered, temporal work of art that demands interpersonal engagement. *Ruins of Detroit*, on the other hand, presents a common stereotype of Detroit, so it does not require critical engagement. As Walter Benjamin argued about Albert Renger-Patzsch's photography collection *The World is Beautiful*, *Ruins* "succeed[s] in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish,

technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment” (*Understanding* 95). The metaphoric distinction between strategies and tactics, or between ruins of space and ruins in place, is not limited by artistic medium. Rather, these distinctions lie in the possibility of giving voice to the everyday.

Like Kelley’s *Mobile Homestead*, Dennis Maher’s installation also gives voice to the experiences of everyday life in the Rust Belt. Installed at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, NY in 2013, Maher’s *House of Collective Repair* collates eight model homes.³⁸ Each “home” was constructed by a specific tradesperson using only the material of his or her trade. For example, the plumber constructed her home from pipes, the painter used paintbrushes and stir-sticks, and so forth. Commissioned by Maher, he collected the model homes and situated them in relation to one another, constructing an imaginatively recreated model city.

Maher’s *House of Collective Repair* was disorienting when I first encountered it. Although the individual materials were easily recognized—pipes, boards, wires—the constructed objects were less familiar. A short video was mounted to the wall, and it offered a narrative about the installation’s construction. The entire piece nearly filled the exhibition space, so as I moved through the space, it was necessary to be cautious and very attuned to my movements in order to not disrupt any of the piece’s components. Each model home, though distinct, contributed to the larger project, blending into the structures of Maher’s “model city.” At various moments throughout the exhibit, audio

38. For more information on the installation, including images of Maher’s work, please visit the Albright-Knox Art Gallery website at <http://www.albrightknox.org/exhibitions/exhibition:01-25-2013-dennis-maher-house-of-collective-repair/>.

recordings played the voices of the craftspeople explaining their individual contribution. The installation engaged every sense, and it was completed only when people moved through the space—or, perhaps more precisely, the exhibit was never actually complete, but was constantly in process.

I categorize Maher's work similarly to Halpern's *A*, Frazier's *Notions*, or Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*, within what I've been calling ruins in place. *Collective Repair* uses largely discarded, ruined materials to recreate an alternative vision. It is a model city built from the ruins of the past. In some ways, it provides the mirror image of Caycedo's *SCRAPCITY*, the painting with which our discussion began. In Caycedo's piece, the mountain of debris looms behind and above the city as an oppressive, ominous vision. Here, Maher repurposes the ruins of the Rust Belt to reimagine and rebuild a new vision of the city. Elsewhere, I have written about Maher's project as a critique of urban renewal currently at work across the Rust Belt (Manning). For our present purposes, it is important to see that his alternative vision is premised upon a collective approach to place-making.

In order to get a sense of Maher's goals for the project, it is worth quoting him at length. In the pamphlet for the installation, he writes that,

The house models...establish themselves as unique monuments within the armature of a miniature city. Within this city, I imagine skilled laborers are the primary occupants. They are the handlers around which the unformed material of the city moves. I imagine that they travel along cracks in the city's walls, congregate at one another's houses, and form unique bonds—bonds that are

solidified by the awareness of how to make something work. As they impart form to loose piles of matter, they link aspiring visions to constructed realities. They rehabilitate the city by connecting their hands to the minds of those who perceive it from afar. This connection produces a new image of the city, one in which standard tools and materials are communicators of its lost knowledge and indicators of its future prospects (“No Use” 12).

Maher focuses here on collective labour to construct “a new image of the city.” This collective labour operates through a form of de Certeau’s tactics, using “standard tools and materials” to produce this radical new vision out of the ruins of the past. Here, too, Maher’s project connects the temporal split between the past ruins and our future hope. Instead of seeing these as opposed, as *Ruins of Detroit* might, Maher develops them as integrally connected, where our “future prospects” depend upon an exploration of our “lost knowledge,” and our “lost knowledge” must serve our “future prospects.”

Maher’s project develops this futurity through a poetics of the everyday built from the ruins of the everyday. Specifically, *Collective Repair* gives voice to a number of different tradespeople and artisans. Because it was created collectively, the project is necessarily polyphonic or multi-vocal—much like Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*. Maher’s project listens to and gives voice to disparate visions of the everyday, and it is precisely this multiplicity that makes Maher’s work so inventive and suggestive of an alternative political form, however vaguely imagined. Through his work, Maher—and the other artists we might categorize alongside him as producing a poetics of ruins in place—allows the everyday to emerge in all its ambiguity and contradictions. And, as Highmore

argues, “only *after* the everyday is allowed to emerge would something like a politics of the everyday become possible” (*Everyday Life* 172). Concluding his essay on the project, Maher poses a series of questions. He asks, “could the collective house change how we think about and inhabit the city? And could it become the nexus of a city-centered art?” (“No Use” 12). Maher’s questions ask the viewer to rethink our relationship to the urban ruins that surround us in places like Buffalo or Detroit. Instead of seeing mere trash, Maher asks us to imagine the potential for alternatives. As Maher’s project demonstrates, collective imaginary and construction can lead to alternate social and political organization in the Rust Belt.

In conclusion, I’d like to return once more to the site that began our discussion—the Museum of Contemporary Art-Detroit. Upon leaving, I was overwhelmed by both the effectiveness and the limitations of various aesthetic representations of the American Rust Belt. In the warm Michigan sun, I stood outside and pondered *Mobile Homestead* once more before leaving the city, gazing through the fence and parking lot and yard up to the façade of the white home. I then turned south, looking down Woodward, to see Detroit’s skyline. The sky was clear and blue. When I stepped off the curb to get a photograph of the distant skyline, I noticed that standing just in front of the *Mobile Homestead* installation, at the corner of Canfield and Woodward, was a group of people also staring south, though they were waiting silently for the bus, not admiring the view (Figure 17). If they noticed the ironic home behind them, they didn’t give any indication that it had changed their everyday practice of waiting for a bus that, given Detroit’s

continued financial woes, was sporadically scheduled at best (Cwiek).



Figure 17. Author's personal collection.

This intimate view of the relationship between ruin aesthetics and the poetics of everyday life provided a stark juxtaposition without a clear resolution: How could the everyday aesthetic of *Mobile Homestead* affect actual change in the everyday lives of Detroit's citizens? Indeed, is it even fair to demand such change from an aesthetic project? If the project provides a future imaginary of urban space, for whom is the imagined city? The artist? The museum's patrons? The people waiting for the bus?

Rust Belt aesthetics use the real and imagined ruins of urban space and time to recreate narratives about the region. In many cases, these narratives are nothing more than a ruined landscape void of the everyday experiences and rituals of the people who live there: it is *the ruins of space*. In other projects, the poetics of everyday life make the practices of everyday life legible, and place is critically reimagined through the lexicon of

the everyday. This poetics is attentive to the everyday and attempts to represent the uses of ruins, both structural and social: this is a poetics of *the ruins in place*. While the former maintains the status quo, the latter imagines, as Highmore suggests, a politics that emerges from the everyday. This is not a politics “about having certain ends in mind, but about generating beginnings” (Highmore *Everyday* 173). That’s why projects like *House of Collective Repair*, *Mobile Homestead*, or *A*—while imbued with a political potential—do not attempt to answer, but instead ask: what would an everyday politics look like in our place of urban ruins?

Conclusion: Listening in the Rust Belt: Rust Belt Aesthetics as a Multi-vocal Practice

Although U.S. presidential politics is a far cry from the subtlety of the politics of everyday aesthetics I have been interrogating, I nonetheless want to turn to a recent event in the Republican campaign as we conclude our discussion. In June 2016, the presumptive Republican nominee for president, reality television star Donald Trump, visited Monessen, PA, a small mill town near Pittsburgh—not unlike the fictional Buell in Meyer’s *American Rust*. During his speech at a recycling facility, Trump railed against international trade agreements and proclaimed that the economic downturn throughout the Rust Belt is “the consequence of a leadership class that worships globalism over Americanism” (Detrow). Rosalyn Christopher was in the crowd listening to Trump’s speech. Later in an interview with NPR, she said that she “think[s] we need to give the jobs to Americans...and quit sending the stuff overseas.” Christopher expresses an economic anxiety over her uncertain future and her community’s position within a more globalized economy. Hers is a familiar economic nationalism.

Christopher’s economic nationalism is an echo of earlier times when layoffs and plant closures were happening at record pace. For example, Lynn and Mark Cieslica, interviewed for the *Portraits in Steel* collection discussed earlier, made similar remarks on the heels of Mark’s layoff from a steel mill. Speaking in the 1980s, Lynn Cieslica says that “the United States needs to get back to some of the old values. I really feel that we’ve kind of lost sight of who and what we are...we tend to take more in from the other countries than we are actually putting out and our people are suffering because of it” (173). Like Christopher, Cieslica emphasizes a nationalist economy, and she asserts an

anti-globalist worldview where her nation—and indeed her local place—should be the primary focus of the political class.

In news reporting on the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Rust Belt has begun to figure prominently, largely because of the decades-long persistence of economic stagnation, disinvestment, and unemployment. Media outlets pursue a line of reporting that attempts to predict whether Trump can secure the votes of white, working class people in the region, a demographic historically associated with the union-friendly Democratic Party. At present, of course, my focus is not in explicating the election and polling results; rather, I wanted to introduce the election for two reasons.

First, I wanted to demonstrate how the Rust Belt remains a cohesive region in the American consciousness. News outlets like CNN ran online reporting focused exclusively on the Rust Belt. For example, one piece titled “Resetting red and blue in the Rust Belt,” reported from three Rust Belt cities—Buffalo, NY; Erie, PA; and Youngstown, OH—and presented interviews with people in order to understand what they were primarily concerned with in the upcoming election. Largely, the interviewees favoured Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders, two candidates viewed as “anti-establishment” and who, in different ways, appealed to white, working class voters who have long felt ignored by the political process. Indeed, the story concluded that Rust Belt voters “have repeatedly revolted by supporting unlikely, anti-establishment candidates” (Lee). This is one example of many that understands the region as a cohesive entity.³⁹

39. See, for example Ronald Brownstein’s “The States That Will Pick the President: The Rust Belt”; Adam Davidson’s “Blaming Trade and Voting Trump in the Rust Belt”; Steven Greenhouse’s “Donald Trump’s Appeal to Rust Belt Workers”; John

Second, and perhaps more importantly for our conversation, is how the Rust Belt is being discussed in these reports. In almost every case, the region becomes shorthand for the white, working class. The “Rust Belt vote” has become racialized, despite the fact that the region contains a large minority population, and some of its principle cities are now majority minority, like Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Gary, IN. Despite this reality, the rhetorical shift focuses on the movement of white, working class men from staunchly pro-union and Democratic to the nativist and populist campaign of Trump. On the political stage, the Rust Belt has once again been whitewashed. It is a narrative promoted by myopic and hegemonic ideologies.

Of course, this has been evident in many of the aesthetic projects we examined. The Levi’s commercial rendered the majority Black population in Braddock invisible through the rhetoric of the frontier. The photography collection *Ruins of Detroit* similarly erased Detroit’s majority Black population to focus instead on the physical decay of the city. In the Chrysler commercial, too, we saw the subtle alignment of white, working class men with an American national identity. Though in a different way, *American Rust* explored the relationship between white nationalism and deindustrialization, suggesting at least a tenuous link between the projects of economic nationalism and white supremacy. The rhetoric of the “Rust Belt vote” is yet another permutation of this subtle

McCormick’s “Clinton Beats Trump with Middle-Income Rust Voters: Bloomberg Poll”; or Keith O’Brien’s “Uprising in the Rust Belt.” Each article understands the Rust Belt as a cohesive region and, what’s more, tends to conflate the regional identity with the white working class.

yet corrosive process of recreating the region as a caricature of economic hardship, idealized ruins, and a romanticized, individualized labour force.

In addition to aesthetic projects focused on preserving or renewing this idyllic image of the region, Rust Belt aesthetics also include projects interested in imagining alternative and more equitable futures in the region. Often, this is done through attentive listening and representing marginalized groups. In Gansworth and Rogovin's collection *From the Western Door to the Lower West Side*, the intersection of poetry and photography complemented the intersectional relationship of indigenous people to the deindustrialized urban landscape. In Frazier's pointed response to the Levi's commercial, she channelled histories and legacies of the Black working class to perform how labour destroys the body, an issue elided in the television advertisement. Likewise, Meyer's *American Rust* uses multiple voices to tell the story of the continuous disinvestment in and marginalization of the American working class. Maher's project depends upon listening to the wisdom and experience of the working class craftspeople in order to construct a model city from diverse perspectives and disparate media. Rust Belt aesthetics, as demonstrated by these examples, can participate in the radical reimagining of the region through an emphasis on a multi-vocal aesthetic practice.

In this thesis, I have been trying to hold these two disparate strands in tension in order to analyze how Rust Belt aesthetics are mobilized for different ends. Indeed, my own work has been about *constructing* the region through a methodology of critical regionalism, so I have brought together varied aesthetic projects under one rubric in order to better articulate a region that is constructed upon different, competing, and diverse

voices. In many ways, I hope that *Toward a Rust Belt Aesthetic* can be one representation of the political potential of listening to many different voices, from Mark and Lynn Cieslica to Dennis Maher to the Chrysler corporation to LaToya Ruby Frazier.

During the course of this project, it has also been important to me to present projects that demonstrate one of Powell's key components of critical regionalism—that it “envision more just and equitable landscapes” (25). To be sure, it is in these more radical projects where I find the best chance to imagine—and to then enact—these alternative and progressive landscapes. Within these different projects, I have noted the common threads of attentiveness to the everyday and a willingness to engage in a multi-vocal aesthetic practice. Within this thesis, this quest for a multi-vocal aesthetic practice has manifested in different ways: collaborative projects, multiple narrative points-of-view, and a focus on marginalized or ignored people. Through these aesthetic practices, emergent visions of the region have been given a voice.

At its most just and equitable, then, Rust Belt aesthetics draws on multiple voices to create an aesthetic project that—far from ignoring—embraces the region's inherent complexities. Rust Belt aesthetics are imaginaries about what the region and the region's cities can become. In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey argues that “[a]s we collectively produce our cities so we collectively produce ourselves. Projects concerning what we want our cities to be are, therefore, projects concerning human possibilities, who we want, or perhaps even more pertinently, who we do not want to become. Every single one of us has something to think, say and do about that” (159). In other words, Harvey argues that through our collective imaginaries, our cities—and, by extension, regions—can be

fundamentally reformed to better foster “human possibility.” Rust Belt aesthetics is precisely such an imaginative attempt to collectively reshape the American Rust Belt. At moments, these re-imaginings can reify the ruins of the Rust Belt—like the Levi’s commercial. However, by valuing multiple voices and perspectives, Rust Belt aesthetics, at its most radical, has the potential to foster multiple future imaginaries that recreate the region *from* the voices and *for* the futures of its diverse population. Rust Belt aesthetics can reinvent or reimagine ruins to make the language of the everyday legible, engendering the transformative potential of life amongst the ruins.

As an example, I’d like to turn to the film *Detropia*. In the 2012 documentary *Detropia*, the filmmakers turn a critical eye toward Detroit. It is a beautiful film that presents the city in all its complexity. The camera captures a scene from a local union meeting, where workers are told that either they accept a drastic pay cut, or the plant will relocate. The film depicts a community meeting about the city’s fiscal troubles, a meeting that boils over with tension, anger, and frustration, where one woman pleads with the city to not cut public transit. Some scenes depict young, white artists who have recently moved to the city, and others show long-time Black residents laughing about the effort to fill the city with urban gardens. In short, the film depicts both life and ruins.

In one scene, Crystal Starr, a local barista who moonlights as an urban explorer and community blogger, serves coffee to a Swiss tourist. Perhaps it is my own Rust Belt roots showing, but the tourist’s snobbery is palpable when he asks if the coffee shop has ceramic mugs, assuming only disposable things exist in this city. Then, he corrects Starr when she compliments his Harry Potter-style glasses; the glasses, he assures her, are

modeled after 1950s Italian architecture. He tells her of his expedition to see the “decay” of the once great metropolis. “Decay,” she says. “That could be slightly offensive,” and she laughs. Outside the café, as they both smoke cigarettes, Starr comments about how busy the café had been. “Thank God for the Opera House,” she says, and the camera pans to the marquee of the Detroit Opera House across the street. The tourist doesn’t say anything, ignoring the Opera House that might just undermine the narrative of ruins he’s come to expect. This scene dramatizes the productive tensions between the Rust Belt’s reified ruins and imaginative futures.

Starr is the same woman who earlier in the film explores an abandoned building and finding the wall torn out and the copper piping missing, a scene discussed above. At one moment in that scene, she sits at a window ledge and looks out over Detroit’s skyline. Starr says, “I feel like I was maybe here a little while back...I have this young body and spirit and mind, but I have the memory of this place when it was banging. That’s how I feel.” Her body contains the memory of Detroit in its heyday, with people and movement and life without ruins. As part of her public blog, Starr records herself as she explores the city’s ruins, narrating pieces of history and her own reactions to the place. For her, the city’s ruins are to be listened to and re-presented in a way that creates dialogue. Sitting on the window ledge, she murmurs to herself, “I can’t leave, man. I can’t fucking leave.”

At the centre of both scenes is a quest for a sense of place, or an aura, to Detroit. In writing on critical regionalism, Powell draws attention to this construct of “senses of place.” He argues that a city’s or region’s sense of place “has often been taken

(reductively) to be an ineffable or ethereal, sensory property” (14). The Swiss tourist and his quest for authentic ruins can be understood as a quest for this ineffable quality of Detroit, a quality associated with the stereotypical markers of the city. It is a quest that is non-dialogic because it depends only on reproducing established perceptions. The photography collection *Ruins of Detroit* functions in this way—a beautifully executed collection of ruin porn. Powell, however, suggests that it is through an examination of “those features of a place that seem, at least superficially, to be the permanent stable markers of its identity that we can begin to see the dynamic, evolving, and rhetorical qualities” possible in a more nuanced construction of a city’s sense of place. Starr, for example, pursues this more discursive, multi-vocal sense of place, which operates more as a dialogue instead of a stereotype. Still drawing on the city’s ruins, Starr is able to imagine a multi-vocal history and look through, and thus beyond, the ruins to see the life that existed and exists still.

To take one final example, the Heidelberg Project in Detroit similarly values dialogue as it engages with the reconstruction of urban space. The project was created by artist Tyree Guyton as a political protest against the city’s neglect of the African-American working class neighbourhood. Guyton painted bright polka dots on some of the abandoned homes, and on others he attached salvaged, everyday objects like children’s dolls, furniture, clocks, and other found items. Since its initial inception, the Project has grown to include artists’ workshops, urban gardens, children’s programming, and an amphitheatre (*The Heidelberg Project*). In 2013, large pieces of the project were destroyed by arson. Jeanee Whitfield, the Project’s executive director, promised that the

Project was not giving up in the face of this set-back. Instead, she said that “[o]ur work is about not just that physical location...[The Project] is literally there to help the community to think of ways it can rebuild itself” (Matheny 5). Whitfield suggests that the principle tool of the Project is to listen attentively to the surrounding community.

The Heidelberg Project imagines alternative visions of remaking the city through an engagement with the community. As Valerie Kinlock argues about the Project, “the wild display of mundane commodities opens up a new way of talking about Detroit by forcing the dilapidation within urban communities to become just as important as the city’s new stadium, casinos, and multimillion dollar housing developments” (118). The Heidelberg Project examines the ruins and dilapidation— seemingly “permanent stable markers of [a place’s] identity” (Powell 14)—in order to listen and engage with the surrounding community. This engagement, in turn, helps to articulate the Project’s mission and goals, namely to help reimagine the neighbourhood and city in terms of its residents. The Heidelberg Project—like Frazier’s Levi’s intervention, or Meyer’s *American Rust*, or Maher’s *House of Collective Repair*—stands firmly within the tension between reasserting hegemonic narratives of the city and radically transforming how and for whom the city works.

Aesthetic projects can often risk being co-opted by hegemonic interest, either to sell products—not unlike Levi’s and Chrysler in our earlier discussion—or to quiet dissent. Aesthetic projects that resist this co-optation can continue the important work of imagining alternative futures. In effect, this balancing act is Gramsci’s “‘terrain of the conjunctural’”—the metaphor that has organized much of this argument. Following

Gramsci's argument, I have demonstrated that the Rust Belt is at a moment of potential—a conjuncture between the forces of neoliberal capitalist hegemony and unknown yet alternative futures. What's at stake in this moment is a claim on the future of the region's and the nation's identity. This is playing out dramatically in how the Rust Belt region is being courted by the Trump campaign through racist and nativist policies, but it also happens in subtler ways, like the rhetoric of the frontier white-washing the region. The multi-vocal, polyphonic potential of Rust Belt aesthetics is ultimately its mechanism for resisting hegemonic co-optation. If aesthetic projects remain attentive to the everyday, to the newly arrived artists *and* the long-time residents waiting for the bus, then they can more readily and more effectively imagine new beginnings that—with or without rust—engender a more just, equitable, and peaceful landscape.

To end this discussion of beginnings, it seemed appropriate to turn to the final scene in *Detropia*. The scene opens with a shot of Michigan Central Station. The former train station is a Beaux-Arts building that has been abandoned for years. In many ways, it functions like Powell's "permanent stable markers"; it operates as a metaphor for the city. The station draws countless urban explorers, and it is covered in brightly coloured graffiti. The building is so iconic, in fact, that it serves as the cover to *Ruins of Detroit*. Situated at the edge of the city, the train station is the tallest building in the vicinity, and it is surrounded by an unkempt yard, seemingly a hulking ghost amidst the reclaimed prairie.

In the film, a man enters the train station. When he faces the camera, the viewer recognizes him from earlier in the film as one of the performers from the Detroit Opera

House. Inside the graffiti filled building, with sunlight making its way through the shattered windows, the man sings a quick scale. He is testing the acoustics. In the background, a train whistle blows, and the viewer can see the cars race passed the window. Then, over the train whistle, the man sings an aria. For a few seconds, as the man holds a note, the camera rests on the city's skyline as seen through the shattered, arched window of the train station. Outside, as the aria continues, three people stand on tiptoes to peer over the barbed wire and into the station's windows. At one point, the camera pans upward to a flock of birds scattering against the blue sky, and Crystal Starr's quiet murmur—*I can't leave, man. I can't fucking leave*—seems incredibly prescient at this moment.

The scene concludes a film that painstakingly presented a myriad of voices that are all contributing to the future of Detroit and to the Rust Belt. Such disparate viewpoints have the potential to create nothing more than a chaotic cacophony of voices. At its most just and most visionary, Rust Belt aesthetics works against such a cacophony. Like Maher's *House of Collective Repair* or Gansworth and Rogovin's *From the Western Door to the Lower West Side*, the multi-vocal nature of the aesthetic can produce something new, something like the aria inside Michigan Central Station—instead of a cacophony, a symphony that might even entice to the birds scattering above to stay and to live among the ruins.

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